



# How closely aligned are China and Russia? Measuring strategic cooperation in IR

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## Abstract

Russia's high-profile "turn to the East," the deterioration of Russia–US relations after the Ukraine crisis, and China's "new assertiveness" in the South and East China Seas have led to the perception that China and Russia are now "aligned" in opposition to US-led unipolarity. However, alignment remains an inchoate term that has not been systematically defined in the international relations literature. Thus, it is difficult to assess the degree to which China and Russia are aligned, as well as the extent to which their strategic cooperation has increased over time. This paper develops and applies an ordinal set of objective criteria for military alignment and applies these criteria to measure the degree of strategic cooperation in post-Cold War China–Russia relations. It also explores China–Russia cooperation across economic and diplomatic dimensions to assess the overall progress in the bilateral relationship over time. Drawing on multiple Chinese and Russian sources, it demonstrates that China and Russia have now developed strong military alignment, if not a full-fledged alliance, and that cooperation on each of the other two dimensions, while not yet as strong, has steadily increased since the end of the Cold War.

**Keywords** Strategic cooperation · Alignment · China–Russia relations

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## Introduction

Assessing strategic cooperation in post-Cold War China–Russia relations appears to be a difficult task. There has been a striking lack of progress in understanding China–Russia alignment and the degree to which it has increased over time, as manifested in the titles of leading books on the relationship. In 2000, the pervasive question was “Rapprochement or Rivalry?”<sup>1</sup>; twelve years later, the question had barely changed to “Rivalry or Partnership?”<sup>2</sup> Numerous underspecified and contrasting terms have been used to describe this bilateral relationship. Since the mid-1990s, China–Russia relations have been referred to as “partnerships”—simply “partnership,”<sup>3</sup> “limited partnership,”<sup>4</sup> “strategic partnership,”<sup>5</sup> or “limited defensive strategic partnership”<sup>6</sup>—and a variety of “axes”—“axis of convenience,”<sup>7</sup> “axis of necessity,”<sup>8</sup> or “axis of insecurity.”<sup>9</sup> To add to the lexical confusion, the term “alliance” has also often been a reference point in scholarly discussions of China–Russia relations.<sup>10</sup>

None of these or any other applied terms have been defined in a manner that is sufficient for making them subject to systematic empirical examination. There have been multiple descriptions and examinations of various empirical aspects of China–Russia strategic interactions.<sup>11</sup> However, attempts to develop an analytical

<sup>1</sup> Sherman W. Garnett, *Rapprochement or Rivalry? Russia–China Relations in a Changing Asia* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Robert E. Bedeski and Niklas Swanström, *Eurasia’s Ascent in Energy and Geopolitics: Rivalry or Partnership for China, Russia and Central Asia?* (Routledge 2012).

<sup>3</sup> David Kerr, “The Sino–Russian Partnership and US Policy Toward North Korea: From Hegemony to Concert in Northeast Asia,” *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (2005): 411–438.

<sup>4</sup> Sherman W. Garnett, ed. *Limited Partnership: Russia–China Relations in a Changing Asia: Report of the Study Group on Russia–China Relations* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Jeanne L. Wilson, *Strategic Partners: Russian–Chinese Relations in the Post-Soviet Era* (ME Sharpe 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Chenghong Li, “Limited Defensive Strategic Partnership: Sino–Russian Rapprochement and the Driving Forces,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 16, no. 52 (2007): 477–497.

<sup>7</sup> Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and The New Geopolitics* (Brookings Institution Press 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Kuchins, “Russia and the CIS in 2013: Russia’s Pivot to Asia,” *Asian Survey* 54, no.1 (2014): 129–137.

<sup>9</sup> Sir Tony Brenton, “Russia and China: An Axis of Insecurity,” *Asian Affairs* 44, no. 2 (2013): 231–249.

<sup>10</sup> For specific references to the “alliance” in discussing China–Russia relations, see: Alexei Voskresenski, *Russia and China: A Theory of Inter-State Relations* (London: Routledge 2003), 208; Alexandr Nemets, “Russia and China: The Mechanics of an Anti-American Alliance,” *The Journal of International Security Affairs* 11 (2006): 83–88; Elizabeth Wishnick, “Russia and China: Brothers Again?” *Asian Survey* 41, no. 5 (2001), 798.

<sup>11</sup> For the most recent ones, see: Jeanne L. Wilson, “The Eurasian Economic Union and China’s Silk Road: Implications for the Russian–Chinese relationship,” *European Politics and Society* 17, no. sup1 (2016):113–132; Michael Cox, “Not Just ‘Convenient’: China and Russia’s New Strategic Partnership in the Age of Geopolitics,” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 1, no. 4 (2016): 317–334; Thomas Ambrosio, “The Architecture of Alignment: The Russia–China Relationship and International Agreements,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 6, no. 1 (2017): 110–156; Marcin Kaczmarek, “Two Ways of Influence-building: The Eurasian Economic Union and the One Belt, One Road Initiative,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, no. 7 (2017): 1027–1046; Liselotte Odgaard, “Beijing’s Quest for Stability in its Neighborhood: China’s Relations with Russia in Central Asia,” *Asian Security* 13, no. 1 (2017): 41–58; Elizabeth Wishnick, “In



framework to assess the degree of alignment between the two countries have been scarce and lack objective measurements.<sup>12</sup> Against the backdrop of intensifying Russia–US rivalry after the Ukraine Crisis and China–US competition in East and Southeast Asia, as well as new arms deals and joint military drills between Moscow and Beijing, more attention has started to be paid to the comprehensive military cooperation between the two countries.<sup>13</sup> Some observers have raised straightforward questions, such as “Is there a China–Russia alliance?”<sup>14</sup> and “Are China–Russia relations an alliance or not?”<sup>15</sup> However, as in the case of broader assessments mentioned above, there has been no comprehensive framework for assessing military cooperation that would demonstrate the level of China–Russia military cooperation and its progress over time. In sum, our knowledge of the strength of contemporary China–Russia strategic cooperation has been rather limited and unmethodical. Rozman’s assessment from twenty years ago remains accurate today: analysts “have reached little consensus on what the [China–Russia] partnership is, why it has developed, what it signifies, and how firm it is likely to be.”<sup>16</sup>

Referring to the international relations (IR) literature does not resolve the confusion and reveals even more problems for defining and measuring interstate strategic cooperation. A careful look at the “alliance” literature results in more than 30 different definitions of the term (China–Russia relations meet some, but not others) and only two attempts to develop an objective indicators-based taxonomy, both of which are now quite dated.<sup>17</sup> Walt uses “alliance” interchangeably with informal “alignment” and does not provide indicators for either.<sup>18</sup> Ward documents that “much written work use the three different orientations—alliance, alignment, and coalition—as

Footnote 11 (continued)

search of the ‘Other’ in Asia: Russia–China relations revisited,” *The Pacific Review* 30, no. 1 (2017): 114–132.

<sup>12</sup> A rare example of an attempt to conceptualize without objective measures is Thomas S. Wilkins, “Russo–Chinese Strategic Partnership: A New Form of Security Cooperation?” *Contemporary Security Policy* 29, no. 2 (2008): 358–383.

<sup>13</sup> See: Ethan Meick, “China–Russia Military-to-Military Relations: Moving Toward a Higher Level of Cooperation,” U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 20, 2017; John Watts, Sofia Ledberg, Kjell Engelbrekt, “Brothers in Arms, yet Again? Twenty-First Century Sino-Russian Strategic Collaboration in the Realm of Defence and Security,” *Defence Studies* 16, No. 4 (2016): 427–449; Alexander Korolev, “Beyond the Nominal and the Ad Hoc: The Substance and Drivers of China-Russia Military Cooperation,” *Insight Turkey* 20, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 25–38; Alexey D. Muraviev, “Comrades in Arms: The Military-Strategic Aspects of China-Russia Relations,” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 1, no. 2 (2014): 163–185.

<sup>14</sup> Lyle J. Goldstein, “A China-Russia Alliance?” *The National Interest*, (April 25, 2017), retrieved October 6, 2017, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-russia-alliance-20333>.

<sup>15</sup> Zheng Yu, “China and Russia: Alliance or No Alliance?” *China-US Focus*, (Jul 29, 2016), retrieved October 6, 2017, from <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/china-and-russia-alliance-or-no-alliance>.

<sup>16</sup> Gilbert Rozman, “Sino-Russian Relations: Will the Strategic Partnership Endure?” *Demokratizatsiya* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1998), 396.

<sup>17</sup> Edwin H. Fedder, “The Concept of Alliance,” *International Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1968): 65–86; Bruce M. Russett, “An Empirical Typology of International Military Alliances,” *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 15, no.2 (May 1971): 262–289.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 1.



though they were identical.”<sup>19</sup> According to Wilkins, despite multiple publications, there is little understanding of “alliances” and other “alignments” between states, and there is no credible taxonomy.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, “strategic partnership,” which is the official name for China–Russia relations, has been surrounded by even greater confusion and presented as playing the role of not more than “simply a rhetorical device used by diplomats to help them around the rough edges of shifting global politics.”<sup>21</sup>

There are two related goals of this paper: one narrow and one broad. The narrow objective is to accurately assess the degree and trajectory of strategic cooperation in post-Cold War China–Russia relations. The goal is not to rename the relationship, but particularly to measure the change in cooperation over time while also providing a rough point estimate of the absolute degree of cooperation. As such, the analysis below is more descriptive/typological than causal. This is not meant to imply that the causes behind China–Russia cooperation are irrelevant for understanding this bilateral relationship. However, one must first define a variable before one can embark on explaining it, especially given the state of the field as mentioned above. Therefore, the primary focus here is on describing and measuring China–Russia strategic cooperation, not explaining its causes.<sup>22</sup> Yet because there are no current frameworks for assessing alignment, this narrow goal entails first fulfilling a broader one: to construct an objective and deductively justifiable framework to assess strategic cooperation, which can then be applied to other cases in the future. Of course, the framework introduced below is a preliminary first cut that will likely (and hopefully) invite additional refinement, but it represents a necessary attempt to fill a crucial gap in the IR literature. “Cooperation,” military or not, is a core dependent variable that pervades the IR field. However, attempts to objectively measure it have been scant, which has serious implications for the IR research. Thus, it is possible that some of the “puzzles” of increasing or decreasing cooperation that scholars have sought to explain do not actually exist by objective measures, while others might have gone unrecognized.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Michael D. Ward, *Research Gaps in Alliance Dynamics* (Denver: University of Denver, 1982), 14.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas S. Wilkins, “‘Alignment’, Not ‘Alliance’—The Shifting Paradigm of International Security Cooperation: Toward a Conceptual Taxonomy of Alignment,” *Review of International Studies* 38 (2012), 54.

<sup>21</sup> Sean Kay, “What is a Strategic Partnership?” *Problems of Post-Communism* 47, no. 3 (2000), 17.

<sup>22</sup> The explanation is done by other papers in this special issue.

<sup>23</sup> Consider, for example, the cacophony of assessments surrounding China’s reaction to the Russia–Georgia war of 2008 and the Ukraine Crisis of 2014. Regarding the former, some argued that China “sides with the West, not Russia” (see: “Asia Sides with West, Not Russia, over Georgia,” *NBC News*, August 28, 2008, [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/26435952/ns/world\\_news-europe/t/asia-sides-west-not-russia-over-georgia/#.Vs52oU2KCHs](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/26435952/ns/world_news-europe/t/asia-sides-west-not-russia-over-georgia/#.Vs52oU2KCHs)), while others argued that China was on Russia’s side (see: Yu Bin, “China Still On-side with Russia,” *Asia Times*, September 6, 2008, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/JI06Ad01.html>). Same with the Ukraine Crisis: some argued that China “sided with Russia” (see: Tyler Durden, “China Just Sided with Russia over the Ukraine Conflict,” *Global Research*, February 27, 2015, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/china-just-sided-with-russia-over-the-ukraine-conflict/5434334>) while others observed that “China splits with Russia over Ukraine” (see: Scott Stearns, “China Splits with Russia over Ukraine,” *Voice of America*, March 18, 2014, <http://www.voanews.com/content/china-splits-with-russia-over-ukraine/1873418.html>). Academic studies on the issue are similarly divided. These conflicting depictions vividly reveal the problem with answering a seemingly simple question of whether China



The suggested framework offers a way to systematically and objectively assess the degree of military alignment between states. It moves beyond the existing practice of simply extracting and listing different indicators of cooperation, and adds an ordinal dimension to the indicators by introducing objective definitions of “early,” “moderate,” and “advanced” stages of alignment. To more effectively trace the trends over time, this framework qualitatively assesses changes within each stage rather than dichotomously coding the presence or absence of these indicators. While the main emphasis is on military cooperation as the backbone of strategic alignment in general, and between China and Russia in particular, the paper also assesses China–Russia cooperation on economic and diplomatic dimensions as a “robustness check” to show that the improvement in bilateral relations is not limited to the military realm.<sup>24</sup>

The paper is organized as follows: Section one synthesizes the literature on alliances, alignments, strategic partnerships, and other forms of interstate relations to develop an ordinal and empirically operationalizable framework that assesses military cooperation. Section two applies the framework to demonstrate the developmental trajectory since the end of the Cold War and the current state of China–Russia military alignment. Section three uses existing quantitative indicators of economic and diplomatic cooperation to show that China and Russia are becoming more aligned on other dimensions as well and that the upward trend is not only on the military dimension. Section four concludes. Throughout the analysis, the paper draws on multiple original Chinese and Russian language documents, reports, and publications that, to date, have been absent from English language studies of China–Russia relations. To substantiate the analysis, the author also conducted several rounds of interviews with Chinese and Russian foreign policy experts in both China and Russia in 2015 and 2016.<sup>25</sup> The analysis demonstrates that post-Cold War China–Russia relations have, from a low starting point, grown steadily stronger, and is close to surpassing what is defined here as the “moderate” stage of alignment. Furthermore, there exists a strong basis for even more advanced forms of bilateral cooperation.

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Footnote 23 (continued)

cooperated with Russia or not. In this situation, viable explanations are impossible because the very dependent variable cannot be defined.

<sup>24</sup> Economic and institutional cooperation is omitted from the general index of strategic cooperation due to the difficulty of assigning relative weights to these incommensurate dimensions of cooperation. However, the focus on the military dimension is warranted, insofar as it has the highest bar for cooperation: states that cooperate diplomatically and economically do not necessarily cooperate militarily, but increases in military cooperation are very likely to be accompanied by enhanced economic and diplomatic cooperation. This is both because incentives for military cooperation also likely apply to economic and diplomatic realms, and because economic and diplomatic cooperation complements and augments joint military capabilities. See discussion in “[Robustness check: diplomatic and economic cooperation](#)” section, below.

<sup>25</sup> The interviews occurred in Tianjin (April 2016), Shanghai (May and September 2016), Moscow (July 2016), Vladivostok (May 2015), and Blagoveshchensk, Khabarovsk, and Vladivostok during August 2016.



## The military alignment framework

The present study is guided by two methodological considerations. First, its primary concern is the actual working of military cooperation that has come to fruition, rather than the promises of formal treaties. As emphasized by Snyder and others, discussions on this subject must not be limited to formal alliances because “what we really want to understand is the broader phenomenon of ‘alignment,’ of which explicit alliance is merely a subset.”<sup>26</sup> Alliance “merely adds formality and precision” to alignment.<sup>27</sup> Alignments are “not signified by formal treaties but are delineated by a variety of behavioral actions.”<sup>28</sup> Relying only on formal treaties can also be misleading. Some informal alignments, such as the US–UK, US–Israel, or US–Taiwan alignments, far surpass some formal alliances, such as the China–DPRK or US–Thailand alliances, in terms of de facto levels of security cooperation. As such, the lack of a clear mutual defense pact between China and Russia does not necessarily indicate weak military cooperation.<sup>29</sup>

Second, to reflect the trajectory and degree of development of China–Russia military alignment, the developed framework is ordinal, as some indicators precede the others. The formation of a functioning alignment takes time, and strategic cooperation must pass a moderate stage before it moves into an advanced stage or tighter alliance. States are not likely to become closely aligned overnight; however, they may rush into a tight alliance treaty in response to an external threat or shock. In a sense, every strategic partnership has a “life cycle” and progresses through stages. Greater institutionalization of an alignment over time affects its reliability, credibility in deterring challenges, and performance in potential military conflicts.<sup>30</sup> Formal alliance is a more advanced stage of alignment because it primarily serves “to strengthen preexisting alignments by introducing elements of precision, legal and moral obligations, and reciprocity.”<sup>31</sup> The institutional structure of an alignment or strategic partnership can gradually develop into a closer alliance, or it can move in an opposite direction toward less cooperation. Therefore, some indicators that imply improvement in relations from low initial levels of cooperation (such as confidence

<sup>26</sup> Glenn Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 123.

<sup>27</sup> Wilkins, “Alignment’, not ‘alliance”, 56.

<sup>28</sup> Ward, *Research Gaps in Alliance Dynamics*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> China and Russia have in fact had a formal treaty—the “Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation”—since 2001 (full English text available at <http://www.voltairenet.org/article173177.html>). While this treaty falls short of an explicit mutual defense pact, it is a clear consultation and non-aggression pact.

<sup>30</sup> See: James D. Morrow, “Alliances, Credibility, and Peacetime Costs,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 38, no. 2 (1994): 270–297; Alastair Smith, “Alliance Formation and War,” *International Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1995): 405–425; James D. Fearon, “Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands Versus Sinking Costs,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 1 (1997): 68–90; Brett Ashley Leeds and Sezi Anac, “Alliance Institutionalization and Alliance Performance,” *International Interactions* 31, no. 3 (2005): 183–202.

<sup>31</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, “Alliances, Balance, and Stability,” *International Organization* 45, no. 1 (1991), 124.



building measures) may indicate increasing tensions if they emerge when cooperation is already quite high.

Given these considerations, the present study develops a framework to assess trends in bilateral military cooperation over time, which it then applies to post-Cold War China–Russia relations. Figure 1 identifies seven indicators of military cooperation and groups them into the three clusters of early, moderate, and advanced cooperation. Each indicator is ordinal, that is, the early-stage indicators precede the moderate and advanced indicators. In turn, the presence of advanced indicators, even at lower levels, indicates a higher *overall* degree of military cooperation. In other words, the degree of cooperation is determined by the highest stage that is manifested, and higher stages subsume lower stages. For example, stages 3 and 4 require stage 2, and stages 5, 6 and 7 necessitate stages 2, 3, and 4. However, some early-stage indicators can be expected to fall off when they are no longer necessary, and their continuous presence might indicate backsliding rather than development. It is the expansion of higher-level indicators that reflects increasing alignment. Importantly, it is hypothetically possible to see “moderate,” or even “advanced,” indicators without “early” ones depending on peculiarities of a particular case. However, as argued below, there is a sound rationale behind these indicators and their ordering, such that in most cases we should expect to see lower stages of cooperation exhibited at high levels before alignment enters the moderate and advanced stages.

This framework, while consisting of generalizable and objective measures of military cooperation, can offer only a rough assessment of military alignment. The ultimate goal would be to devise a comprehensive index consisting of more fine-grained measures of the degree of cooperation within each category and a weighting system to aggregate degrees of cooperation across stages, which could then be used to compare degrees of military alignment across dyads. However, this is a monumental task that is beyond the scope of this article. The more limited goal here is to take the first step of systematically identifying and operationalizing the indicators of military cooperation with rough ordinal weights, which establishes a baseline typology that can be built upon in subsequent work. Bearing this caveat in mind, the below discussion explicates the framework.

CBMs (confidence building measures) are the first early indicator of a cooperative trend. This is an indicator of weak alignment because via implementing CBMs, the parties are attempting to overcome initially high degrees of mistrust or resolve highly contentious issues, e.g., border disputes, and thus remove them from bilateral agendas. Early, low-level CBMs can be “emergency contacts” that are aimed at, for example, preventing dangerous military activities or resolving border disputes. When these problems become resolved and the cooperation moves forward, higher-level CBMs can include measures of demilitarization and de-securitization of the common border, the routinization of mechanisms for resolving disputes or regularly sharing defense-related information, which indicates higher levels of trust.

Mechanisms of inter-military consultations follow CBMs as indicators of early alignment. According to Snyder, the consultation among allies is an indispensable





aspect of an alliance.<sup>32</sup> This mechanism enhances mutual understanding and increases the predictability of intra-alignment dynamics, which can be important assets when joint actions are required. The transition from CBMs to regular consultations is marked by a shift in the agenda from the existing problems between the consulting parties to broader issues of regional and global politics. A shift from low to high levels of cooperation in consultation occurs when the parties begin to create unique platforms—that they do not have with other foreign states outside of the alignment membership—which provide for regular meetings and deeper cooperation.

The third indicator, which reflects the beginning of the moderate stage of strategic cooperation, is military-technical cooperation (MTC), which is accompanied by regular exchanges of military personnel. MTC increases mutual dependence and the compatibility of military hardware, which may be crucial for allies in times of war when shared supplies of equipment and logistical and technological support may determine the alliance's performance. Simultaneously, exposure to technological expertise requires a considerable amount of trust. Moreover, the proper organization of MTC requires a high level of coordination across multiple institutions (research centers, manufacturers, and various government agencies), shared procedures, and standardized training. These are important parameters of MTC that take time to develop. In turn, the active exchange of military personnel and opening military educational institutions and curricula to a foreign state that accompanies MTC also requires significant trust in the partner. The progress from low to high levels of cooperation within MTC is indicated by the transition from only providing technical training and assistance related to purchasing arms to actual military technology transfers and long-term projects for joint design and the production of arms and their components. For personal exchanges, advancing to higher levels is manifested in the progress from short-term visits for technical training to joint military education programs.

The fourth indicator, which closes the moderate cooperation stage, is regular joint military exercises. These are important for the alignment's functioning because they reflect a specific degree of military compatibility and interoperability, increase coordination, and practice joint techniques. Thus, they open the door to a stage for more advanced forms of military cooperation. They also often send important signals, admonitions, or assurances to certain countries or groups of countries. The progress from low to high levels occurs with changes in the geographic range and the content of military exercises. For example, expanding the geography of exercises from the parties' immediate geopolitical environments to distant seas, especially in response to new developments in international politics, would indicate a significant advancement. Similarly, changes from simple joint maneuvers to the actual establishment of joint military command centers and the introduction of command code sharing systems, as well as other forms of interoperability, would reflect a high level of cooperation.

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<sup>32</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, pp. 350–362.





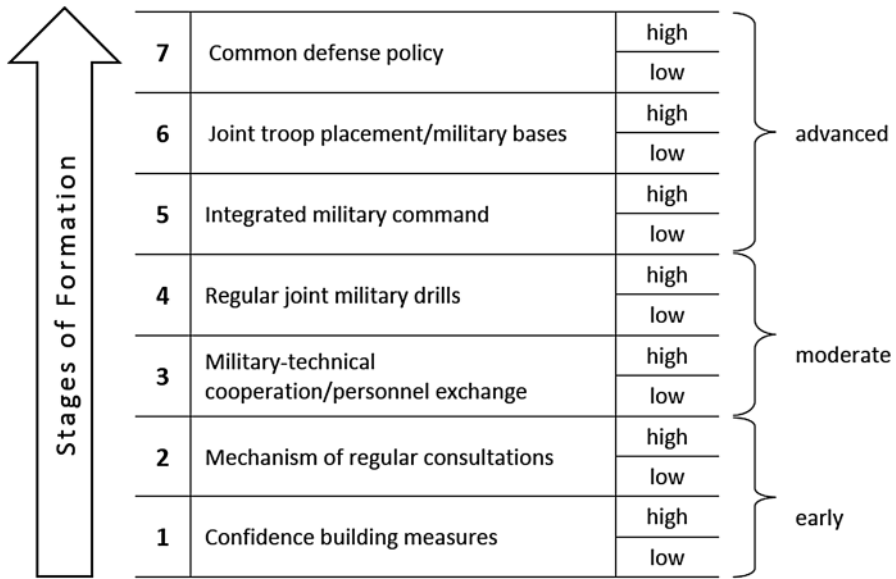


Fig. 1 Ladder of military cooperation

The advanced stage of military cooperation is assessed using three criteria—an integrated military command, joint troop placements or military base exchanges, and a common defense policy. The integrated military command provides the organizational framework for fulfilling joint military tasks by the aligned parties. In these circumstances, each country’s military forces, which regularly remain under respective national controls, become available to the joint operations and are placed under the responsibility of either one side’s commanders or a joined command structure on an agreed basis. Examples of integrated military command could include introduction of a shared system of command codes or adopting an operating language allowing the transmission of orders and communications between the involved militaries; episodes of merging the allies’ army units into a single operational grouping with a purpose of practicing joint interoperability; establishing joint command centers staffed with officers from both sides working together. There is also variation in the degree to which military commands can be integrated. A relatively low degree of integration would occur episodically and without long-term commitments, as characterizes joint military exercises. A higher level, in turn, would be characterized by permanently operating command structures that are consistently deployed, and thus would entail long-term commitments.

Joint deployments and base sharing are a step forward because these measures include sensitive issues of territorial sovereignty. The establishment of military bases abroad enables a country to project power in the recipient country and influence political events there. Also, the existence of bases abroad implies rights to military facilities in the foreign territory. These are highly sensitive issues, in general, and in the context of China–Russia relations, in particular. A low degree of base sharing occurs when mutual deployments are small and do not include air force or



other sophisticated weapons, whereas high-level base sharing occurs when the size of the deployed contingent is large and accompanied by the significant allocation of advanced military hardware.

Finally, the highest form of military cooperation is a common defense policy at the executive and strategic levels. It requires the most binding commitments between allies with a purpose of joint fulfillment of the most demanding military missions. This also involves pooling resources for defense equipment acquisition as well as obligations to supply combat units for jointly planned missions within a designated period of time. Most importantly, this level of cooperation requires synchronized and harmonized actions with regard to the allied parties' national security. This indicator may also be manifested at higher and lower degrees, depending on the scale and content of cooperation, but it always requires extensive investments in joint actions and indicates in-depth military cooperation. The decision to enter this stage requires strong incentives and resolve from policy makers, and cannot occur without first achieving a high degree of cooperation on the more moderate indicators described above.

## **An empirical assessment of China–Russia military alignment**

Since the end of the Cold War, China–Russia relations have progressed from “good neighborliness” in the early 1990s, to “constructive partnership” in 1994, to “strategic partnership” in 1996, to “a comprehensive strategic partnership” in 2001, then to “a comprehensive strategic partnership and coordination” in 2012, and, most recently, to “a comprehensive strategic partnership of equality, mutual trust, mutual support, common prosperity, and long-lasting friendship.”<sup>33</sup> While these formal “names” indicate an upward trend, How close are China and Russia based on the objective indicators of military cooperation that were discussed above?

Figure 2 chronologically displays the trajectory of post-Cold War China–Russia military cooperation and shows that the ordinal framework presented above largely conforms to reality. While there are chronological overlaps between the indicators, the transition into higher-level cooperation in each stage requires that the previous stage of cooperation has become high.

### **The early stage: CBMs and regular consultations**

Most of the CBMs in China–Russia relations are concentrated in the 1990s. The earliest, low-level CBMs were joint attempts to normalize relations through a series of measures that were aimed to settle the China–Soviet border dispute and demobilize military forces along the 4300-km-long joint border. These were highly contentious

<sup>33</sup> Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Slovenia, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei's Regular Press Conference on June 27, 2016,” retrieved October 5, 2017, from <http://si.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/t1375607.htm>.



and sensitive issues, and their resolution was necessary before there could be progress in the relationship.

On December 18, 1992, Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin signed “The Memorandum of Understanding on the Guiding Principle for the Mutual Reductions of Armed Forces and the Strengthening of Trust in the Border Region,” which intended to create a “common border of trust.”<sup>34</sup> Negotiations to reduce the border-area military forces and strengthen inter-military trust continued for the next two years and resulted in a visit from Russia’s Chief of General Staff, Mikhail Kolesnikov, to Beijing in April 1994. In July 1994, the two countries signed “The Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities,” with the main goal of further de-securitizing the border and creating procedures for dealing with “accidental border crossings,” which occasionally occurred along the long border. This agreement also established regular information exchanges regarding the movements and activities of the two countries’ border army units.<sup>35</sup> Two months later, Jiang Zemin visited Russia and the two countries signed two additional important documents: the “Joint Statement on No First Use of Nuclear Weapons against East Other and Not Targeting Strategic Nuclear Weapons at Each Other” and the “Agreement on the Western Part of China–Russia Border,” which successfully settled the western segment of the border.<sup>36</sup> As a result, the bilateral relations were upgraded from “good neighborliness” to “constructive cooperation.”

On November 10, 1997, at a summit in Beijing, Yeltsin and Jiang signed a new border agreement, which settled the demarcation of the longest eastern sector of the China–Russia border, with the three islands that were in the border rivers being subject to future negotiations. This diplomatic breakthrough indicated that almost the entire China–Russia border had been virtually settled. This was also a turning point that introduced bilateral CBMs of a higher level—which were aimed toward demilitarizing the border and information sharing. In August 1998, the two countries signed the “China–Russia Protocol on Border Defense Information Exchange,” which enhanced the procedures for mutual notifications about military activities that were close to the border. In December 1999, there were agreements for the complete removal of Chinese and Russian operational army units to 100 km away from the border, which created a vast demilitarized area.<sup>37</sup> The formal and final resolution of the border issues occurred on October 14, 2004, through signing the “Agreement

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<sup>34</sup> Zhong-E Guanyu Zai Bianjing Diqu Xianghu Caijian Junshi Liliang he Jiaqiang Junshi Lingyu Xinren Wenti de Liangjie Beiwanglu [The Memorandum of Understanding on the Guiding Principle for the Mutual Reductions of Armed Forces and the Strengthening of Trust in the Border Region], [http://www.pkulaw.cn/fulltext\\_form.aspx?Db=eagn&Gid=100669717&EncodingName=](http://www.pkulaw.cn/fulltext_form.aspx?Db=eagn&Gid=100669717&EncodingName=).

<sup>35</sup> Zhong-E Yufang Weixian Junshi Huodong Xieding [The Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities] <http://www.chinabaik.com/article/baike/1000/2008/200805111442468.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Zhonghu Renmin Gongheguo Zhuxi he Eluosi Lianbang Zongtong Lianhe Shengming [The Joint Statement of the Presidents of People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation], Zhongguo Falv Fagui Zixun Wang [China’s Law and Regulations Information], October 12, 2010, [http://www.nti.org/media/pdfs/3b\\_1.pdf?\\_=1316627913](http://www.nti.org/media/pdfs/3b_1.pdf?_=1316627913).

<sup>37</sup> Wu Yan, “Juxing Lianhe Junyan: Zhon-E Hui Jiecheng Junshi Tongmeng Ma? [Joint Military Exercises: Will China and Russia Form a Military Alliance?], Renmin Wang, 10 July 2002, <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/junshi/62/20020710/772735.html>.



on the Eastern Segment of the China–Russia Border,” which resolved the issue of the two islands—the Bolshoi Ussuriysky Island and Bolshoi Island—and closed the book on territorial disputes in China–Russia relations.

With the border issues resolved, there was a considerable decrease in the number and frequency of bilateral CBMs in China–Russia relations, with the CBMs simultaneously becoming more sophisticated and gaining a broader, non-contentious agenda, thus gradually evolving into regular consultations.<sup>38</sup> Subsequently, these consultations developed into a comprehensive, routinized mechanism of contacts at all levels. The mechanisms of consultation developed into a multi-level institutionalized infrastructure of contacts that guaranteed regular information exchanges among almost all major government agencies and organizations—from the top decision makers and their administrative apparatuses to the Defense Ministries and their subdivisions as well as regional military districts and border garrisons and military educational institutions. Arguably, there is only one state in addition to Russia with which China has military interactions that are of comparable depth and comprehension: Pakistan.<sup>39</sup>

Formally, China–Russia military consultations began in 1992, when the then-Chinese Defense Minister, Qin Jiwei, visited Moscow and established official relations between the militaries of the two countries. On October 11, 1993, during the Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev’s visit to Beijing, the two countries signed the “Military Cooperation Agreement between the Ministries of Defense of China and Russia,” which laid the formal foundation for bilateral inter-military cooperation.<sup>40</sup> The mechanisms of regular consultations that were first established were the *Regular Meetings Between Defense Ministers of Russia and China*, established in 1993, and *Annual Strategic Consultations among Chiefs of the General Staff*, established in 1997. Both mechanisms are annual meetings that occur in Moscow and Beijing on a rotating basis with regular agendas that range from issues of general strategic orientations and military strategies in the two countries to military-technical cooperation. These mechanisms guarantee a stable flow of information between top military officials and assist in attaining a joint understanding of foreign policy orientations. However, given their relatively broad agenda and the presence of similar consultation practices in China’s and Russia’s interactions with other countries, they do not reflect actual high-level cooperation.

A shift to the high level of cooperation in terms of military consultations began in the early 2000s (after the CBMs resolved contentious border issues) and manifested in creating more focused mechanisms that China and Russia do not have with many

<sup>38</sup> Arguably, the last CBM occurred in 2009 with the Agreement on Mutual Notification about Launches of Ballistic Missiles and Space Launch Vehicles, which established a new level of information sharing. See: “Kuai Xun: ZhongE Qianshu Xinghu Tongbao Fashe Dandao Daodan he Hangtian Yunzai Huojian de Xieding [Express News: China and Russia Sign Agreement on Mutual Notification about Launches of Ballistic Missiles and Space Launch Vehicles], *China News*, 13 October 2009, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/news/2009/10-13/1908552.shtml>.

<sup>39</sup> Author’s interview with an expert on China-Russia military cooperation from the Institute of Far Eastern Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, 3 October 2016.

<sup>40</sup> The full Russian text is available at <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&nd=102026598&rdk=&backlink=1>, accessed 22 June 2016.



foreign states. An important step in this direction was establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001, which significantly expanded and institutionalized the interface of China–Russia military consultations. It introduced multiple platforms for regular interactions between Defense Ministers and other military officials of different levels and generated what can be called the *Mechanism of Inter-Military Consultations within the Functioning Structure of the SCO*. This mechanism includes the SCO’s Annual Summits, which have been held each year in one of the member states’ capital cities since the day that the SCO was established, the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structures (RATS), which were established as a permanent body within the SCO in June 2004,<sup>41</sup> the Meetings of Heads of Ministries and Departments, which provide an extra platform for consultations between the two countries’ Defense Ministers, and the traditional bilateral military consultations “on the sidelines” of the SCO—which are similar to the already routinized special “Putin–Xi forums” that regularly occur during multilateral meetings to demonstrate the special relationship between the two leaders.<sup>42</sup>

Additional progress occurred with the establishment of a new mechanism focusing on China’s and Russia immediate national interests in October 2004—*Russia–China Consultations on National Security Issues*.<sup>43</sup> This mechanism operates at the level of Heads of the Security Council (on the Russian side) and State Council representatives (on the Chinese side) and became a format that China only has with Russia. According to China’s State Council representative, Tang Jiaxuan, the new mechanism is “the first precedent in which China creates an interstate mechanism of consultations on its national security issues with a foreign state.”<sup>44</sup> This indicates the “convergence of Russia’s and China’s positions on major global and regional security issues” and “the transition of bilateral security cooperation into a new quality.”<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> “Information on Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, <https://web.archive.org/web/20081211154326/http://www.sectsco.org/fk-03.html>.

<sup>42</sup> “Ministru Oboronu Rossii i Kitaya Provedut Segodnya v Sankt Peterburge Peregovoru ‘Na Poyah’ Soveschaniya Voennuh Vedomstv Stran SHOS [Defense Ministers of Russia and China Hold Negotiations in Saint Petersburg ‘On the Sidelines’ of the SCO Member-States’ Defense Ministries Summit], The Russian Ministry of Defense, 30 June 2015, [http://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/world/more.htm?id=12044152@egNews](http://function.mil.ru/news_page/world/more.htm?id=12044152@egNews), accessed 2 July 2016. Since 2013, Putin and Xi met more than 20 times. With this number of contacts, the words of greeting by both evolved from “dear President” to “dear friend,” and later to “my old friend.” See: The Chronology of Putin–Xi meetings with description of settings and full text speeches, available at the President of Russia web portal: <http://kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/351>.

<sup>43</sup> The Russian Foreign Ministry Representative, A.V. Yakovenko, answers to the Russian Media’s questions on China–Russia relations (in Russian), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, 11 October 2004, [http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/cn/-/asset\\_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/458210](http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/cn/-/asset_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/458210).

<sup>44</sup> “Vustypleniya Prezidenta Rossii V.V. Putina i Chlena Gosudarstvennogo Soveta Kitaya Tang Jiaxuena v hode Rossiisko-Kitaiskoi Vstrechi [The Address by the Russian President Putin and the member of the Chinese State Council Tang Jiaxuan during Russia–China meeting],” Moscow, Kremlin, The Russian President Media Service, 2 February 2005, [http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/cn/-/asset\\_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/449890](http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/cn/-/asset_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/449890).

<sup>45</sup> Sovmestnoe Rossiisko-Kitaisko Kommunique [China–Russia Joint Communique], The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 4 July 2005, [http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/cn/-/asset\\_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/433748](http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/cn/-/asset_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/433748).



According to the documents, both countries intend to use the new communication channel to jointly react to the new challenges and protect their national security interests.<sup>46</sup> On December 8, 2009, at the fourth annual consultation in this format, the Secretary of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, and Chinese State Council member Dai Bingguo announced that this bilateral security dialogue should occur no less than four times a year.<sup>47</sup>

The breadth and depth of China–Russia security consultations continued to increase, in response to the contingencies of the international environment in the Asia Pacific. The case in point is the *China–Russia Northeast Asia Security Dialogue*—a new platform for regional security consultations, which was launched in April 2015 and aimed to “create effective security mechanisms in Northeast Asia.”<sup>48</sup> This is the most tightly scheduled format, with the frequency of meetings varying based on the urgency of regional issues, and, at times, having a bimonthly schedule, which immediately occurred after the US decision to launch the THADD missile shield in South Korea.

Since the early 1990s, China and Russia have been launching new or enhancing existing consultation mechanisms every 3–4 years. Currently, all the mechanisms combined generate a frequency of 20–30 high-level security-related consultations per year; this number excludes the entire body of regional cooperation formats that occur between provinces and cities, educational exchanges, and military exercises. Thus, a high-level inter-military contact between China and Russia occurs almost every two weeks. Most of these end with a joint statement or declaration that reflects the two countries’ shared view on the issues of international politics. These mechanisms have been consistently operating since the date of the establishment, and none have ceased to function.

### **Moderate cooperation: MTC and regular military exercises**

While episodic military-technical exchanges between China and Russia began to occur in the 1990s, MTC fully flourished in the late-2000s, after bilateral consultations were already institutionalized. Around this time, regular joint military exercises began to be launched.

In the early 1990s, when Russia was experiencing severe economic hardships, China–Russia military-technical exchanges contained some barely legal practices, which created a large and hard-to-assess “gray area” in their bilateral relations. In addition, tragically comic cases are well known in Russia, such as bartering the

<sup>46</sup> Sovmestnoe Rossiisko-Kitaisko Kommunike.

<sup>47</sup> E-Zhong Jiang Meinian Juxing 4 Ci Zhanlue Anquan Cuoshang [Russia and China will hold Strategic Security Consultations 4 times a year], Sputnik News, 8 December 2009, [http://sputniknews.cn/russia\\_china\\_relations/20091208/42655990.html](http://sputniknews.cn/russia_china_relations/20091208/42655990.html).

<sup>48</sup> “O pervom raunde rossiisko-kitaiskogo dialoga po bezopasnosti v Severo-Vostochnoi Azii [About the first round of the China–Russia Northeast Asia security dialogue],” The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 25 April 2015, [http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/1207275](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/1207275).



Russian civilian jet airliner Tupolev Tu-154 for two freight cars of Chinese cucumbers.<sup>49</sup> Those were years of chaotic exchanges between China and Russia, and their actual impact on MTC remains unknown.

An attempt to regularize the China–Russia MTC occurred in 1992, with the signing of the “Military-Technical Cooperation Agreement” and establishing the “Russia–China Mixed Intergovernmental Commission on Military-Technical Cooperation,” which became a formal platform for discussions of arms sales to China and contributed to the overall normalization and regulation of the bilateral MTC.<sup>50</sup> By 1996, the two sides agreed on the Su-27 project—hitherto, the largest agreement for defense technology transfers from Russia to China, according to which China’s Shenyang Aircraft Corporation (SAC) procured a license to assemble 200 Russian supermaneuverable Su-27 jet fighters. The acquired technology has subsequently been exploited for developing the Chinese Shenyang J-11 B fighter.<sup>51</sup> These were signs of significant progress. However, these were sporadic episodes of MTC.

Vladimir Putin’s accession to power in 2000 put a start to a complete overhaul of Russia’s arms export agencies and supervisory bodies. The Russian Federation Committee for Military-Technical Cooperation with the Foreign States was established and empowered with broad control and supervisory functions.<sup>52</sup> This measure allowed for an increase in the volume of arms exports and improved quality controls. In addition, it set the stage for more advanced forms of MTC. As a result, by the mid-2000s, technology transfers and joint ventures amounted to 30% of the overall transfer and sales of Russian military equipment to China.<sup>53</sup> In 2006, Russia’s former Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov emphasized that in the sphere of MTC, China is Russia’s “privileged partner” and the MTC constitutes the backbone of the China–Russia strategic partnership, which elevates the entire spectrum of the bilateral relations.<sup>54</sup>

An important turning point was on December 11, 2008, during the 13th meeting of the Mixed Intergovernmental Commission on Military-Technical Cooperation in Beijing, for the signing of the “Agreement of Intellectual Property in

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<sup>49</sup> Viktor Larin, *Rossiisko-Kitaiskie Otnoshenia v Regional'nuh Izmereniyah: 80-e Gody XX—Nachalo XI Veka [Russia-China Relations in Regional Dimensions: 1980s—early 2000s]*, (Vostok-Zapad, 2005), p.75.

<sup>50</sup> Ching Wei Lin, “Tantao Zhong-E Junshi Jishu Hezuo xin Dong Xiang [Exploring the Military Technology Cooperation between China and Russia],” *Prospect and Exploration*, Vol. 7, issue 8 (2009): 60–71.

<sup>51</sup> Tai Ming Cheung, *Fortifying China: The Struggle to Build a Modern Defense Economy* (Cornell University Press 2009), p. 141.

<sup>52</sup> For more details on Putin’s early policies in this area, see: Vadim Kozyulin, “Russian Arms Sales: Another Reform?” *Yaderny Kontrol (Nuclear Control) Digest*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Spring 2001), pp. 35–39, available at <http://www.pircenter.org/en/security-index/134-yaderny-kontrol>; Konstantin Makienko, “November 2000–January 2001 Reform of Russian Defense Export System,” *Moscow Defense Brief*, No. 1, 2001, <http://mdb.cast.ru/mdb/1-2001/at/rdes/>.

<sup>53</sup> Tai Ming Cheung, *Fortifying China: The Struggle to Build a Modern Defense Economy* (Cornell University Press 2009), p. 141.

<sup>54</sup> Ching-wei Lin, “Zhong-E Junshi Hezuo de Zhuanbian—Cong Zhong-E Lianhe Junyan Tantao [China-Russia Military Cooperation A Probe into China-Russia Joint Military Exercises],” *Zhongguo Dalu Yanjiu [Mainland China Research]*, Vol. 49, Issue 4 (December 2006), pp. 49–75.





Military-Technical Cooperation,” which significantly alleviated Russia’s concerns about the Chinese replicating its weapon systems and facilitated exports of more advanced arms and technologies to China.<sup>55</sup>

Since then, the China–Russia MTC has transitioned to a high level, as actual military technology transfer and long-term cooperation projects constitute the bulk of the cooperation. The list of China–Russia long-term MTC projects is long and growing. According to Rosoboronexport (Russia’s sole state intermediary agency for military exports and imports), the largest China–Russia MTC programs are currently related to aircraft engines and anti-aircraft weapons, which constituted 90% of Russia’s arms-related exports to China in 2012. The Chernyshev Moscow Machine-Building Enterprise and the China National Aero-Technology Import and Export Corporation are performing a joint program to modernize the Russian Klimov RD-33 turbofan jet engine for a lightweight fighter jet that has become the primary engine for the Chinese CAC/PAC JF-17 Thunder lightweight multirole combat aircraft. In 2011, the Russian Military Industrial Company launched the assembly of GAZ “Tigr” (Tiger) multipurpose, all-terrain infantry mobility vehicles in China.<sup>56</sup> In August 2015, the Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, Dmitry Rogozin, named the four primary joint projects in the China–Russia MTC.<sup>57</sup> The first addresses the space program and includes building a joint base on the moon, producing Russian rocket engines in China, and joint projects in satellite navigation, remote earth sensing, producing electronic components and space equipment, human spaceflight, and others.<sup>58</sup> The second project is the joint construction of a large military helicopter, which was signed into an agreement by Xi Jinping and Putin in May 2015, when Xi was attending the May 9th Victory Parade. According to the Chairman of the Aviation Industry Corporation of China, Lin Zuoming, who visited the “Russian Helicopters” company to meet with its General Director, Alexander Miheev, in 2015, the two parties agreed to accelerate the process and specified the tasks.<sup>59</sup> The third project addresses the two countries’ agreement for jointly designing and producing a wide-body aircraft, which was signed into an agreement during Premier Li Keqiang’s visit to Moscow in 2014. Additionally, the fourth project is exports to China and maintaining Russia’s S-400 anti-aircraft weapon system. Given Ivanov’s reference to China as a “privileged partner,” China became the first foreign purchaser of the previous generation of these systems—the S-300. This is also the case with the S-400 deal. In addition, according to officials from Rosoboronexport, the

<sup>55</sup> List of acting agreements in the area of intellectual property protections between Russia and Foreign States [http://www.ved.gov.ru/rus\\_export/protection/special/](http://www.ved.gov.ru/rus_export/protection/special/).

<sup>56</sup> “Voenno-Technicheskoe Sotrydnichestvo Rossii i Kotaya. Docie [China-Russia Military Technical Cooperation. A Dossier],” TASS Russian News Agency, 2 September 2015, <http://tass.ru/info/2228966>.

<sup>57</sup> “Novui Etap v Kitaisko-Rossiiskom Voenno-Technicheskom Sotrydnichestve [A New Stage in China-Russia MTC], *People’s Daily* (Russian edition), 15 December 2015, <http://inosmi.ru/military/20151215/234815876.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Roman Krecyl, “Rossiya i Kitai Usilivayut Sblizhenie v Voennoi Oblasti [China and Russia are accelerating Military Rapprochement]” *Vzglizd*, 19 November 2014, <http://vz.ru/society/2014/11/19/716036.html>.

<sup>59</sup> “Novui Etap v Kitaisko-Rossiiskom Voenno-Technicheskom Sotrydnichestve”.



J-31 Chinese fifth-generation aircraft, which is considered an export program for competing with the USA on regional markets, will be powered by Russian RD-93 engines.<sup>60</sup>

It is important to emphasize Russia's changing attitude toward comprehensive military-technical cooperation with China, specifically the disappearing caution about relying on China in this area. When meeting with the Chinese Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, Xu Qiliang, the Russian Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu, stated that "The level of our relations demonstrates that we do not have unsolvable problems. Our work will be aimed at the realization of our MTC projects."<sup>61</sup> In turn, Sergei Kornev from Rosoboronexport stated that the forefront of the China–Russia MTC is increasingly represented by the joint production of weapons in Chinese territory.<sup>62</sup> According to the chief editor of the Moscow Defense Brief, Vasili Kashin, "if previously Russia was constrained by political factors in its MTC with China, now those factors have disappeared. We are now too inter-linked with the Chinese." Moreover, China currently has much to offer, for example, electronic components, including those for the space program, composite materials, drone technologies, and engines for warships.

Russia's tendency to consider China as not only a market but also as an indispensable MTC partner strengthened after the Ukraine crisis and the deterioration of Russian–Western cooperation. The China–Russia MTC has increasingly become a reciprocal "two-way street." Given the current dynamics, even if Russia–Western political relations stabilize at some point, Russia has already passed the point of no return in its MTC with China.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, according to Russian officials, the Kremlin trusts China and is going to consistently work to enhance bilateral MTC, disregarding Western provocations in the form of reconstructing "China's threat for Russia."<sup>64</sup> An example of this perspective was the Russian Foreign Minister Serge Lavrov's speech about the development of Russia's comprehensive partnership with China on November 22, 2014, in which he noted that: "We can now even talk about the emerging technological alliance between the two countries."<sup>65</sup>

The development of military personnel exchanges paralleled the development of the MTC and evolved from short-term visits for technical training to longer-term military education programs. Russia was the first foreign destination for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers' military education. The official statistics on the number of personnel who are involved in military educational exchanges are classified, mostly at China's request.<sup>66</sup> However, the existing open sources suggest that bilateral military personnel exchanges have been considerably increasing.

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<sup>60</sup> Krecyl, "Rossiya i Kitai Usilivayut Sblizhenie".

<sup>61</sup> Krecyl, "Rossiya i Kitai Usilivayut Sblizhenie".

<sup>62</sup> Krecyl, "Rossiya i Kitai Usilivayut Sblizhenie".

<sup>63</sup> Krecyl, "Rossiya i Kitai Usilivayut Sblizhenie".

<sup>64</sup> "Novui Etap v Kitaisko-Rossiiskom Voenno-Technicheskom Sotrydnichestve".

<sup>65</sup> *Remarks by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the XXII Assembly of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy* (Moscow: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 22 November 2014) [http://archive.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/24454A08D48F695EC3257D9A004BA32E](http://archive.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/24454A08D48F695EC3257D9A004BA32E)

<sup>66</sup> Interview with an expert on China–Russia military cooperation, Moscow, October 2016.



Moreover, interviews show that China does not have similar types of military personnel exchanges with any other major power. Although short-term exchanges and visits by PLA officers to different countries, including the USA, are very common, long-term educational programs in which officers are methodically trained to later join the PLA's commanding staff only exist in China's relations with Russia. It is not likely that military cadres that have extensive exposure to Western education will smoothly move to top-ranked commanding positions. This is because China does not trust the USA and its Western allies in military relations.<sup>67</sup>

There are a few military educational institutions that are the primary destinations for Chinese PLA officers. Top-ranking officers typically go to the General Staff Academy of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, which provides general programs in strategic and tactical aspects of warfare and, according to some estimates, accepts up to 20 high-ranking PLA officers every year.<sup>68</sup> Other important institutions are the Combined Arms Academy of the Armed Forces, the Gagarin Air Force Academy, and the Military Academy of Rear Services and Transportation. They provide 2- to 3-year programs, and each accepts 40–60 PLA officers every semester (mostly mid-career-level commanding officers and General Staff officers who are between 35 and 45 years of age).<sup>69</sup> Although the Chinese officers typically attend classes separately from their Russian peers, the actual content of the curriculum is similar to what is taught to Russian officers.

Education in Russia has helped many PLA officers make significant career leaps. For example, Lu Chuangang, a Senior Colonel, studied at the Russian General Staff Academy and became the Head of the PLA's Command Group for the 2008 "Peaceful Mission" China–Russia joint military exercises. Xu Linping was promoted to Major General of the PLA in 2007 and served as a Commander of the 38th Army Group of the Beijing Military Area of the PLA during 2011–2014, also studied in Russia. In January 2014, he became the Vice-Commander of the PLA's Lanzhou Military Region. Chen Zhaohai became the Director of the Military Training and Arms Department of the PLA General Staff Headquarters. Remarkably, China's Defense Minister Cao Gangchuan (2003–2008) studied in Russia for six years and became the primary facilitator of China's purchases of Russian arms.

Transitioning to the next substage in the moderate stage of strategic cooperation occurred by introducing joint military exercise. On December 13, 2004, the two countries announced a decision to conduct the first large-scale joint military exercise, which were named the "Peace Mission." The first exercise—"Peace Mission 2005"—occurred on August 19–25, 2005, in China's Shandong Peninsula and Russia's Vladivostok, and engaged 10,000 soldiers and officers (8000 Chinese and 2000 Russians). The official reason for the new exercises was counter-terrorism. However, the large scale and the use of heavy firepower, including long-range bombers, as well as practicing air and naval blockades, amphibious assaults, and occupying region demonstrate that the actual goals must have been more broad.

<sup>67</sup> This picture emerged during multiple interviews with both Russian and Chinese experts.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with an expert on China–Russia military cooperation, Moscow, October 2016.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with an expert on China–Russia military cooperation, Singapore, October 2016.



“Peace Mission”-type large-scale joint military exercises became a regular practice, and now occur every one or two years. Some were held within the SCO format, and most included strategies and tactics for resisting the danger of “color revolutions” and curbing political turmoil in Central Asia. It is important to note the “Peace Mission-2009,” which occurred in China and after which the first Chinese calls to abandon the “non-alignment strategy” could be heard.<sup>70</sup> “Peace Mission-2010” was the longest exercise and lasted 17 days, from September 9 to September 25, 2010, and included approximately 5000 servicemen, more than 300 military vehicles, and an excess of 50 aircraft and helicopters.<sup>71</sup> During the subsequent “Peace Mission-2012” and “Peace Mission-2014,” the militaries from the two countries further practiced cooperation and interoperability and solidified the mechanism of joint military exercises.

In 2012, another type of regular China–Russia military exercises—“Joint Sea”—was introduced. While the “Peace Mission” is predominantly ground and air exercises, the “Joint Sea” aims to achieve better coordination between the two countries’ navies. The first “Joint Sea” occurred on April 22–27, 2012, in the Yellow Sea and included practicing convoying, anti-aircraft and anti-submarine warfare, anti-piracy and rescue activities, and naval logistics. The “Joint Sea” naval exercises occur every year in different locations. “Joint Sea-2015” was a geopolitical game changer, as it became the largest naval exercise undertaken by the PLA Navy with a foreign navy and, occurring in the post-Ukraine context, the second stage of it was located in the Mediterranean, which is considered the heart of NATO. Before heading out with Russian ships to the Mediterranean, Chinese military vessels entered the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk. This military visit was also the first in the history of China–Russia relations and was symbolically connected to Xi Jinping’s attendance at the Victory Parade in Moscow on May 9, 2015. During the drills, the two navies demonstrated a high level of coordination in foreign waters.<sup>72</sup> In turn, “Joint Sea-2016,” which occurred on September 12–19, 2016, included surface ships, submarines, fixed-winged aircraft, helicopters, and amphibious vehicles and became the first major exercise of its type that included China and a second country in the disputed South China Sea after the Hague-based tribunal overruled China’s claims on the waters under its nine-dash line claim.<sup>73</sup> Combined, the “Peace Mission” and “Joint Sea” exercises guarantee that, every year, China and Russia have one to two large-scale joint military exercises, which include thousands of servicemen and hundreds of military vehicles, aircraft, helicopters, and naval ships.

<sup>70</sup> “Zhong-E Lianhe Junyan: Jiefangjun Buzai Fengxing Bujement Zhengce [China–Russia Joint Military Drills: the PLA no Longer Pursues the Non-Alignment Policy],” Huangqiu Shibao [The Global Times], 14 July 2009, <http://junshi.cctv.com/20090714/105454.shtml>.

<sup>71</sup> “Peace Mission 2010,” [http://english.cntv.cn/english/special/peace\\_mission/home/index.shtml](http://english.cntv.cn/english/special/peace_mission/home/index.shtml).

<sup>72</sup> Veronika Bondareva, “Rossiisko-Kitaiskie Ucheniya ‘Morskoe Vzaimodeistvie’. Dos’e [China–Russia Exercises ‘Joint Sea.’ Dossier], Russian News Agency TASS, 19 August 2015, <http://tass.ru/info/1960969>.

<sup>73</sup> Ankit Panda, “Chinese, Russian Navies to Hold 8 Days of Naval Exercises in the South China Sea,” *The Diplomat*, 12 September 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/09/chinese-russian-navies-to-hold-8-days-of-naval-exercises-in-the-south-china-sea/>.



In May 2016, China and Russia launched a new joint military exercise, “Air-space Security 2016,” which took place in the Central Research Institute of the Russian Armed Forces and became the first Russia–China computer-simulated missile defense drill. “Aerospace Security—2017” was located in Beijing in December 2017. According to China’s Defence Ministry, the main task of the exercise is “to work out joint planning of combat operations when organizing air missile defenses, operation, and mutual fire support.”<sup>74</sup> While both countries emphasize that the drills are not directed against third countries, they occur in the context of China–Russia joint opposition against the American global defense system and seek to strengthen bilateral military interoperability.

Around the same time, China and Russia began to conduct another joint exercise—regular exercises for internal security troops, which includes Russia’s National Guards and China’s police units.<sup>75</sup> The inclusion of these activities increases the number of Chinese–Russian joint military drills to 5–6 per year.

### **Advanced cooperation: the growing interoperability of military forces**

The problem with assessing advanced levels of military cooperation is the lack of data. One way to address this situation is to more carefully examine the details of joint military activities. Although there is no current evidence of either military base exchanges (indicator 6) or a common defense policy (indicator 7), the increasing comprehensiveness and regularity of China–Russia military exercises reveal certain elements of episodic military interoperability and an integrated military command (indicator 5).

According to some assessments, there is a modest degree of compatibility and interoperability between Chinese and Russian forces.<sup>76</sup> Thus, during the above-mentioned “Peace Mission-2005,” a new system of command codes was introduced to allow for the transmission of orders and communication between Russian and Chinese pilots. “Peace Mission-2009” was also characterized by the improved coordination of military forces with elements of a joint defense simulation. More elements of interoperability and integrated command were observed during “Peace Mission-2010,” in which two Russian Mig-29s and three Chinese H-6 jet bombers were merged into one squadron and performed joint tasks to practice joint command codes and interoperability.<sup>77</sup> It is also worth emphasizing that all China–Russia joint tasks during the drills operate in the Russian language.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>74</sup> “Russian-Chinese Joint Air Defense Drills Kick Off in Beijing,” TASS Russian News Agency, December 11, 2017, <http://tass.com/defense/980318>.

<sup>75</sup> Participatory observations from the seminar “Russian-Chinese Military and Defense Industry Cooperation Since the Beginning of the Ukrainian Crisis” by Vasily Kashin, Visiting Fellow, Military Transformations Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, 3 October 2016.

<sup>76</sup> Dimtri Trenin, “From a Greater Europe to a Greater Asia?” *Global Times*, 26 February 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/909121.shtml>.

<sup>77</sup> “Peace Mission 2010,” [http://english.cntv.cn/english/special/peace\\_mission/home/index.shtml](http://english.cntv.cn/english/special/peace_mission/home/index.shtml).

<sup>78</sup> Author’s interview with an expert on China–Russia military relations, Singapore, 11 October 2016.



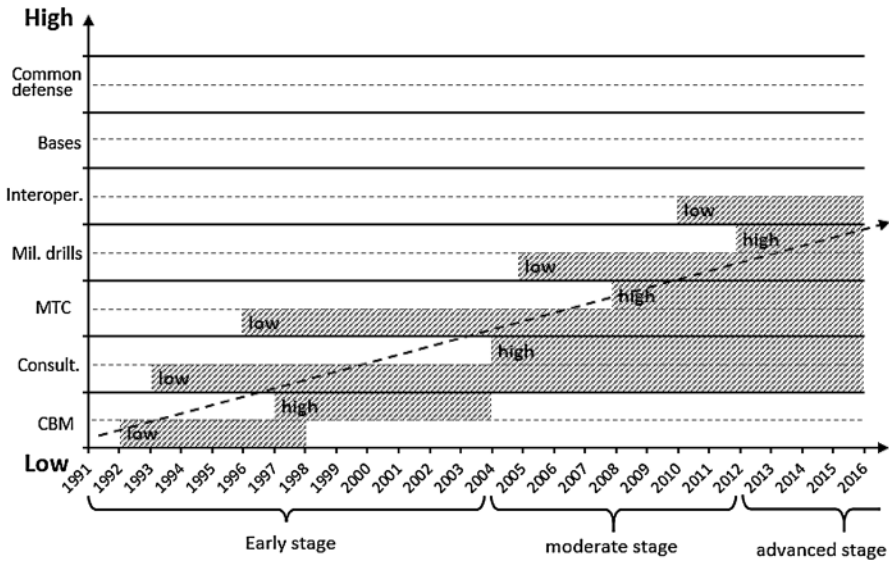


Fig. 2 Development of China–Russia military cooperation since 1991

During “Joint Sea-2014,” the exercises included the joint defense of warships in anchorage, conveying and rescuing captured naval ships, elements of anti-aircraft warfare, and several rescue operations. All operations were coordinated from a joint command center. “Joint Sea-2015” marked a step forward because it included the joint command of warships in the foreign waters of the Mediterranean Sea. For that purpose, a joint command center was established in the Divnomorskoye Coordination Center of the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk.<sup>79</sup> According to the Chinese Defense Ministry, one of the aims of the exercise was “to increase our navies’ ability to jointly address maritime security threats.”<sup>80</sup> During the post-Hague tribunal, “Joint Sea-2016,” which occurred in the South China Sea, the Chinese and Russian navies engaged in a range of activities, including search and rescue drills, anti-submarine warfare, and, remarkably, “joint island-seizing missions,” which appear to be a new addition to the “Joint Sea”-type drills.

The above analysis demonstrates that, since 1991, China and Russia have constructed comprehensive mechanisms of inter-military cooperation that have started to move into the initial stages of advanced cooperation, as defined in the present framework (Fig. 2).

<sup>79</sup> Tom Parffit, ‘Russia-China Clinch Tightens With Joint Navy Exercises in Mediterranean,’ *The Telegraph*, 11 May 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11596851/Russia-China-clinch-tightens-with-joint-navy-exercises-in-Mediterranean.html>.

<sup>80</sup> “China, Russia to hold first joint Mediterranean naval drills in May,” Reuters, 30 April 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-russia-military-idUSKBN0NL16F20150430>.



## Robustness check: diplomatic and economic cooperation

As a robustness check on the comprehensiveness of the upward trend in China–Russia cooperation, this section considers other non-military aspects of bilateral cooperation on economic and diplomatic dimensions. Indeed, it has been argued that alignment “does not focus solely upon the military dimension of international politics”<sup>81</sup> but spreads across security, diplomatic, and economic spheres.<sup>82</sup> The importance of trade, for example, has received a fair amount of attention in multiple alliance studies.<sup>83</sup> Echoing Montesquieu’s famous dictum that “the spirit of commerce unites nations,” some scholars have used economic logic to explain states’ security concerns and alignment patterns.<sup>84</sup> Thus, the gains from trade are likely to bolster the aggregate political-military power of the alliance and enhance the allies’ security.<sup>85</sup> In turn, a lack of trade can undermine the foundations of an alliance. Economically interdependent states may view threats to their economic partners as threats to their own material interests. Hence, governments become more willing to accept the costs of alliance with valuable economic partners, to deter attacks on them, and defend them in the face of war.<sup>86</sup>

Alliances also entail diplomatic cooperation that displays a degree of mutual support and coordination in the international institutions. Alignments should provide members with “mutual expectations of support” that can contain elements of both “hard” balancing and “soft” balancing.<sup>87</sup> Alignment parties should also display some degree of policy coordination and manifest a “willingness to commonly pursue joint interests and mutual goals.”<sup>88</sup>

Therefore, theoretical and empirical assessments of alignments often move beyond narrowly defined security guarantees.<sup>89</sup> In the assessment of the military

<sup>81</sup> Ward, *Research Gaps in Alliance Dynamics*, 7.

<sup>82</sup> Thomas S. Wilkins, “From Strategic Partnership to Strategic Alliance?: Australia–Japan Security Ties and the Asia–Pacific,” *Asia Policy* 20, no. 1 (2015), 81.

<sup>83</sup> For mixed evidence on whether alliances increase trade levels and on whether trade makes alliance more likely, see: Harry Bliss and Bruce Russett, “Democratic Trading Partners: The Liberal Connection, 1962–1989,” *The Journal of Politics* 60, no. 4 (1998): 1126–1147; James D. Morrow, “Alliances and Asymmetry”; James D. Morrow, Randolph M. Siverson, and Tressa E. Tabares, “The Political Determinants of International Trade: the Major Powers, 1907–1990,” *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 3 (1998): 649–661; Joanne Gowa, *Allies, Adversaries, and International Trade* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Edward D. Mansfield and Rachel Bronson, “Alliances, Preferential Trading Arrangements, and International Trade,” *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 1 (1997): 94–107.

<sup>84</sup> Brian Lai and Dan Reiter, “Democracy, Political Similarity, and International Alliances, 1816–1992,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44, no. 2 (2000), 209–210.

<sup>85</sup> Mansfield and Bronson, “Alliances,” 94.

<sup>86</sup> Lai and Reiter, “Democracy Political Similarity, and International Alliances,” 209.

<sup>87</sup> Wilkins, “‘Alignment’, not ‘alliance’,” 65, 73.

<sup>88</sup> Georg Strüver, “International Alignment Between Interests and Ideology: The Case of China’s Partnership Diplomacy,” *GIGA Working Papers* 283 (March 2016), 8.

<sup>89</sup> For more examples of analyses of non-security dimensions of alignments, see: D. Scott Bennett, “Testing Alternative Models of Alliance Duration, 1816–1984,” *American Journal of Political Science* 41, no. 3 (1997): 846–878; Brian Lai and Dan Reiter, “Democracy, Political Similarity, and International Alliances, 1816–1992,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44, no. 2 (2000): 203–227; Michael W. Simon and Erik Gartzke, “Political System Similarity and the Choice of Allies: Do democracies Flock Together, or Do Opposites Attract?,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40, no. 4 (1996), 618.





component of China–Russia cooperation, it is particularly important to consider economic and diplomatic aspects of cooperation because China–Russia relations are often presented as being military dominated and lacking other foundations.<sup>90</sup> The analysis below uses existing quantitative indicators, such as the volume of bilateral trade and its share in each country’s total external trade. To assess the degree of diplomatic cooperation, in turn, this paper explores the pattern of China–Russia joint voting behavior in the UN Security Council (UNSC). It also briefly explores the agendas of regional blocks in which China and Russia are core players.

### **Diplomatic cooperation and converging perceptions of threats**

In the sphere of diplomatic cooperation, China and Russia display joint resistance against the West’s attempts to use force to remove recalcitrant regimes or exert economic pressure on states reckoned by the USA and its Western allies as guilty of human rights violations. Thus, in 2007, a China–Russia joint veto stymied the UN over Myanmar. In 2008, a similar veto was imposed to protect Mugabe’s Zimbabwe from censure. The most telling example is China and Russia jointly vetoing four US-backed resolutions on Syria—on October 4, 2011; February 4, 2012; July 19, 2012; and May 22, 2014<sup>91</sup>—that thwarted US-led efforts, combined with France, the UK, Germany, and Portugal, to topple the Assad regime. The USA and its allies lambasted the vetoes and accused Moscow and Beijing of buying time for President Assad to smash the opposition.<sup>92</sup> Susan Rice, the US ambassador to the UN, stated that the USA was “outraged” and “disgusted.”<sup>93</sup> Hillary Clinton indicated that Russia and China would “pay the price” for supporting Assad.<sup>94</sup> According to UN envoys, efforts by the USA and its allies to impose sanctions on Syria were met with “fierce resistance” from Russia and China.<sup>95</sup> However, at a 2014 meeting in Beijing, Russian and Chinese leaders appeared to congratulate each other for preventing a western intervention, which, from their perspective, would have made matters much worse, and would have undermined any moves toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict.<sup>96</sup>

Table 1 shows the veto records of the UNSC since 1991, which demonstrates the emergence of the China–Russia power axis within the UN. In the early 1990s,

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<sup>90</sup> Gregory Shtraks. A Cold Summer for China and Russia?//The Diplomat.—2015.—1 сентября.— URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2015/09/a-cold-summer-for-china-and-russia/>.

<sup>91</sup> *Security Council - Veto List* (United Nation: Dag Hammarskjöld Library), available at [http://www.un.org/depts/dhl/resguide/scact\\_veto\\_en.shtml](http://www.un.org/depts/dhl/resguide/scact_veto_en.shtml).

<sup>92</sup> ‘Russia and China Veto of Syria Sanctions Condemned as ‘Indefensible’,’ *The Guardian*, 19 July 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/19/russia-china-syria-sanction-veto>.

<sup>93</sup> *Meeting of the Security Council on the Situation Syria: Chinese and Russian Vetoes*(Moscow: Voltaire Network), <http://www.voltairenet.org/article171639.html>.

<sup>94</sup> ‘Clinton: Russia and China will ‘Pay Price’ for Supporting Assad,’ *RT*, 6 July 2012, <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2012/07/06/249632/us-warns-russia-china-over-syria/>.

<sup>95</sup> Louis Charbonneau, ‘Russia, China Resist U.N. Syria Sanctions Push: Envoys,’ *Reuters*, 26 August 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/26/us-syria-un-idUSTRE77P4X920110826>

<sup>96</sup> Cox, “Not just ‘convenient,’” 325.



**Table 1** Veto records of UN Security Council (1991–2017)

Total	USA	Russia	China	China–Russia
37	15 (13 before 2007)	12 (3 before and 9 after 2007)	2 (both before 2007)	8 (all after 2007)

2007 is the year of the first China–Russia joint veto in the UNSC

there were no joint China–Russia vetoes; however, after 2007, half of Russia’s and all of China’s vetoes in the UNSC were joint China–Russia vetoes. In addition to the UNSC, in the period of 2006–2012 (after its first six years on the UN Human Rights Council, China had to leave the council after six years in compliance with a rule that was set by the Council for each member state), out of a total of 120 voting occasions, China was never on the same side with the USA. However, there was a 99% rate of agreement between China and Russia.<sup>97</sup>

Russia and China also enhanced cooperation within multilateral formats, such as the SCO and BRICS. On July 15, 2014, the two countries established an agenda for the BRICS Development Bank (New Development Bank), with a reserve currency pool, which was called the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) and was equal to \$US100 billion. Headquartered in Shanghai, the Bank represents an attempt to break the dominance of the US dollar in global trade, as well as dollar-backed institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, both of which are US-led institutions in which BRICS countries have little influence.

This institutional cooperation between the two countries is accompanied by converging assessments of external threats in Moscow and Beijing. The analysis of the meeting protocols from China–Russia security consultations reveals increasing concerns over the “American factor” in world politics, and agreement on the necessity of a China–Russia joint reaction. For example, during annual strategic consultations among Chiefs of the General Staff on May 24, 2016, the two parties confirmed their common concerns with American attempts to increase its influence in the Asia Pacific, and the Chinese side stated that China is willing to be strategically “on the same page” with Russia.<sup>98</sup> The 2015 consultations within the SCO members stressed that economic sanctions without authorization by the UN Security Council were unacceptable.<sup>99</sup> Several China–Russia Northeast Asia Security Dialogues throughout 2016 and 2017 emphasized that the American Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea would undermine security in Northeast Asia; that THAAD is the continuation of Washington’s unilateral worldwide deployment strategy and is an attempt to tilt the regional balance of power in its favor; and

<sup>97</sup> Wu Fengshi, ‘China-Russia Axis in UN,’ unpublished manuscript.

<sup>98</sup> “Zhong E Liang Jun di Shiba Lun Zhanlue Cuoshang Zai Jing Juxing [The Eighteenth China-Russia Inter-Military Strategic Negotiations Take Place in Beijing], Ministry of National Defense of the PRC, 24 May 2016, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/diplomacy/2016-05/24/content\\_4663577.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/diplomacy/2016-05/24/content_4663577.htm), accessed 2 July 16.

<sup>99</sup> Shaghai Hezuo Zuzhi Chengyuanguo Yuanshou Wufa Xuanyan [Ufa Declaration of the Heads of the SCO’s member States], 9 July 2015, The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, <http://chn.sectsc.org/documents/>.



that China and Russia must consolidate mutual coordination to better respond to the new threats.<sup>100</sup>

Arguably, the critique and condemnation of US policies in Asia and elsewhere as “increasingly threatening” as well as the display of intentions to counter the increasing American threat have become embedded norms in the China–Russia security relationship. This is where China–Russia relations contrast sharply with China–US relations: in interactions with the USA (or any other country), China never calls Russia a “threat.” Likewise, in its formal contacts with other countries, Russia does not call China a threat. Rhetoric is, admittedly, a secondary indicator, but it points in the same direction as the other above-mentioned indicators.

### **Economic cooperation: from trade to unequal interdependence**

According to China’s trade statistics in the pre-crisis year of 2014, China–Russia trade was less than one-fifth of China–US trade (95.3 vs. 555.1 billion USD)<sup>101</sup> and only one-fourth of Russia–EU trade (380 billion USD),<sup>102</sup> which shows relatively low levels of economic cooperation. However, a more careful look at the data reveals that the situation with China–Russia trade is rather mixed.

First, the total volume of trade has been increasing relatively fast since the early 1990s. As shown in Table 2, in the 1990s, China–Russia bilateral trade remained within a meager 5–7 billion USD. In 2000, total bilateral trade reached only 8 billion USD, but by 2011 it increased tenfold and reached 80 billion USD. In the pre-Ukraine Crisis in 2014, China–Russia trade exceeded 95 billion USD, and, in terms of total volume of trade, China became Russia’s biggest single trade partner.

Second, as also shown in Table 2, there have been several significant proportional changes. While Russia consistently occupies only 2% of China’s total external trade, the share of China in Russia’s external trade has been steadily increasing, from 5% in 2001 to 14.76% in 2016. The Ukraine Crisis, low oil prices, the war of sanctions between Russia and Europe, and the devaluation of the ruble in 2014–2015 caused a 30% decrease in Russia’s total external trade. At the same time, Russia–EU trade decreased by 40% (it plummeted from 380 billion USD in 2014 to 230 billion USD in 2015), which is more than the overall decline of Russia’s external trade, while China–Russia trade in 2014–2015 shrunk only by 28%, which is less than the overall decline. In fact, Russia–EU trade almost halved when compared to 417 billion USD in 2013. At the same time, the volume of China–Russia trade in the post-Ukraine Crisis context is recovering rapidly by growing more than 20% from 69.53 billion USD in 2016 to almost 85.72 billion USD in 2017. Therefore, Russia’s trade with China

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<sup>100</sup> O chetvertom raunde rossiisko-kitaiskogo dialoga po bezopasnosti v Severo-Vostochnoi Azii [About the fourth round of China–Russia Northeast Asia security dialogue], The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 28 July 2016, [http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/cn/-/asset\\_publisher/WkKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/2376057](http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/cn/-/asset_publisher/WkKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/2376057).

<sup>101</sup> Zhongguo Tongji Nianjian [China Statistical Yearbook], <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2006/indexch.htm>.

<sup>102</sup> “Tovarooborot Rossii i ES v 2015 gody upal na 40% [Russia’s Trade with the EU Fell by 40% in 2015], *Kommersant*, January 13, 2016, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2890699>.



has increased vis-à-vis its trade with the EU. China, by all evidence, was able to partially fill the niche that emerged in Russia's foreign trade due to Western sanctions and Russia's retaliatory embargo. At the same time, in terms of trade, Russia depends on China much more than China depends on Russia.

Particularly important in terms of generating economic interdependence are long-term projects, such as in China–Russia energy cooperation. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the two countries were not significant to each other's energy sectors. Interactions in this sphere were sporadic, small in scale, and often undisclosed.<sup>103</sup> Highly dependent on the export of mineral resources and recovering from the Soviet collapse, Moscow attempted to enlarge its oil and gas export to Asian countries, but, until recently, it remained largely reluctant to increase the level of energy cooperation with China.

Things began to substantially change by the end of Putin's second term, and China–Russia energy cooperation further moved forward in the context of Russia's subsequent "reorientation to Asia" strategy.<sup>104</sup> The new projects went far beyond simple trade transactions and established a long-term energy cooperation that includes creating large-scale, on-land energy infrastructure that cuts across the China–Russia border and, thus, connects the two countries for the foreseeable future. Russia has become a major oil and gas supplier for China, while the Chinese energy market has become one of the major destinations for Russia's energy exports.

The first project that changed China–Russia energy cooperation was the construction of the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean (ESPO) oil pipeline, which includes a 1056-km-long pipeline from Skovorodino (Russia) to Daqing (China) and was jointly constructed by the Russian Transneft and the China National Petroleum Corporation. The construction was completed in 2010 and, on January 1, 2011, the pipeline started scheduled oil shipments to China.<sup>105</sup> The ESPO pipeline has had a considerable impact on Russia's oil export to China, which more than doubled between 2010 and 2015, and exceeded 800,000 barrels per day in some months of 2016 (in 2000, Russia's oil export was only 88,000 barrels per day). In 2014, due to the increased capacity of the ESPO pipeline, Russia became China's third largest supplier and accounted for 11% of China's total oil imports. In 2015 and 2016, however, Russia continued to take market share from other oil exporters and managed to overtake Saudi Arabia for several months as the largest crude oil exporter to China.<sup>106</sup>

Another important shift in China–Russia energy cooperation occurred in 2013 when Beijing received access to Russia's gas fields, which was always cautioned by the Kremlin. At the G-20 summit in St. Petersburg on September 5, 2013, in the presence of Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC)

<sup>103</sup> Here, there is a parallel with the above-described cooperation in the sphere of MTC.

<sup>104</sup> For more details of Russia's "Reorientation to Asia" or "Pivot to Asia" policies, see: Alexander Korolev, "Russia's Reorientation to Asia: Causes and Strategic Implications," *Pacific Affairs* 89, no. 1 (2016): 53–73.

<sup>105</sup> Vladimir Soldatkin and Philippa Fletcher, "Russia in milestone oil pipeline supply to China," *Reuters*, January 1, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-china-oil/russia-in-milestone-oil-pipeline-supply-to-china-idUSLDE6BU0CK20110101>.

<sup>106</sup> Røseth, "Russia's Energy Relations with China," 46.



**Table 2** China–Russia trade (1992–2017)

Годы	Total China–Russia Trade (billion USD)	China’s share in Russia’s external trade (%)	Russia’s share in China’s external trade (%)
1992	5.86	4.81	3.54
1993	7.68	5.67	3.92
1994	5.08	3.59	2.15
1995	5.46	3.39	1.94
1996	6.85	4.34	2.36
1997	6.12	3.74	1.88
1998	5.48	3.71	1.69
1999	5.72	4.28	1.59
2000	8.00	4.52	1.68
2001	10.67	5.06	2.09
2002	11.93	6.04	1.92
2003	15.76	6.05	1.85
2004	21.23	5.77	1.84
2005	29.10	5.97	2.05
2006	33.40	6.53	1.89
2007	48.17	7.31	2.21
2008	56.83	7.61	2.22
2009	38.80	8.42	1.76
2010	55.45	9.52	1.86
2011	79.25	10.17	2.18
2012	88.16	10.4	2.28
2013	89.21	10.54	2.15
2014	95.28	11	2.21
2015	68.06	11.9	1.72
2016	69.53	14.76	1.89
2017	84.72	–	–

*Source:* Calculated based on China’s and Russia’s customs statistics as well as UN Comtrade database <https://comtrade.un.org/>. The results of the calculations may differ slightly depending on the source, but the dynamics of trade within the presented period remains unchanged regardless of data source

and NOVATEK (Russia’s largest independent natural gas producer) concluded an agreement on the purchase of a 20% equity share in the large Yamal LNG project by CNPC. The project includes constructing a large LNG plant that has a capacity of 16.5 million tons per annum, based on the feedstock resources of the South-Tambeyskoe field near Sabetta in the Yamal peninsula, and the construction of a transport infrastructure, including a seaport for large-capacity LNG carriers and an airport.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>107</sup> “NOVATEK and CNPC conclude agreement on share purchase in Yamal LNG,” *Novatek News*, 5 September 2013, [http://www.novatek.ru/en/investors/events/archive/index.php?id\\_4=783&mode\\_4=event&afrom\\_4=01.01.2013&ato\\_4=31.12.2013&from\\_4=2](http://www.novatek.ru/en/investors/events/archive/index.php?id_4=783&mode_4=event&afrom_4=01.01.2013&ato_4=31.12.2013&from_4=2), accessed 29 June 2015.



Energy cooperation with China dramatically increased with the signing of the \$400 billion gas and \$270 billion oil megadeals in 2014 and 2013. Some analysts argued that practical agreements about Russian natural gas supplies to China along the eastern and western (via the Altai) routes ranked among the primary successes in China–Russia trade and economic cooperation in 2014.<sup>108</sup> For example, the gas deal provides for annual supplies by the Russian state-controlled gas company, Gazprom, of 38 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas for 35 years via the “*Sila Sibiri*” (the Power of Siberia) gas pipeline the construction of which is also part of the signed deal.

These projects are in sharp contrast to Russia’s caution vis-à-vis China in the energy sphere in the 1990s and early 2000s. The Russian Deputy Prime Minister, Arkady Dvorkovich, who is responsible for overseeing Russia’s gas and oil industries, stated in February 2015 that there are no more psychological barriers or political obstacles in the sphere of energy cooperation between China and Russia. China is Russia’s strongest partner in Asia, and Russia will consider allowing China to have more controlling stakes in strategically important energy projects.<sup>109</sup> Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in turn, stated that important bilateral decisions “pave the way to an energy alliance between Russia and China.”<sup>110</sup> The International Energy Agency (IEA) forecasts considerable increases in the Russian pipeline gas supply to China and estimates that it will reach 80 bcm by 2040 and will account for 30% of Russia’s total gas export.<sup>111</sup> In the energy sector, China and Russia are becoming more dependent on each other, with Russia willing to tolerate a greater degree of economic vulnerability in front of China.

## Conclusion

The extant literature on China–Russia relations has mostly been unable to bear any significant theoretical fruit and contribute to conceptual generalization in IR. In other words, such important case as China–Russia relations has produced very little in conceptualization and theory building that can transcend the case itself. The present study attempts to address this problem by symbiotically synthesizing both the existing theoretical knowledge and the empirical analysis of China–Russia relations. It endeavors to go beyond China–Russia relations per se to start qualifying and quantifying strategic alignment in IR. While it does not purport to fully resolve the debate about how close China and Russia are to a real alliance and what such

<sup>108</sup> Vladimir Portyakov, “How Does the Ukraine Crisis Influence Russian-Chinese Current Trends and Future Prospects,” paper presented at the international workshop “After the Ukraine Crisis: Towards a Post-Hegemonic Multipolar World?” February 24–26, 2015, National University of Singapore.

<sup>109</sup> “Dvorkovich Dopustil Ychastie Kitaya v Osvoenii Strategicheskikh Mestorozhdenii [Dvorkovich does not exclude the possibility of China’s participation in the development of strategic energy deposits], *RBK*, February 27, 2015, <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/27/02/2015/54f002189a7947255e32ef80>.

<sup>110</sup> *Remarks by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the XXII Assembly of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy* (Moscow: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 22 November 2014) [http://archive.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/24454A08D48F695EC3257D9A004BA32E](http://archive.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/24454A08D48F695EC3257D9A004BA32E).

<sup>111</sup> IEA (International Energy Agency). 2015. *World Energy Outlook 2015*. Paris: International Energy Agency. Accessed April 20, 2016. <http://www.worldenergyoutlook.org/weo2015/>.



terms as “alliance” or “alignment” mean in contemporary international politics, it is intended to be seen as a necessary step in enhancing our understanding and measurement of alignment, in general, and China–Russia alignment, in particular.

Empirically, the analysis above shows that since the end of the Cold War, China and Russia have constructed comprehensive strategic cooperation, of which some aspects are more advanced than others. However, all aspects have consistently progressed over the last two decades. Military cooperation has advanced furthest. A comprehensive and multi-level mechanism of inter-military consultation, which is responsive to international contingencies, has been put in place and institutionalized. Large-scale MTC and military personnel exchanges have increased the level of inter-military compatibility. Since 2005, due to regular joint military exercises, China and Russia have achieved a certain degree of episodic interoperability of their military forces. On the plane of diplomatic cooperation, China and Russia do not behave as true allies. However, due to the gradual convergence of their perceptions of threats and interests, the two increasingly support each other in relevant international organizations and make efforts to create new international institutions that are allegedly capable of providing better representation for the voices of the “non-West.” Economic cooperation is the weakest aspect of the China–Russia alignment, although in no way does it lack substance. Large-scale, long-term, costly energy projects inevitably generate bilateral interdependence under which the leadership from either side will at least think twice before seriously undermining the positive dynamics of the relationship.

The current upward trend in China–Russia strategic cooperation should not be viewed as irreversible. Snyder has emphasized that depending on both external and internal factors alignments may start to move in the opposite direction vis-à-vis the prior pattern.<sup>112</sup> Therefore, it is not impossible for Moscow and Beijing to start moving apart. At the same time, China–Russia strategic cooperation should not be viewed as ad hoc or impulsive. The two countries have travelled a long way, and where they are now in terms of alignment formation—the level of their technical preparedness for tighter forms of military cooperation—allows them having a significant impact on international politics and should be taken seriously. Given the geopolitical parameters and military capabilities of China and Russia, their evolving alignment is an important factor that has a direct bearing on the entire structure of the contemporary international system and can challenge the existing US-led international order in the most fundamental ways. Russia can gain access to more instruments for promoting its agenda of balancing the USA and enhancing its version of multipolarity in Europe. China, in turn, receives Russia’s political backing and access to Russia’s energy resources and military technologies, which are essential assets for China in its growing tensions with the USA in Asia. Closer alignment between China and Russia can also accelerate the merging of their flagship geopolitical projects, such as China’s Silk Road Initiative and Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which has a potential to strategically reshape

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<sup>112</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, “Alliances, Balance, and Stability,” *International Organization* 45, no. 1 (Winter, 1991), 125.





the Eurasian space.<sup>113</sup> Closer China–Russia relations can also mean very limited Russia–US and China–US cooperation on issues of crucial strategic importance for the USA. Thus, without methodical assessment of China–Russia strategic alignment, the field might be miscalculating the overall tendency of power relations within the international system as well as the current dynamics of China–US and Russia–US relations.

Theoretically, this article offers a framework for assessing interstate alignment dynamics that can be applied to various cases. To test and further refine the suggested framework, the next step would be applying it to the cases of, e.g., US–India and China–Pakistan alignments, which would allow locating China–Russia cooperation in a comparative context and further generalizing the indicators of alignment suggested in this research. The US–India alignment is a new development in the post-Cold War international politics that can also be interpreted as an ad hoc phenomenon (as a reaction to China’s assertiveness in the Asia–Pacific region), whereas China–Pakistan alignment is an important regional security arrangement that requires better understanding and invites more research efforts. Both provide useful reference points for assessing the relative depth of China–Russia strategic cooperation. The list of potential cases to which the suggested framework can be productively applied can also include multilateral alignments, such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization, US–Japan–Australia Security Dialogue, and the ASEAN Security Community, for a more systematic understanding and comparative mapping of alignment dynamics in different regions.

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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<sup>113</sup> On May 8, 2015, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping signed the Joint Statement on Cooperation and Connection between the Silk Road and EEU. According to Putin, “The integration of the EEU and Silk Road projects means reaching a new level of partnership, and actually implies a common economic space on the continent.” See: “Russia, China Agree to Integrate Eurasian Union, Silk Road, Sign Deals,” 8 May, 2015, RT, <http://rt.com/business/256877-russia-china-deals-cooperation/>.

