

Beyond the Nominal and the Ad Hoc: The Substance and Drivers of China-Russia Military Cooperation

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ABSTRACT *Post-Cold War China-Russia relations have always been a matter of debate. Since the end of the Cold War, the China-Russia strategic cooperation has progressed consistently, showing immunity to exogenous shocks. This paper explores the international-systemic incentives for the China-Russia alignment and examines the actual mechanisms of the China-Russia military cooperation to identify the foundations for a military alliance. The paper argues that China-Russia relations are “on the verge of an alliance,” meaning that a strong basis for an alliance is in place, and only minor steps are needed for a fully-fledged alliance to materialize; the occurrence of such steps is still an open question.*

Introduction

Post-Cold War China-Russia relations have always been a matter of debate, as witnessed by such titles as *Rapprochement or Rivalry?*¹ or *Rivalry or Partnership?*² With regard to China’s reaction to Russia’s policies in Georgia in 2008, for example, some observed that China “sides with the West, not Russia,”³ and that the “Beijing-Moscow rift over Georgia war deepens.”⁴ Others, however, argued that China is still on Russia’s side.⁵ Similarly, in the case of the Ukraine crisis, some argued that China “sided with Russia,”⁶ while others observed that “China splits with Russia over Ukraine.”⁷ Somewhat similar confu-

sion surrounds Russia’s reaction to the South China Sea dispute. Some believe that Russia supports China’s South China Sea position,⁸ whereas others ask, “Why doesn’t Russia support China in the South China Sea?”⁹ Academic studies can similarly be divided into those that are doubtful about the durability of China-Russia partnership and those that believe that it has strong foundations or at least that the existing bilateral problems are not unsurmountable.¹⁰

Meanwhile, since the end of the Cold War, China-Russia relations have progressed consistently from “good neighborliness” in the early 1990s, to “constructive cooperation” in the late

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A satellite image of Subi Reef, an artificial island being developed by China in the Spratly Islands, South China Sea.

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1990s, to “comprehensive strategic partnership” in 2001, to “comprehensive strategic partnership and coordination” in 2012, and most recently to “comprehensive strategic partnership of equality, mutual trust, mutual support, common prosperity and long-lasting friendship”¹¹ in 2016, a progression which shows the consistent consolidation of China-Russia interactions and their immunity to exogenous shocks. In the context of the deterioration of Russia-U.S. relations following the Ukraine crisis and the intensification of China-U.S. tensions, China-Russia relations have often been perceived by both policy advocates and scholars as an actual or incipient alliance. In October 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin called Russia and China “natural partners and natural allies,” using the word “ally” that Moscow had previously eschewed with respect to

China.¹² Some prominent Chinese international relations experts have also argued that China will be unable to shift the U.S.-dominated unipolar world order “unless it forms a formal alliance with Russia.”¹³ In this context some have started to ask, is there a China-Russia alliance?¹⁴ Are China-Russia relations an alliance or not?¹⁵

Although these questions are important, as are the aforementioned attempts to ascertain which side China or Russia aligns with in regional crises, they are of limited help in understanding the substance and functioning of post-Cold War China-Russia relations. Indeed, to draw a sharp distinction between the nominal categories of “alliance” vs. “no alliance” and to insert China-Russia relations into either category is less important than finding out whether

this bilateral relationship can function in a way that a military alliance would function, how their inter-military cooperation actually works, and whether there are systemic incentives for the two countries to align with each other. History reveals that the presence of a formal alliance does not guarantee that there is, in fact, a functional alliance, and vice versa, that the absence of an alliance treaty does not mean that there is no such alliance. In fact, states can act as alliance members without being formal allies. The “Grand Alliance” of the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, formed during World War II to defeat Nazi Germany, lacked many formal features of an “alliance” and operated in the absence of treaties.¹⁶ One of the most renowned international relations theorists, Hans Morgenthau, once wrote that there are situations when states’ interests “so obviously call for concentered policies and actions that an explicit formulation of these interests, policies and actions in the form of treaty of alliance appears to be redundant.”¹⁷ One might argue that the U.S.-UK “special relationship” or the U.S.-Japan-Australia trilateral strategic dialogue (TSD) fall in this category.¹⁸

In a similar vein, an emphasis on ad hoc reactions to various regional events or assessments of the nature of China-Russia interactions from the vantage point of regional geopolitics in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, the Arctic region or elsewhere may not be the best way to grasp the actual dynamics and the driving forces of China-Russia relations. Both China

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and Russia are nuclear great powers with structural positions within the international system; they are, in fact, important building blocks of that system. This means that the baseline of their behavior toward each other is dictated more by the trends of great power politics involving the system leader –the United States– unfolding at the systemic level than by regional interests or disputes. As alliance theory informs us, great power alliances, understood as formal or informal relationships of security cooperation, emerge in response to imminent existential threats.¹⁹ Since only the United States, and not the regional powers with which China and Russia have disagreements, can pose such a threat, what matters most is how China and Russia react to the behavior of the United States and not how they behave vis-à-vis an array of regional-level disputes. Therefore, one has to look into the China-Russia-U.S. triangle and see whether China and Russia in their bilateral in-

According to China-Russia official documents and statements at different levels, the two countries share a view of the United States as increasingly threatening to both China's and Russia's geopolitical interests, civilizational identities, and domestic political regimes

teractions interpret the United States and its policies as an explicit external threat, which would constitute a foundation for a China-Russia military alignment.

With these considerations in mind, in this paper, I attempt to answer two interrelated questions regarding contemporary China-Russia military relations. First, I explore whether China and Russia have a shared view of security threats with respect to the United States and, therefore, whether there are international-systemic incentives for a China-Russia alignment. Second, I look into the actual mechanics of the China-Russia military cooperation that has come to fruition, rather than the promises of written agreements, to understand whether this cooperation carries the features of, or at least lays the foundation for, a military alliance. The unifying goal of the paper is to go beyond the nominal characteristics and the ad hoc reactions in China-Russia re-

lations and look into the substance of this important bilateral power axis. I argue that China-Russia relations are “on the verge of an alliance” –which is a condition where strong foundations for an alliance are in place and only minor steps are needed for a fully-fledged alliance to materialize; the occurrence of such steps remains an open question.

Is the United States Viewed as a Threat by China and Russia?

Answering this question inevitably invites another one; is China a threat to Russia? The “Chinese threat” theory went viral in the media in the 1990s and early 2000s, and it still reappears from time to time in Russian political discourse. As noted by some renowned Russian China experts, however, the argument that Russia's governing elites and ordinary people are wary of a rising China, which now overpowers Russia on various indicators, and that, from this perspective, some form of entente with the United States and the EU is possible to ensure against the growing Chinese power, is problematic. The main problem with such an argument is that the U.S.-led West is seen by Moscow as a bigger and more immediate threat than China.²⁰ According to the Deputy Director of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Vladimir Portyakov, “At present, any unprejudiced person is much better aware than before that today and tomorrow, Russia faces a much bigger, more dangerous and more real threat from the West than

a hypothetical threat from a rising China the day after tomorrow.”²¹

Interesting remarks, in this regard, were made by President Putin himself: “Foreign experts keep telling us about the threat from China. We are not worried at all... There is no threat on the side of China... We have coexisted with China for a thousand years. We had difficult moments, and at times better relations, but we know each other very well and we have got used to respecting each other.”²² There seems to be a consensus in the Kremlin that for the foreseeable future China will not pose a threat to Russia. According to General Leonid Reshetnikov, who until recently headed the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, a think tank under the Russian president, China’s main rival is the United States, not Russia, and Beijing will need a well-protected and quiet rear area. Therefore, Reshetnikov says:

For the next 30-40 years Russia is unlikely to face any threat from China. Beijing is doing its best to avoid whatever might cause Russia’s irritation and negative reaction. A serious conflict between Russia and China is possible only if grave mistakes are made by us or by the Chinese, or else if the American agents do a good job in China. The Western countries are keen to set Russia and China against each other. They keep forcing on us this China threat notion. However, we will never buy that.²³

Similarly, Russia is not perceived as a threat in China. Although some

Chinese experts mention conflict of economic interests between the two countries or voice reserved attitudes about the idea and actual methods of the expansion of Russia’s “zone of influence” into the post-Soviet space,²⁴ rarely, if ever, do the Chinese present Russia as an actual or potential threat. Some consider China-Russia relations as “the most important bilateral relation” and call for significant strengthening of China’s strategic partnership with Russia.²⁵ Remarkably, a recent comprehensive study of numerous Chinese publications on China’s core interests demonstrates that the image of Russia in the Chinese discourse is almost entirely positive and that none of a hundred-plus Chinese articles analyzed argue that Russia has damaged or is a threat to China’s interests.²⁶

In turn, according to China-Russia official documents and statements at different levels, the two countries share a view of the United States as increasingly threatening to both China’s and Russia’s geopolitical interests, civilizational identities, and domestic political regimes. The China-Russia shared view of security threats related to the United States becomes particularly pronounced in regard to the U.S. National Missile Defense (NMD) agenda, the potential danger of the “West-led color revolutions” in Central Asia and elsewhere, and issues of territorial integrity, and is present in many other issues of global politics.

In fact, China’s and Russia’s shared views regarding the role of the U.S.-USSR Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty

(ABM) and their concerns about the American NMD program can be traced back to the 1990s. By the early 2000s, these concerns had grown into more explicit resistance, particularly during the annual “Shanghai Five” (today’s Shanghai Cooperation Organization) Summit meeting in Dushanbe (Tajikistan) on July 5-6, 2000, which occurred shortly after the U.S. Congress passed legislation for the deployment of a defense system against limited ballistic missile attacks. During the Summit, President Putin and his Chinese counterpart, Jiang Zemin, organized their own “mini-summit” to discuss the role of the ABM treaty and the threats associated with the U.S.-proposed NMD. Less than two weeks later, during Putin’s state visit to Beijing on July 17-18, 2000, the two countries signed the “Beijing Declaration,” and the “Joint Statement on the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty,” which formally consolidated China’s and Russia’s common stance on the American NMD and the U.S.-dominated world order more broadly. According to these documents, the true goal of American actions was “to seek unilateral military and security dominance that will pose the gravest adverse consequences for the security of Russia and China.”²⁷ Moscow and Beijing urged Washington to adhere to the ABM treaty, warning that altering it “would trigger a new arms race and lead to an about-face in the positive trends that had appeared in world politics after the end of the Cold War.”²⁸ They also stated that the specter of an alleged “missile threat” to the United States from “some countries” as a justifica-

tion for the new NMD is “totally unjustified.”²⁹ In 2008, the then Russian President Dimitry Medvedev and the then Chinese President Hu Jintao emphasized their shared view of the U.S.-generated threat in a “Joint Russia-China Declaration on Major International Issues,” which stated that “the creation of global missile defense systems and their deployment in some regions of the world... does not help to maintain strategic balance and stability and hampers international efforts in arms control and nuclear nonproliferation.”³⁰

New rounds of NATO expansion in 2004 and 2009, perceived in Russia as a direct threat, the American “pivot to Asia,” which was seen in China as the creation of containment lines against China in the Asia-Pacific region and, therefore, a direct threat to China’s national security, and the U.S.’ support of regime change in the former Soviet republics and elsewhere drew China’s and Russia’s security views closer together. At the meetings between the Defense Ministers of China and Russia, which remain largely underreported in the western media, the two parties regularly point at the United States as the major existential threat. Thus, on November 18, 2014, in Beijing, the Chinese Defense Minister, General Chang Wanquan, and his Russian colleague, Army General Sergei Shoigy, stated that both China and Russia are “concerned with the U.S.’ attempts to strengthen its political and military influence in Asia Pacific,” and that they must jointly resist the threat of “color revolutions,” which are believed to be “experiments

of the American spin doctors.” The threat of “color revolutions” is perceived to be growing in light of the events in Ukraine and Hong Kong in 2014 and now “might threaten China’s and Russia’s national interests.”³¹ On May 25, 2015, in Moscow, the Secretary of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, and the Chinese State Council representative, Yang Jiechi, again emphasized the common approach of China and Russia to the issue of international security and their shared interests in jointly counteracting “color revolutions, attempts to interfere in the domestic politics of sovereign states, and unilateral economic sanctions.”³² In this context, China and Russia sought to find appropriate forms of establishing a “collective regional security system” in Asia.³³

Thus, China and Russia express to each other (and to the world) an increasing concern over the “American factor” in world politics and the necessity for a joint reaction to it. It is possible to argue that the critique and condemnation of the U.S. policies in Asia and elsewhere as “increasingly threatening,” and the designation of the international environment as “increasingly complicated,” as well as the announcement of intentions to join efforts in resisting the growing American threat, are becoming an embedded norm of the China-Russia security dialogue. The alleged intention of the United States to contain Russia and China through various means, including the NMD program, the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THADD) system in

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South Korea, the “pivot to Asia,” economic sanctions, or NATO’s eastward expansion, are all becoming the routinized content of China-Russia multiple security consultations at different levels.

However, there is no evidence of either China or Russia criticizing each other on the global stage despite some disagreements over regional interests, even after the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, the Ukraine crisis of 2014, or the Hague tribunal on the South China Sea.³⁴ Similarly, in no China-U.S. joint statements or declaration (or those between China and other countries) has Russia or its policies been presented as a potential or actual threat. The same applies to Russia’s assessments of China in its formal contacts with other countries.

In summary, there is an observable and growing convergence of threat perceptions between China and Russia, especially with regard to the United States, which is a factor in favor of closer China-Russia bilateral security cooperation.

The breadth and depth of China-Russia bilateral security cooperation continue to grow, responding to the two countries' converging security concerns

The Mechanisms of China-Russia Military Relations

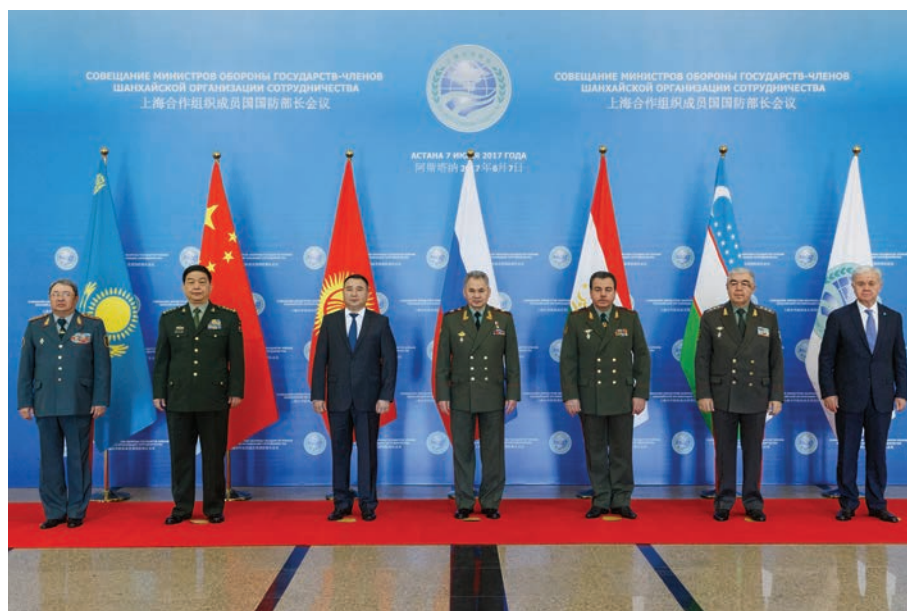
Are all the above-mentioned details just rhetorical statements without actual implementation behind them? What are the actual manifestations and the development trajectory of post-Cold War China-Russia military cooperation? To answer these questions, one has to explore the extent to which the China-Russia peacetime security cooperation has become institutionalized and regularized, the number and regularity of the countries' joint military exercises, and how technically prepared the two countries are for more advanced forms of military partnership.

Over the last two decades, China and Russia have done much to establish a multilevel infrastructure of contacts among almost all major government and military agencies, including top decision makers and their administrations, ministries of foreign affairs and their departments, defense ministries, general staffs, security councils, regional military districts, border garrisons, and military education institutions. Military-to-mili-

tary cooperation has progressed and expanded continuously, displaying increasing consistency. Currently, military contacts between China and Russia generate multiple channels of information exchange with agendas that include issues of global and regional security, common threat perception, national security interests, military technical cooperation and military personnel exchanges, organization of regular joint military drills, and other issues.

What is particularly relevant in the context of the present analysis is the trajectory of post-Cold War China-Russia military cooperation. As early as October 1993, the two countries signed the Cooperation Agreement between the Ministries of Defense of China and Russia, which established the formal foundations and rules for bilateral inter-military cooperation.³⁵ Since then, China and Russia have launched a new consultation mechanism or increased the frequency of meetings within the existing mechanisms every four to five years, which demonstrates a consistent upward trend. Some of the mechanisms were created from scratch, whereas others appeared through the institutionalization, routinization, and formalization of already existing regular practices. All of the mechanisms have been operating consistently.

Currently, there are four major types of high-level bilateral military consultation mechanisms with intervals between meetings varying from one year to less than two months,



Representatives of (L-R) Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Secretary General of the SCO pose for a photograph before a meeting of the defense ministers of the SCO on June 7, 2017.

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and four major types of joint military drills with intervals between the drills varying from one year to two years. All military contacts combined generate a frequency of 25-30 high-level military consultations per year, and 3-4 large-to-medium scale joint military drills every year. There is arguably only one other state with which China has a comparable system of military contacts – Pakistan.

At the same time, the institutional network of China-Russia military consultations continues to grow, responding to changes in international circumstances, such as, for example, the intensification of the North Korea nuclear problem. With strong and routinized mechanisms of inter-military consultations and with highly consistent and regular large-scale joint military drills, China and Russia have started to display an episodic

interoperability of their armed forces and elements of integrated military command, indicating that there is a solid foundation for more advanced forms of military cooperation.

The chronology of the extensions of China-Russia military cooperation reveals that the two countries are responding to the presence of an external threat, which, as seen from the joint statements that result from each meeting, is increasingly associated with the United States and its policies. Let us briefly consider some of the most important mechanisms of bilateral military consultations as well as the joint military exercises.

The first and most important mechanism of China-Russia inter-military consultations – *The Mechanism of Regular Meetings between the Defense Ministers of Russia and China*–

was established in 1993. The meetings within this mechanism have been taking place on a yearly basis in Moscow and Beijing, revealing the two countries' shared perception of external threats. At one of the recent meetings within this format, the Russian Defense Minister stressed that "together we are going to undertake more sea and land joint military exercises than in previous years," whereas his Chinese counterpart emphasized that both China and Russia are facing an increasingly complex international environment, which requires the "cohesion and joint efforts" of the militaries of the two countries.³⁶

The second mechanism – *The Mechanism of Annual Strategic Consultation among Chiefs of the General Staff* – emerged in 1997. Dealing with practical issues of military cooperation, this mechanism has been functioning consistently and has demonstrated the joint security concerns of the two countries. At one of the recent meetings, both sides emphasized the existing China-Russia consensus on a wide range of global and regional issues, and China expressed its willingness to be strategically "on the same page" with Russia.³⁷

The third mechanism – *Russia-China Consultation on National Security Issues* – deserves special attention because it is "the first precedent of China creating an interstate mechanism of consultations on its national security issues with a foreign state."³⁸ Established in October 2004, this mechanism focuses on China's and

Russia's immediate national interests. It operates at the level of the heads of the Security Council on the Russian side, and the representatives of the State Council on the Chinese side. In February 2005, during his visit to Moscow, Chinese representative Tang Jiaxuan in his dialogue with President Putin emphasized that the emergence of the new format is an indication of the convergence of the two countries' positions on major global and regional security issues and a sign of the transition of the countries' bilateral ties to a new level.³⁹ Concrete examples of converging national security concerns on which China and Russia currently cooperate via this communication channel include issues of international information security and joint policies of resisting "color revolutions" and unilateral economic sanctions.⁴⁰

The emergence of the fourth mechanism – *The China-Russia Northeast Asia Security Dialogue* – in 2014 reflects the responsiveness of the bilateral military consultation network to the contingencies of the international environment. The core agenda of this mechanism is the facilitation of effective security cooperation in Northeast Asia.⁴¹ Operating at the level of deputy foreign ministers, these meetings are the most tightly scheduled and sometimes occur every two months, depending on the regional geopolitical circumstances. Thus, the meeting that occurred in Moscow on March 4, 2016, predominantly focused on the North Korean nuclear problem and the "aspirations of certain states [read the United States] to use the incident

to tilt the regional power balance to their advantage.” China and Russia emphasized the negative impact of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THADD) missile shield in South Korea on security in Northeast Asia.⁴² Subsequent meetings further condemned the U.S.-South Korea decision to deploy the American THADD system in South Korea by calling it a continuation of Washington’s unilateral deployment strategy worldwide.⁴³

The list of the mechanisms of China-Russia bilateral military cooperation can be extended. One can add to it, for example, various regional-level security consultations, mechanisms of inter-military consultations within the structures of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the China-Russia Mixed Intergovernmental Commission on Military-Technical Cooperation, and other mechanisms. The key point here, however, is that the breadth and depth of China-Russia bilateral security cooperation continue to grow, responding to the two countries’ converging security concerns.

The same tendency can be observed in the growing frequency and sophistication of China-Russia joint regular military exercises, which started to take shape in 2004 when the “Peace Mission” type of joint military exercises, aimed at bolstering ground and air coordination, were launched. Operating in the Russian language, regular exercises of this type occur every one or two years in China or Russia and involve heavy firepower, includ-

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ing long-range bombers, air and naval blockades, amphibious assaults, “occupation of a region” exercises, as well as the sub-agendas of resisting the potential danger of “color revolutions” in Central Asia. The emerging interoperability of the military forces can be discerned in the elements of the joint defense simulations, merging Chinese and Russian aircrafts into squadrons that perform joint tasks and practicing command codes.⁴⁴

In 2012, a new type of exercise –the “Joint Sea” China-Russia naval exercise– was launched with the goal of achieving better coordination between the two countries’ navies. Taking place every year in such places as the Yellow Sea (2012), the Sea of Japan (2013), the East China Sea (2014), the Mediterranean (2015), and the South China Sea (2016), these exercises involve practicing convoying, anti-aircraft and anti-submarine warfare, anti-piracy and rescue activities, naval logistics, and joint island-seizing exercises.⁴⁵

Most recently, China and Russia have launched new types of smaller-scale military exercises, such as ballistic missile defense simulation exercises, and exercises for internal security troops involving Russia's national guards and China's police units. The inclusion of these activities increases the frequency of Chinese-Russian joint military drills to 4-5 per year.

Conclusion

The development of China-Russia military cooperation has been consistently advancing since the end of the Cold War, and it correlates with converging external threat perceptions in Moscow and Beijing. Comprehensive multilevel mechanisms for inter-military consultations have been put in place, which increase the mutual predictability and reliability of the bilateral contacts. China-Russia military cooperation has established a strong basis for more advanced formats of military alignment. As a result of their regular joint military exercises, China and Russia have achieved a certain degree of compatibility and interoperability between their forces. The international environment, and American policies in post-Soviet space and the Asia-Pacific region are conducive to further enhancements of military cooperation between China and Russia. Although the political will on the part of the Chinese and Russian leaders to form an alliance may not be there yet, it seems that only minor steps will be needed on the technical side for a full-fledged alliance to materialize. ■

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