



ANALYSIS

## A RELATIONSHIP OF CONVENIENCE

RUSSIAN-CHINESE DEFENCE COOPERATION

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AHL	Advanced Heavy Lift
AVIC	Aviation Industry Corporation of China
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
GLONASS	Globalnaya navigatsionnaya sputnikovaya sistema (Global Navigation Satellite System)
NSR	Northern Sea Route
PAP	People's Armed Police Force
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
PLA	People's Liberation Army
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
QCCM	Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
XUAR	Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region

## INTRODUCTION

The Western alliance system that took shape after World War II and expanded after the Cold War is facing the most troublesome period in its history. Amongst EU member states there are increasingly divergent views on the direction the Union should take, how deeply it should integrate, and whether it should coordinate more fully on defence-related issues, which could infringe on NATO's traditional areas of responsibility. In NATO, arguably the world's foremost military alliance, fissures are developing that may weaken the military credibility upon which European security has rested for decades. President Trump's 2020 decision to withdraw parts of the US military presence from Europe symbolises a new reality that requires the US to re-prioritise the deployment of its military resources. This necessity predates President Trump's inauguration in 2016 and demonstrates the fact that the US faces challenges in both Europe and Asia. Unable to compete with rivals on two fronts, it has for the time being chosen to focus on Asia as the region where its interests are most threatened.

Developments within NATO and the EU are closely monitored in Russia and China. Both countries have in recent years pursued policies that have directly threatened the values-based, Western-led world order. Russia has militarily attacked its neighbours twice since 2008. China has forged

ahead with the construction of numerous artificial islands in disputed regions of the South China Sea while paying lip service to its commitment to diplomatic dialogue for the resolution of territorial disputes. The rapid militarisation of these artificial features has expanded China's ability to project power in the region and led to well-founded fears over its intentions.<sup>1</sup>

Both Russia and China oppose an international system that they criticise as an imposition of the West. They perceive the current global order as one in which the rule of law is 'values-based' and subject to interpretation. They do not accept that the ideals of democracy, personal liberty and human rights that helped the Western world win global influence have commonly agreed definitions, but increasingly paint these ideals as values that must consider the different cultures prevalent in non-Western countries. Russia and China are not unique in their critique of 'western values', but the lead they have taken in presenting an anti-Western position and their status as major powers will ensure that their critique carries weight with the non-Western world and cannot be easily dismissed by the West. In defying the current rules-based order, both countries have carved out the space to seek greater domination of their respective regions and to pursue increased global activism.

This challenge to the status quo comes at a time when a leadership gap is apparent at the global level. As the US has become more internally-focused, its international image has declined, providing an incentive for both Russia and China

*Both Russia and China oppose an international system that they criticise as an imposition of the West*

to challenge its influence and hegemony in the international system.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, America's critique of international organisations and treaties and its controversial actions, such as its withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range

<sup>1</sup> The artificial islands, featuring 3 000 m runways, aircraft hangars and large harbours, are frequently visited by Chinese military aircraft and vessels. China has disrupted the fishing and energy exploration activities of other countries, and challenged military aircraft and vessels operating in the region.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Poushter, "[How People Around the World See the U.S. And Donald Trump In 10 Charts](#)," Pew Research Center, 8 January 2020; Richard Wike, Janell Fetterolf, Mara Mordecai, "[U.S. Image Plummet Internationally As Most Say Country Has Handled Coronavirus Badly](#)," Pew Research Center, 15 September 2020.

Nuclear Forces Treaty and the World Health Organization, enable Russia and China to portray US policy as essentially self-serving and exploitative. America's retreat from international institutions and treaty obligations allows Russia and China to develop narratives that cast their own foreign policy objectives as benign, if not positively beneficial.

Directly or indirectly, the US provides the motivation for increased cross-sector cooperation between Russia and China. Russian military operations in Ukraine in 2014 led to Russia's international isolation and the imposition of a range of sanctions by the EU and US. Additionally, apprehensive about prospective Russian moves in its neighbourhood, NATO deployed high-readiness forces to Poland and the Baltic states to demonstrate political resolve. Since then, numerous areas of contention have surfaced between Russia and the West, including Russia's role in sustaining Al Assad's

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rule in Syria, interference in the 2016 US Presidential election, an alleged violation of the INF treaty, and the assassination attempt on Sergei Skripal in the UK. The August 2020 poisoning of the Russian opposition leader, Alexi Navalny, will further estrange Russia from the West and cement its present confinement.

Meanwhile, President Trump's trade war against China, diplomatic wrangling between the two countries over COVID-19 and intensified military competition in the Indo-Pacific region has severely strained Chinese-US relations. Rather than seek greater accommodation with the US, as China has previously attempted, Beijing now seeks leverage against what it views as US efforts to contain its economic and military growth. China thus welcomes greater accord with Russia and the economic and political cooperation between the two countries is increasingly accompanied by a defence component. The growing tempo of Russian-Chinese defence

cooperation has predominantly been driven by what the two countries stand against, rather than what they stand for.

This analysis examines the current state of Russian-Chinese defence cooperation and considers how it may evolve in the near-term. The first section outlines the geopolitical

environment that has pushed both countries towards closer cooperation. This is followed by an analysis of their current military relationship. Section three provides an overview of existing and potential arms trade and military research initiatives that seek to encourage collaboration in the defence sector, while section four examines military exercises and military-to-military relations. Despite the seemingly good relationship between Russia and China, both

countries also actively compete in regions such as Central Asia and may do so in the future the Arctic.

These aspects are the subject of sections five and six. Section seven reviews Chinese espionage activities in Russia, which continue despite growing defence cooperation between the two countries. Section eight looks at the possibility of a new military alliance between Russia and China.

## 1. THE RATIONALE FOR COOPERATION

It is undoubtedly true that both Russia and China share grievances regarding their relationship with the West, particularly the US, but this is perhaps not surprising when they are heavily criticised in the highest-level national security documents. The White House states that,

China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control

information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence.<sup>3</sup>

The US National Defense Strategy further characterises both countries as revisionist powers that are,

undermining the international order from within the system by exploiting its benefits while simultaneously undercutting its principles and 'rules of the road'.<sup>4</sup>

Because of the sentiments expressed in such statements, the US has arguably become the most important factor in the bilateral relationship between Russia and China. Russia's advocacy of a post-West international order has further strengthened the two countries' belief that they should coordinate in challenging the existing global order.<sup>5</sup>

During a September 2019 meeting between the Russian Minister of Defence, Sergei Shiugu, and the Deputy Chairman of the Central Military Commission of the People's Republic of China, Zhang Yusia, both sides confirmed their willingness to cooperate further in defence-

aversion to formal alliances. 'Ally' is not a term China uses in its bilateral relationship with Russia, even as it acknowledges that this relationship has "gone beyond the bilateral scope and is important for maintaining regional and world peace."<sup>7</sup> China's growing political, economic and military clout has long been couched in terms of a 'peaceful rise'. At a time when China's global exercise of power is increasingly scrutinised, its close relationship with Russia provides confirmation from a major state that its rise is, indeed, non-threatening. This bilateral relationship also strengthens Chinese and Russian narratives that are critical of Western values-based diplomacy in the developing world. The existing world order and its deficiencies thus provide a foil for the two countries to further their own national interests—they have little incentive to change the existing world order, but can instead seek greater accommodation within it.

Rather than an ideological alliance reminiscent of the Cold War, the Russian-Chinese bilateral relationship is very much guided by realpolitik. The endeavours of the two countries thus far

have focused on carving out their own exclusive spheres of influence externally and maintaining state stability internally. In so far as cooperation helps them meet these objectives, they will continue to cooperate.

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related matters, while accusing the US and "other Western countries" of pursuing aggressive policies towards them, including implementing a policy of hegemony, resorting to persecution, exerting strategic pressure and pursuing policies of containment. Yusia added that China was ready to "conduct cooperation to achieve a new breakthrough" in the relationship between the two countries.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, coordination between Russia and China runs contrary to China's long-espoused

## 2. MILITARY RELATIONS

The Russian-Chinese military relationship dates to China's defence sector engagement with the Soviet Union, which began after the US imposed an arms embargo on China in the wake of its response to the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. Continued restrictions in China's access to defence technology have led to an enduring defence industrial relationship with Russia and many former Soviet republics.

<sup>3</sup> The White House, "[National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#)," December 2017, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Defense, "[Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States](#)," January 2018, 2.

<sup>5</sup> "[Lavrov calls for 'post-West' world order; dismisses NATO as Cold War relic](#)," Deutsche Welle, 18 February 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Mariya Tomilenko, "[Rossiysko-kitayskoye sotrudnichestvo osnovatel'no \[Russian-Chinese cooperation is solid\]](#)," Krasnaya zvezda, 6 September 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Russia, "[Ambassador Zhang Hanhui attends video seminar on China-Russia relations in the new era](#)", 3 July 2020.

As Russia's relations with the West deteriorated following the crisis over Crimea in 2014, the bilateral relationship between Russia and China attracted increased attention as one of the more stable diplomatic interactions of either country. By this time, China's President Xi Jinping had enunciated his idea of a 'China Dream' wherein the development of the Chinese nation was underpinned by a strong military. Concerns over China's military intentions and the indictment of People's Liberation Army (PLA) personnel for cyber espionage by the US had already taxed China's relations with the West.

Faced with increased international scrutiny and criticism, it is unsurprising that both Russia and China found an incentive to strengthen their bilateral relations. Military cooperation between the two countries is not accidental, but very much an important aspect of their wider bilateral relationship. This is evident in initiatives such as the "roadmap on military cooperation for 2017-2020" signed between Russia and China in June 2017.<sup>8</sup> Although the scope of the roadmap has not been publicly discussed, it likely pertains to bilateral exercises, student exchanges, joint overflights, and other military activities.

*Russia is the single largest exporter of arms to China*

A renewed emphasis on bilateral ties between the two countries is also reflected in the 2019 upgrade of the relationship to a "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era."<sup>9</sup> According to the joint statement issued at the time, the goal of this new kind of partnership is for both sides to give more support to each other as they seek to take their own development paths, preserve their respective core interests, and protect their sovereignty and territorial integrity.<sup>10</sup> The focus on territorial integrity perhaps indicates a desire for closer

coordination between the two countries on territorial and maritime disputes.

### 3. DEFENCE TRADE

According to the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, Russia is the single largest exporter of arms to China. In 2019, Russia supplied China with arms valued at approximately \$688 million while

*Military cooperation between the two countries is not accidental, but very much an important aspect of their wider bilateral relationship*

France, ranked at number two, provided exports valued at a distant \$92 million. However, China's share of Russia's total arms exports has been falling from a high of over 60% in 2005 to only 14.5% in 2019.<sup>11</sup> This has largely been a consequence of the development of China's indigenous defence industry. Despite this, and the imposition of US economic sanctions on Chinese entities for purchasing Russian military equipment, the two continue to collaborate on key military programmes.<sup>12</sup> Even as Chinese indigenous defence industrial capabilities and capacities have grown, Russian expertise in some spheres continues to be valued by China.

While the focus of defence trade has largely shifted from the acquisition of entire platforms to component systems and technologies, China continues to be an important market for the Russian defence industry.

The expansion of military technical collaboration between the two countries in 2014 paved the way for Russian technology transfers to China in support of Russian platforms in service with the Chinese armed forces, as well as for new acquisitions. In December 2019, Alexander Scherbinin, the deputy CEO of the Russian state arms export agency Rosoboronexport, stated that military-technical cooperation between Russia and China "amounts to several billion

<sup>8</sup> "Russian defense minister suggests signing Russian-Chinese military cooperation roadmap," TASS, 7 June 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Xinhua, "China, Russia agree to upgrade relations for new era," china.org.cn, 6 June 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database."

<sup>12</sup> "US imposes sanctions on China for buying Russian weapons," BBC News, 21 September 2019.

dollars per year.”<sup>13</sup> As the priorities of the two countries align with regard to highlighting capabilities in the realms of artificial intelligence, space, cyber security and unmanned systems, it is likely that cooperation in developing dual-use

### *Military technical cooperation between Russia and China amounts to several billion dollars per year*

technology will eventually outstrip military trade. Some existing Russian-Chinese cooperation in the civilian realm, for instance the joint development of a wide-body civilian airliner, already has military applications. Meanwhile, in November 2018 Russia and China signed a cooperation agreement concerning the peaceful use of the GLONASS and BeiDou satellite systems.<sup>14</sup> The ability to access each other’s navigation systems could also conceivably be expanded to provide utility in the military domain. Similarly, the declaration of cooperation for lunar missions paves the way for amplifying their respective strengths in space exploration and technology, which could potentially be exploited for military use.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.1. MILITARY PROCUREMENT AND RESEARCH

Despite Russia’s long-standing assistance in Chinese military modernisation, it was usually India, rather than China, that received the latest Russian weapons and equipment.<sup>16</sup> This pattern began to change in 2015, when China became the first foreign buyer of Russia’s Su-35 multirole fighter aircraft, contracting to receive 24 of the aircraft by the end of 2018.<sup>17</sup> Although China’s interest in the Su-35 is believed to date back to 2008, protracted negotiations over the terms delayed the final contract. According to media

reports, one of the earliest points of contention was Russia’s insistence on a minimum buy of 48 aircraft, supposedly due to fears that China was only interested in the procurement to allow it to reverse engineer the aircraft’s NIIP Irbis-E passive electronically scanned array radar and 117S engine.<sup>18</sup> As is evident from the sale, these fears were overcome, and in June 2019 TASS reported that

Russia had offered to sell China another batch of Su-35s.<sup>19</sup> China also became the first international buyer of the S-400 Triumf air defence system when it signed a contract for two sets in 2014. Delivery of the second set was completed in late 2019.<sup>20</sup>

Rostec’s annual report for 2019 reveals that its subsidiary, Russian Helicopters, was contracted to provide 121 rotary aircraft to China in early 2019. The order contained 100 variants of the Mi-171 helicopter, including 18 Mi-171Sh for military transport and 14 Mi-171 fitted with the Klimov VK-2500 engine that is advertised as increasing the aircraft’s operational ceiling by 30%.<sup>21</sup> This sale indicates that despite the progress made by China’s indigenous defence manufacturing sector, it continues to rely on Russian expertise for certain platforms.

Alongside these military sales, Russia and China are also engaged together in research and development of military hardware. In 2019, at the International Aviation and Space Show, they announced an agreement to jointly develop a 40-tonne helicopter, designated the Advanced Heavy Lift (AHL). According to statements by Miao Wei, China’s Minister of Industry and Information Technology, delivery is planned for 2032, while Viktor Kladov, Rostec’s Director for International Cooperation and Regional Policy,

<sup>13</sup> [“Defense technology cooperation between Russia, China reached several bln dollars per year,”](#) TASS, 16 December 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Tracy Cozzens, [“Russia passes law on GLONASS-BeiDou cooperation,”](#) GPS World, 29 July 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Yohei Ishikawa and Tsukasa Hadano, [“Russia Pulls China Closer With Ties In Space Exploration And Energy,”](#) Nikkei Asia, 28 March 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Artyom Lukin, [“The Russia–China entente and its future,”](#) *International Politics* (2020).

<sup>17</sup> [“Russia, China sign contract worth over \\$2 billion for Su-35 fighter jets,”](#) Reuters, 19 November 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Gabriel Dominguez, “China to receive first batch of Su-35s from Russia by end of 2016, says report,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 15 December 2016.

<sup>19</sup> [“Russia offers to sell new batch of Su-35 fighter jets to China,”](#) TASS, 27 June 2019.

<sup>20</sup> [“Russia completes delivery of second S-400 missile system regimental set to China – source,”](#) TASS, 27 January 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Rostec, *Godovoy Otchet za 2019 god [Annual Report 2019]*, 21 October 2020, 189; [“VK-2500 – Product Qualities,”](#) Klimov, 2020.

has stated that 200 of the helicopters would be produced.<sup>22</sup> In 2018, Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC) displayed a model of the AHL at Air Show China.<sup>23</sup>

The joint development programme dates to 2015 when Russian Helicopters and AVIC signed a framework agreement to work together on the AHL. While China is believed to be responsible for the helicopter's design and production, Russian companies will be technical partners. Wu Ximing, a Chinese political advisor and chief designer of helicopters at AVIC, was quoted in Chinese media as saying that China lacks experience in technologies related to transmission systems and hopes to learn through this partnership with Russia.<sup>24</sup>

Russian news agencies have also quoted an official representative of Russia's Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation as saying that Russia was designing a new generation of non-nuclear submarine with China.<sup>25</sup> China has undertaken indigenous development of its submarine force since it acquired Russian submarine and missile technology as part of its

*In October 2019, Putin announced that Russia would assist China in developing a missile early warning system*

purchase of Kilo class diesel-electric submarines in 2002.<sup>26</sup> While the division of labour for the new project is not clear, some analysts have speculated that the joint development may couple Russian shipbuilding and missile expertise with Chinese technological know-how related to air independent propulsion or the use

of lithium-ion batteries of the sort featured on Japan's Soryu class submarines.<sup>27</sup> If so, this would be the first time that Russia would benefit from technology transfers from China.

Missile defence is, as highlighted by President Vladimir Putin, a further significant area for cooperation. In October 2019, Putin announced that Russia would assist China in developing a missile early warning system that "will drastically enhance the defensive capacity" of the country.<sup>28</sup> Russian media reported that Russia and China had signed a contract worth \$60 million to develop software for early warning systems, while Sergei Boev, head of Russian defence corporation PJSC MAK Vympel, was also quoted as saying that the two countries were modelling Chinese requirements for a missile early warning system.<sup>29</sup> Russia and China had held their first joint computer-based missile defence exercise in 2016. Named 'Aerospace-Security 2016', the exercise was conducted at the scientific research centre of the Russian Aerospace Defence Forces and its results were intended to stimulate further cooperation on missile defence.<sup>30</sup> Russia and the US have

operated early warning systems for decades and a Russian partnership could lead to the transfer to China of considerable technological and operational expertise. Such a system would likely utilise satellites, over-the-

horizon ground-based radars and data processing systems to monitor the launch of nuclear missiles. The development of an early warning system would have implications for strategic calculations in the Asia-Pacific

<sup>22</sup> ["China-Russia Heavy Helicopter to Fly by 2032: Deal Signed at MAKS 2019,"](#) Defense World, 29 August 2019; ["Russia & China plan joint production of at least 200 heavy lift helicopters,"](#) Russia Today, 31 August 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Vladimir Karnozov, ["AVIC Provides First Glimpse of Sino-Russian Heavy-lifter,"](#) Ain Online, 17 November 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Ma Jun and Liu Xuanzun, ["40-ton class heavy helicopter jointly developed by China, Russia to be delivered by 2032,"](#) Global Times, 10 March 2019.

<sup>25</sup> ["Rossiya i Kitay proyektiruyut neatomnyuyu podvodnyuyu lodku novogo pokoleniya \[Russia and China are designing a new generation non-nuclear submarine\],"](#) RIA Novosti, 25 August 2020.

<sup>26</sup> John Pomfret, ["China to Buy 8 More Russian Submarines,"](#) Washington Post, 25 June 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew Greenwood, ["Potential New Submarine Could Have Chinese Muscle and Russian Teeth,"](#) engineering.com, 8 September 2020; H I Sutton, ["China And Russia In Mysterious New Submarine Project,"](#) Forbes, 27 August 2020.

<sup>28</sup> ["Russia helping China to create early missile warning system, says Putin,"](#) TASS, 3 October 2019.

<sup>29</sup> ["RF pomogayet Kitayu sozdat' sistemu preduprezhdeniya o raketnom napadenii \[RF helps China create missile attack warning system\],"](#) Interfax, 19 December 2019.

<sup>30</sup> ["Russia, China launch first computer-enabled anti-missile exercises,"](#) TASS, 26 May 2016.

particularly at a time of increased tensions between the US and China.

Although it has not been mentioned officially, the planned Chinese early warning network may be capable of sharing data with the Russian system and vice-versa. This could greatly enhance Russia's surveillance coverage and improve its readiness to respond to ballistic missile launches. In the event either country is involved in a military confrontation, information sharing could become critical when addressing US missile threats.

Deepening cooperation with Russia thus has the potential to assist China in improving the full range of capabilities, including at the strategic level, that may be relevant in any confrontation with the US and its regional allies. Should the various plans come to fruition, they will provide concrete evidence of a partnership that encompasses all domains from space to sea. Russia, on the other hand, apart from obtaining some expertise in submarine air-independent propulsion, is predominantly focused on challenging the US position geopolitically across different theatres.

#### 4. MILITARY EXERCISES

Cooperation between the Russian and Chinese armed forces has also deepened since their first combined activity in 2003—the 'Coalition 2003 Anti-Terror Exercise', held under the aegis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). From drills that focused on limited cooperation on anti-terrorism, Russian-Chinese bilateral military exchanges have increased in complexity and scope. Even though the two countries continue to participate in anti-terror exercises under the ambit of the SCO, they have also undertaken bilateral anti-terrorism exercises involving paramilitary forces.<sup>31</sup>

Russia and China held their first joint naval drills in 2012 off the coast of Qingdao in the Yellow Sea. Since then 'Joint Sea' naval exercises have been held in the Mediterranean in 2015 and in

the Baltic Sea in 2017; neither of these are traditional operating areas for the PLA Navy. In 2019, bilateral naval drills took place again in the Yellow Sea, focused on joint air defence and anti-submarine warfare.<sup>32</sup> Later in the same year, Russian-Chinese naval exercises were expanded to take in third countries including South Africa in November off Cape Town, and Iran in the Gulf of Oman in December. Naval exercises with Iran are particularly noteworthy given Iran's enduring differences with the US over its nuclear ambitions.

Participation in strategic command post exercises is also becoming a regular feature of military exchanges between Russia and China. The last quarter of every year sees Russia

*Cooperation between the Russian and Chinese armed forces has also deepened since their first combined activity in 2003*

conduct its largest military exercises, which seek to demonstrate the state's ability to undertake combined-arms, theatre-level military operations, encompassing all elements of Russian warfighting capability, from peacekeeping and counterinsurgency operations to combined-arms warfare and nuclear release. These exercises are held in a different strategic direction according to a four-year cycle and each has its own focus. Zapad (last held in 2017) practices operations against NATO forces in the Russian western operational direction, Vostok (2018) traditionally focuses on the Chinese threat to the Russian mainland, Tsentr (2019) addresses threats emanating from Central Asia, while Kavkaz (2020) focuses on Ukraine, Georgia, and the Black Sea. In these exercises, Russia typically refers to the enemy forces as "armed bands" or "terrorists", even though these groups field cruise missiles, strategic bombers and main battle tanks.

Vostok 2018 marked the first time the PLA was invited to participate in these exercises. Given the history of bilateral tensions related to Russia's far east and the usual focus of Vostok,

<sup>31</sup> "[China, Russia Start 'Cooperation-2019' Joint Military Drill](#)," CCTV Video News Agency, 12 October 2019, YouTube video.

<sup>32</sup> "[China, Russia Navies Stage Anti-submarine Drill](#)," CCTV Video News Agency, 4 May 2019, YouTube video.

analysts have speculated that China's invitation to participate in the exercise was meant to allay its fears over Russian intentions.<sup>33</sup>

China deployed 3 200 troops and 900 pieces of equipment for the exercise. According to the official Russian statement prior its commencement, around 300 000 personnel were involved in Vostok 2018, which would put the Chinese contribution at a rather meaningless 1% of the total number of troops deployed. However, it appears that the claimed figures were grossly overstated. A February 2020 article in the Russian newspaper, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, put Chinese participation in Vostok at 10% of the total, which would mean around 32 000 personnel taking part overall.<sup>34</sup> This would suggest that Russia not only intentionally misled the world about the scale of the exercise, but

### *China deployed 3 200 troops and 900 pieces of equipment for Vostok 2018*

also about the worth of the PLA contribution, which, at 10%, would be significant from an operational point of view. Regardless of the actual numbers and whatever the impact on interoperability between the Russian and Chinese armed forces at the tactical level, China scored important points in terms of global visibility through its participation.

In September 2019, 1 600 Chinese troops, 300 pieces of equipment and 30 fixed-wing aircraft also participated in Tsentr 2019, alongside other SCO members. Although China's contribution was only half that of Vostok 2018, one notable addition was the participation of Chinese H-6K long-range strategic bombers.

Most recently, Chinese troops participated in the Kavkaz 2020 exercise in September 2020. This exercise focused on combatting cruise

missiles and unmanned aerial platforms, as well as amphibious landings and naval drills in the Black and Caspian Seas. Military personnel from Armenia, Belarus, Myanmar and Pakistan also participated.<sup>35</sup> On 14 September, one week before the start of Kavkaz, Chinese personnel were reportedly provided with Russian T-72B3 main battle tanks, marking the first known exchange of platforms between the two armed forces.<sup>36</sup>

The current trajectory of Chinese participation in such exercises, suggests that Zapad 2021, to be conducted by Russia and Belarus, will also see the deployment of a small contingent of PLA troops into parts of western Russia, and perhaps also to Belarus.

Besides these strategic-level exercises, China regularly participates in joint training and exercises with elements of the Russian Air Force in the 'Aviadarts' competition, which tests disciplines such as navigation, reconnaissance, aerial combat, and weapons delivery. In July 2019, air exercises between the two countries included long-range patrols over the East China Sea for the first time.<sup>37</sup> South Korean defence ministry officials have claimed that during this period two Russian Tu-95 bombers and an A-50 airborne early warning and control aircraft entered the Korea Air Defence Identification Zone along with two Chinese planes. The A-50 subsequently violated South Korea's territorial airspace close to the Dokdo/Takeshima islands, which are the subjects of a territorial dispute between South Korea and Japan, causing South Korea to scramble F-15 and F-16 aircraft.<sup>38</sup> Russia denied any intrusions into South Korean airspace, but confirmed the joint flight, claiming that it served to "strengthen global stability", while China's Ministry of Defence acknowledged that the patrols included China's H-6K bombers, but did

<sup>33</sup> Michael Kofman, "[Vostok-2018: Russia and China Signal Growing Military Cooperation](#)," *Russia Matters*, 10 September 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Aleksandr Khramchikhin, "[Etapy rossiysko-kitayskikh vzaimootnosheniy, Nezavisimaya gazeta \[Stages of Russian-Chinese Relations\]](#)," 27 February 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Luke Coffey, "[Kavkaz-2020: Russian military exercise sends message to South Caucasus](#)," *Arab News*, 25 September 2020.

<sup>36</sup> "[Kitayskim voyennym potrebovalos' vsego 2 chasa, chtoby osvoit' vozhdeniye nashikh boyevykh mashin' - podpolkovnik VS RF na ucheniyakh \[It took the Chinese military only 2 hours to master driving our combat vehicles - Lieutenant Colonel of the RF Armed Forces in exercise\]](#)," *Voyennoye obozreniye*, 22 September 2020.

<sup>37</sup> "[China-Russia joint aerial patrol targets no third parties: spokesperson](#)," *Xinhua*, 24 July 2019.

<sup>38</sup> "[Russia and South Korea spar over airspace 'intrusion'](#)," *BBC News*, 24 July 2019.

not target any third country.<sup>39</sup> Such operations clearly demonstrate the ability of Russia and China to undertake joint deployments of strategic assets—both the Tu-95 and H-6K can carry a nuclear payload—but may also indicate their willingness to reach understandings about territorial claims in a region where they themselves both have outstanding territorial disputes.

The exercises that Russia and China have conducted together may not necessarily be a serious attempt to develop a capability to conduct combined operations, even though such operations have been rehearsed. Military exercises are often used to send a signal to other countries. In this case, combined exercises are a symbol of a deepening bilateral relationship and are meant to demonstrate to the West that both Russia and China maintain relationships that are

*Combined exercises are meant to demonstrate to the West that both Russia and China maintain relationships that are not influenced by Western criticism*

not influenced by Western criticism. The limited interoperability that has been developed between the armed forces of the two countries does not imply a willingness to deploy combat units to aid each other. Narrow PLA participation in exercises in geographical locations far from its traditional areas of operation or strategic interest cannot seriously be considered an indication of an evolving military alliance. The PLA, despite its rapid modernisation and the expansion of its traditional operational space from China's territorial borders to the far seas, has limited experience in conducting joint operations. Participating in Russian-hosted exercises that focus on real, combat scenarios accords with China's training priorities for the PLA and provides valuable experience for PLA personnel.

<sup>39</sup> [“South Korea fires 360 warning shots after Russian, Chinese military planes enter airspace.”](#) South China Morning Post, 23 July 2019. The statement that military exercises do not target third countries is regularly used by

## 5. COMPETITION IN DEFENCE

Despite collaborating on a multitude of defence-related projects, Russia and China also continue to compete in this sector. Initially, this competition pertained largely to expanding customers and markets for their military hardware. However, in recent years, it has acquired a distinct patina of geopolitical rivalry.

Developments in Central Asia are a prime example. Russia has maintained control over the region, which it considers as lying within its sphere of privileged interests, through both economic and military means. Through its military engagement, it has been able to dictate the pace of modernisation of the region's armed forces and to influence domestic politics. Most significantly, Russia's military presence in Central Asia has expanded its operational depth and ensured that it can respond to any insurgencies in its backyard, especially following the US and NATO troop deployments into Afghanistan.

China first built its influence in the region through economic means, mostly trade and investments. These interests were protected by various SCO mechanisms such as

*Despite collaborating on a multitude of defence-related projects, Russia and China also continue to compete in this sector*

the Business Council and the SCO Interbank Consortium. Weary of growing Chinese influence in the SCO and consequently in Central Asia, Russia attempted to expand SCO membership to India and Pakistan, so that these new actors would assist it in maintaining a check on Chinese influence in the region. Beijing, in turn and without Moscow's participation, created the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) that seeks to

China, and by Russia when describing annual strategic-operational exercises such as Kavkaz or Zapad. Nonetheless, Russia does practise combat against very specific regional or country-based threats.

integrate the anti-terrorism efforts of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and Tajikistan, and thus enable China to assume partial responsibility for the regional security situation. Russia may be concerned about the creation of an alternative security system to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), but Chinese officials have reportedly stressed that QCCM's goal is to supplement the CSTO rather than to compete with it.<sup>40</sup> Regardless of the actual status of the two organisations, it is clear that the initiative gives China additional leverage in its relations with Russia and with the countries of Central Asia.

Along with the creation of new institutional mechanisms that do not include Moscow, China has also been able to increase military exports to the region as a result of Russia's hesitation over the transfer of sophisticated military equipment to its neighbours. The beginning of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the early 2010s coincided with deliveries of Chinese air defence systems to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.<sup>41</sup> The HQ-9 system fills gaps in the long-range surface-to-air missile capability of both countries and supplements their shorter-range missile systems; meanwhile China has become a

*China has become a supplier of equipment that has historically been provided solely by the Russian Federation*

*Perhaps more significant than China's inroads into Central Asia's defence market are its efforts to become a security provider in the region*

supplier of equipment that has historically been provided solely by the Russian Federation.

Since then, Beijing has delivered Y-8 airlift aircraft to Kazakhstan, QW-2 Vanguard 2 short-range air defence systems to Turkmenistan, VP11 patrol vehicles to Tajikistan, and Wing

Loong-1 unmanned aerial vehicles to both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.<sup>42</sup> Larger quantities of equipment are presumably also delivered to Central Asian countries clandestinely in the form of Chinese donations to internal security and border forces. In the longer term, China is likely to seek new opportunities to supply advanced weaponry to Central Asia, ranging from armoured vehicles to aircraft, further undermining Russia's share of the defence market in the region.

Perhaps more significant than China's inroads into the region's defence market are its efforts

to become a security provider in the region. This is evident in the contract signed between Tajikistan and China in 2016, which envisages the building of seven border posts on the Tajik-Afghan border. By 2020, at least some of these border posts were manned by China's People's Armed Police Force (PAP), a paramilitary force that largely deals with issues of domestic security, but which is, like the PLA, under the direct control of China's Central Military Commission.<sup>43</sup> The presence of Chinese security personnel is deemed a win-win situation for Tajikistan and China since it can both limit the spread of extremism to Tajikistan, such as that represented by the Islamic State in Afghanistan, and curb similar forces that may impact developments in China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Even though China's primary aim seems to be ensuring internal stability in Xinjiang and tranquillity along

<sup>40</sup> "Kitay i yego rol' v bezopasnosti v Tsentral'noy Azii [China and its role in security in Central Asia]," Mir Peremen, 21 April 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Yuriy Lyamin, "Pervyye kadry kitayskogo ZRK FD-2000 v Turkmenistane [First shots of the Chinese air defence system FD-2000 in Turkmenistan]," Livejournal, 31 March 2016; "Uzbekistan nachal testirovat' kitayskie zenitno-raketnye komplekty FD-2000 [Uzbekistan began testing Chinese anti-aircraft missile system FD-2000]," Podrobno, 24 October 2019.

<sup>42</sup> "Bronetekhnika kitayskogo proizvodstva v pogranichnykh voyskakh GKNB Tadjzhikistana [Chinese-made armoured vehicles in the border troops of the State Committee for National Security of Tajikistan]," Livejournal, 8 December 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020. Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, DC, Department of Defense, 2020), 127.

its western borders, its deployment of the PAP indicates a greater willingness to engage with the region's security issues and expand its influence there.

Closer Chinese military cooperation with Central Asian states is also conspicuous in the accelerated pace of military exchanges and meetings between senior defence officials.<sup>44</sup> Concurrent Chinese development of infrastructure in Central Asia attests to its aspirations for broader ties with the region. In 2020, China inaugurated a new airport at Tashkurgan in XUAR, close to the borders of Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and reportedly plans to build 24 more.<sup>45</sup> These are essentially dual-use facilities and can thus be used for military purposes, enhancing Chinese readiness and power projection capabilities in the region. The expansion of infrastructure links will also encourage greater exploitation of the area's abundant natural resources and incentivise closer economic cooperation with China. This process is already underway. According to the World Bank's 2019 country economic update, China held a 75% share of Tajikistan's total Foreign Direct Investment.<sup>46</sup>

The relationship between China and Russia with regards to Central Asia has benefitted both parties, with Russia being primarily responsible for military security via the CSTO and China for economic development.<sup>47</sup> However, in the long run, it is unlikely that such a neat division will persist. Chinese interests have already expanded beyond economic investment and trade to encroach upon Russia's traditional sphere of military assistance and control. China is highly likely to deliver more military hardware to Central Asia, and Russia is equally likely to be frustrated by the increased influence that China will gain from these exports.

The rivalry between the two countries is also evident in Belarus. For many years, Belarusian President Aleksander Lukashenko has requested Russian assistance, preferably donations, to upgrade the Belarusian Armed Forces. But Russia has proved reluctant. Moscow's disinclination to help upgrade Belarus' short-range missile capabilities has forced Minsk to consider alternatives. In 2016, Belarus fielded the 301 mm Polonez multiple rocket launcher, which comprises a Belarusian-made MZKT-7930 chassis and Chinese-supplied A200 missiles that can engage targets up to 200 km. Since then, the system has been upgraded and can carry the A300 missile with a 300 km range.<sup>48</sup> China also delivered CS/VN3 Dajiang (Dragon) 4x4 armoured vehicles to Belarus in 2016.<sup>49</sup> Although the number delivered is unknown,

### *The rivalry between the two countries is also evident in Belarus*

they have been used to improve the mobility of Belarusian land components during the suppression of post-election protests in Belarus.

Discussions regarding additional Chinese-Belarusian defence initiatives, especially in the fields of unmanned aerial vehicles and command and control systems, have been ongoing since 2016. These began at a time when President Lukashenko was ostensibly distancing himself from Russia's policies in its near abroad, particularly in the wake of Russian military operations in Ukraine. However, Lukashenko's requests for Russian assistance following the August 2020 presidential elections, and Russia's reported establishment of a backup law enforcement unit to aid Belarus if required, suggest that Belarusian overtures to China may be put on hold, or even stop completely if Russia

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders and John Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications* (Washington, DC: National Defense university Press, July 2017), 18.

<sup>45</sup> "Geopolitika Kitaya na Pamire i yego «lipkaya sila» v Tadjikistane [China's geopolitics in the Pamirs and its 'sticky power' in Tajikistan]," CAA Network, 7 March 2020.

<sup>46</sup> World Bank Group, *Tajikistan: Country Economic Update, Fall 2019* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2019), 10.

<sup>47</sup> Temur Umarov, "China Looms Large in Central Asia," Carnegie Moscow Center, 30 March 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Nikolai Novichkov, "Belarus unveils upgraded Polonez-M MRL system," Janes, 7 June 2019.

<sup>49</sup> "Belarusian army receives Chinese-made 4x4 armored vehicles," Army Recognition, 17 February 2018.

and Belarus merge or further consolidate security cooperation.<sup>50</sup>

Despite this apparent competition, Russia and China are expected to continue to cooperate in the economic sphere since it suits both their interests. China will seek to expand its presence and influence in Belarus as a gateway for further expansion into European markets.<sup>51</sup> From Moscow's perspective, meanwhile, Beijing's economic presence has one key beneficial aspect—if Lukashenko is replaced by a more Moscow-friendly president, the Chinese Communist Party will likely approve the change to safeguard its economic investments, thus providing legitimacy for Russian actions in Belarus. China would also be expected to veto or, at the very least, abstain from any United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution that might be proposed to punish Moscow should it actively intervene in Belarus.

Chinese attitudes towards the protests over the 2020 presidential election in Belarus coincide with those held by Russia. On 19 August, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson stated that Beijing opposes external (i.e. Western) attempts to divide Belarusian society, a view that very much converges with that of Moscow. These Russian and Chinese positions are unlikely to change given their historic opposition to perceived Western interference in domestic affairs and fears of a possible colour revolution.<sup>52</sup>

## 6. THE ARCTIC

Ice thaw in the Arctic is also opening a new area of competition. For many years, Russia has steadily upgraded its military presence in the region, deploying advanced air defence assets, re-establishing Soviet-era air and ground force bases, and building new ones. Through these forward-deployed capabilities, Russia now dominates the Arctic militarily.

Russia's policies in the Arctic might be characterised as economic optimism and security pessimism, but Moscow's assessments seem to have been too extreme on both counts. From the security perspective, its pessimism is unwarranted as it is ahead of other countries in developing military hardware that is designed for operations in harsh, Arctic conditions.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, it conducts regular training for troop deployments via air or sea transport into the High North, demonstrating rapid reaction capabilities that highlight its resolve to defend its interests in the region. On the economic front, Russia has been overly optimistic thus far. Despite the steady, annual increase in voyages and total cargo carried via the Northern Sea Route (NSR), it has failed to meet its economic goals for the region.<sup>54</sup> However, Russia sees enough potential for the long-term economic development of the Arctic, including exploration of gas and oil fields, to plan for a fleet of nine nuclear-powered and four conventional icebreakers by 2035.

China is increasingly eager to play a more prominent role in the Arctic. In January 2018 it published its first Arctic policy paper in which it argues that although countries not directly neighbouring the Arctic have no territorial sovereignty rights, they are permitted to conduct a wide range of operations and tasks there. These include “scientific research, navigation, overflight, fishing, laying of submarine cables and pipelines in the high seas and other relevant sea areas in the Arctic Ocean, and rights to resource exploration and exploitation in the Area.” Given its proximity to the High North, China terms itself a “near-Arctic State” and “an important stakeholder in Arctic

*Russia's policies in the Arctic might be characterised as economic optimism and security pessimism*

<sup>50</sup> “[Russia sets up law enforcement unit on Lukashenko's request to aid Belarus — Putin](#),” TASS, 27 August 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Brian G. Carlson, “[Why China Will Support Russia in Belarus](#),” The Diplomat, 31 August 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Jakub Jakóbowski, “[China's response to the protests in Belarus](#),” OSW, 21 August 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Katarzyna Zysk, *Russia's Military Build-Up in the Arctic: to What End?*, (Washington, DC: Centre for Naval Analyses, 2020), 6.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. The NSR runs through the entirety of Russia's northern territorial waters, from the Bering Strait between Siberia and Alaska to the Barents Sea, near Norway.

affairs,” that seeks to “participate in the governance of the Arctic.”<sup>55</sup>

China has proposed a ‘Polar Silk Road’ to develop Arctic shipping routes, that will augment land-based transit routes and thus expand its trade and influence in the region. This ‘Polar Silk Road’, of course, dovetails neatly with China’s BRI and will allow for “commercial trial voyages in accordance with the law to pave the way for their commercial and regularized operation. China attaches great importance to navigation security in the Arctic shipping routes.”<sup>56</sup>

Clearly, Beijing is increasingly interested in playing a more active role in and around the Arctic, although so far this has been mainly through scientific endeavours. China opened its first north pole research station on Norway’s Svalbard Islands in 2004 and expanded research facilities in northern Iceland in 2018.<sup>57</sup> Its first indigenous icebreaker sailed into the Arctic to conduct research in 2020, while a nuclear-powered icebreaker is reportedly in the works to further expand Beijing’s reach and provide it with a degree of autonomy in Arctic operations.<sup>58</sup>

Russian investments in its icebreaker fleet, already the largest in the world, are partly

*This may put more pressure on the US to develop its presence and operations in the High North*

motivated by financial benefits. Countries wishing to traverse the NSR would need to rely on Russian capabilities for safe passage. Moscow could also deny passage to any ships, either implicitly or explicitly, by not providing an icebreaker escort. In this context, the

<sup>55</sup> “Full text: China’s Arctic Policy,” Xinhua, 26 January 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Kingdom of Norway, “Chinese North Pole Research Station launched in Norway,” 2 August 2004; “China-Iceland Arctic Science Observatory inaugurated in northern Iceland,” Xinhua, 19 October 2018.

<sup>58</sup> Atle Staalesen, “New Chinese icebreaker sets course for Arctic,” The Barents Observer, 16 July 2020; Malte

emergence of a Chinese rival will likely cause friction as Russia will lose leverage.

Beijing’s willingness to participate in the extraction of hydrocarbon resources are also of

*China has proposed a ‘Polar Silk Road’ to develop Arctic shipping routes*

concern to Moscow. Here in particular, Russia’s ambitions are constrained by a lack of funds and the required substantial investments.<sup>59</sup> China’s growing determination to participate in the governance of the Arctic, along with its economic capacity, could lead it to either invest heavily in Russia’s businesses in the Arctic or seek independent opportunities.

For now, however, there seem to be more incentives for both states to cooperate; indeed, Chinese investment into the Novatek-run Yamal onshore liquid natural gas facility in north-western Siberia helped to complete the project.<sup>60</sup> In the near-term, Russia will provide China with commodities it needs (oil and gas), while China will provide much-needed capital and advanced industrial technologies, increasing interdependence between the two countries in Arctic operations.<sup>61</sup>

This may put more pressure on the US to develop its presence and operations in the High North. The US Coast Guard has characterised China as a threat to US access and freedom of navigation in

the Arctic and, drawing parallels to Chinese conduct in the South China Sea and East China Sea, called it—alongside Russia—a challenge “to the rules-based international order around the globe [causing] concern of similar

Humpert, “China Reveals Details of Newly Designed Heavy Icebreaker,” High North News, 16 December 2019.

<sup>59</sup> Holly Ellyatt, “Russia is dominating the Arctic, but it’s not looking to fight over it,” CNBC, 27 December 2019.

<sup>60</sup> Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, “The Emergence of a Sino-Russian Economic Partnership in the Arctic?” The Arctic Institute, 19 May 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

infringement to the continued peaceful stability of the Arctic region.”<sup>62</sup> This Arctic could thus become yet another venue for contest between the US on one hand, and Russia and China on the other. From a strategic perspective, the inclusion of operations in the Arctic in Russian-Chinese defence cooperation efforts contains the potential to threaten US interests in the region.

## 7. CHINESE ESPIONAGE

Despite the propensity of Russia and China to present their relationship as stable, fruitful and unquestionable, it undeniably has a murky espionage aspect. Numerous instances of Chinese attempts to attain information related to Russian military and other advanced technology have been reported in the Russian media. For example, in 2011, Russian Federal Security Service agents arrested a Chinese national who was seeking to acquire sensitive information about Russian air defence systems.<sup>63</sup> In June 2020, Russia opened a criminal investigation against a 78-year-old Arctic specialist, Valery Mitko, who reportedly provided China with classified information “of a military nature” related to the use and construction of submarines.<sup>64</sup> The media has speculated that this attempt at espionage prompted Moscow to suspend deliveries of the S-400 air defence system to Beijing, although the official reason for the delay was given as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on production processes.<sup>65</sup> A criminal case was also opened against a scientist from Tomsk, in September 2020, for reportedly passing sensitive technology to China.<sup>66</sup>

*Numerous instances of Chinese attempts to attain information related to Russian military and other advanced technology have been reported*

Russia’s willingness or reluctance to provide sophisticated equipment to China seems to have little bearing on China’s espionage activity. Instead, China conducts espionage against Russia to acquire technology or know-how in areas that are not within the ambit of cooperation efforts or on subjects which Moscow is unwilling to discuss with Beijing. China can thus be expected to continue to covertly seek access to sensitive Russian technology and information whatever the state of the bilateral relationship.

In the past, Russian fears of reverse-engineering of defence materiel slowed its transfer of advanced weapons and equipment to China. To offset the losses expected from Chinese reverse-engineering activities, Russia has pursued damage limitation measures such as insisting on bulk sales rather than the sale of a few samples. It has also sought to include assurances against theft in contracts or to extract royalties from Chinese companies for infringement of intellectual property rights.<sup>67</sup> These attempts have been assessed as largely unsuccessful.<sup>68</sup> According to Yevgeny Livadny, chief of intellectual property projects at Rostec, there were 500 cases of “unauthorised copying” of Russian equipment abroad between 2002 and 2019. China is believed to have copied Russian air defence systems, aircraft engines and even entire aircraft.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>62</sup> United States Coast Guard, *Arctic Strategic Outlook* (Washington, DC: US Coast Guard, 2019), 9, 4; Heljar Havnes and Johan Martin Seland, “[The Increasing Security Focus in China’s Arctic Policy](#),” The Arctic Institute, 16 July 2019.

<sup>63</sup> Miriam Elder and Tania Branigan, “[Russia arrests Chinese ‘spy’ in row over defence weapons](#),” The Guardian, 5 October 2011.

<sup>64</sup> “[Another septuagenarian spy](#),” Meduza, 16 June 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Frank Chen, “[Russia may be withholding missile deliveries to China](#),” Asia Times, 29 July 2020.

<sup>66</sup> “[V Tomske zaderzhali uchenogo Aleksandra Lukanina. Yego podozrevayut v peredache tekhnologiy Kitayu \[Scientist Alexander Lukanin was detained in Tomsk. He is suspected of transferring technology to China\]](#),” MBH Media, 30 September 2020.

<sup>67</sup> “[Furious Russia Blasts China Over Unauthorized Copying Of Russian Military Hardware](#),” The Eurasian Times, 23 December 2019.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Dimitri Simes, “[Russia up in arms over Chinese theft of military technology](#),” Nikkei Asia, 20 December 2019.

However, the sale of advanced systems such as the Su-35 and the S-400 air defence system indicate that Russia's concerns over reverse-engineering have been less important than the prospect of losing the Chinese defence market. Further, reverse-engineering of advanced technology may simply not be worth the effort. Analysts judge that, despite long-term cyber espionage activity and concerted efforts to reverse-engineer advanced weapon systems, China has been unable to catch up with the US as exploiting technology requires an extensive industrial, scientific and technological base, and

*Recent developments represent the deepening of existing bilateral security coordination processes, rather than a novel transformation of the relationship*

developing knowledge cannot be simply codified, but must be gleaned through extensive experience—the cost and time benefits of China's reverse engineering efforts may thus have been largely marginal.<sup>70</sup> Russian military equipment manufacturers likely came to similar conclusions. As Russian analyst Vasily Kashin has noted, “copying old technology takes the same amount of time as developing new technology. It's much easier to take China's money, invest it in our own development, and let the Chinese do whatever they want.”<sup>71</sup>

In the light of such assessments, and of Russia's political and economic isolation post-Crimea, it is evident that Moscow has made the political decision to pursue military sales to Beijing. Given the economic, political and military cooperation between the two countries, and perhaps due to a lack of viable alternatives, Russia and China might be expected to gradually move towards the joint development of military equipment that will decrease manufacturing costs and increase interoperability, further cementing their relationship.

<sup>70</sup> Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli, „Why China Has Not Caught Up Yet: Military-Technological Superiority and the Limits of Imitation, Reverse Engineering, and Cyber Espionage,” *International Security* 2019 43:3, 141-189.

<sup>71</sup> “Furious Russia Blasts China.”

<sup>72</sup> [“Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and](#)

## 8. A NEW ALLIANCE?

Whether the enhanced military cooperation between Russia and China can be considered an alliance depends entirely on the definition of the term. The Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation signed between the two countries already in 2001, describes the relationship as an alliance only in the loosest of terms.<sup>72</sup> Article 8, for example, limits the contracting parties from entering into an alliance or taking action that “compromises the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of

the other contracting party,” while Article 9 states that “when a situation arises in which one of the contracting parties deems that peace is being

threatened and undermined or its security interests are involved or when it is confronted with the threat of aggression, the contracting parties shall immediately hold contacts and consultations in order to eliminate such threats.”

Besides these formal provisions, Russia and China have for many years enjoyed a high level of institutionalised military exchange across multiple levels of their defence and military establishments. Defence dialogues take place between their general staffs, the branches of their armed forces, military command and control bodies, border districts and military educational institutions.<sup>73</sup> Educational exchanges include the attendance of at least 260-380 PLA officers at Russian military academies each year.<sup>74</sup> Recent developments thus represent the deepening of existing bilateral security coordination processes, rather than a novel transformation of the relationship.

Nonetheless, the fact that Russian and Chinese views on a range of geopolitical issues are fundamentally at odds with the positions

[the Russian Federation](#),” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 24 July 2001.

<sup>73</sup> Mariya Tomilenko, “Rossiysko-kitayskoye sotrudnichestvo osnovatel'no.”

<sup>74</sup> Alexander Korolev, “How closely aligned are China and Russia? Measuring strategic cooperation in IR,” *International Politics*, 57 (2020), 778.

espoused by most Western countries, have led some to speculate on the emergence of a new Russian-Chinese alliance.<sup>75</sup> A prime example is the stance of the two countries on the conflict in Syria. Both Russia and China have rejected calls for regime change, and thwarted attempts to pass UNSC resolutions on Syria.<sup>76</sup> They have also refused to condemn the use of chemical weapons in the conflict and insisted on the inclusion of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in any negotiations. The stability of the government in Damascus has been a priority for them, albeit for different reasons. Russia's military and technical support to Damascus has reinforced its presence in a region where its influence had waned. It has also helped signal to the West, the US in particular, that Russia retains the capacity to derail US policy objectives. China too has benefited from engaging in shuttle diplomacy on Syria and by its contributions to humanitarian aid efforts, which have bolstered its image as a global actor ready to lend a helping hand. China's position on Syria is a continuation of its long-held policy of supporting whatever government is in power—even as Taliban-ruled Afghanistan cut diplomatic ties with much of the world, China continued to maintain a working relationship with the Taliban.

*There is a fundamental difference between Russia and China on the use of military force for intervention*

What is unique to the Syria situation is the level of visible diplomatic effort expended by China. This is clear evidence of China's global aspirations and its determination to maintain stable diplomatic relationships to facilitate the pursuit of its economic interests; President Assad had stated in December 2019 that Syrian involvement in the BRI was not only good for the reconstruction of Syria, but also necessary to ensure the relevance of the BRI in the region.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>75</sup> For example: Nurlan Aliyev, "[Military Cooperation Between Russia and China: The Military Alliance Without an Agreement?](#)" International Centre for Defence and Security, 1 July 2020; MK Bhadrakumar, "[Russia and China cementing an enduring alliance](#)," Asia Times, 11 October 2020; Alexander Korolev, "On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation," Asian Security 15:3 (2019).

But China has seldom been isolated within the United Nations and has always sought common ground with other countries on any given issue, be it climate change or North Korea. In its actions in the UNSC on Syria, Russia provides a convenient shield for China.

There is, however, a fundamental difference between Russia and China on the use of military force for intervention. Although Russia has long been ready to deploy its military beyond its borders in support of its geopolitical positions, China has eschewed the use of military power as an instrument of foreign policy. Even though the threat of China's military power is undoubtedly an effective tool in diplomacy, China has always been wary of deploying combat forces beyond its borders, fearing never-ending conflicts that would erode its economic gains. Both the means as well as the ends the two countries seek through their involvement in Syria may thus be quite different.

Furthermore, Russia and China have not avoided actions that may be detrimental to each other as they are required by the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation. For example, in contrast to the delays reported in the delivery of further sets of the S-400 air defence system to China, TASS reported that COVID-19 was not expected to impact the delivery schedule of the system to India, which had signed a contract for this in 2018.<sup>78</sup> In the wake of the border stand-off between India and China in June 2020 that resulted in the death of 20 Indian soldiers, India requested the accelerated delivery of the S-400. According to media reports, Russia has indicated its willingness to consider this.<sup>79</sup> In other words, despite the Treaty Russia seems ready to assist India in closing the air defence capability gap, even as

<sup>76</sup> "[Russia, China veto approval of cross-border aid for Syria](#)," Al Jazeera, 10 July 2020.

<sup>77</sup> "[The BRI needs Syria just as Syria needs it](#)," China Daily, 19 December 2019.

<sup>78</sup> "[Coronavirus pandemic not to affect S-400 deliveries to India – ambassador](#)," TASS, 11 April 2020.

<sup>79</sup> Huma Siddiqui, "[India to get S-400 Triumph air defence systems in 2021, says Russia](#)," Financial Express, 27 August 2020.

India and China confront each other in disputed border regions.

Russia's participation in the 2016 naval exercise with the PLA Navy in the South China Sea included island-seizing drills. As this exercise came on the heels of the assessment of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) that China had no basis to claim historic rights in the South

These examples of Russia's military relationship with India and Vietnam—countries engaged in territorial and maritime disputes with China—indicate that, contrary to supposition, Russia and China have not evolved a common position with respect to territorial matters. It is also clear that defence engagements with other countries are not sacrificed at the altar of the bilateral defence relationship between Russia and China.

*Russia and China have not evolved a common position with respect to territorial matters*

China Sea, some analysts assessed the joint drills to be “noteworthy” and speculated that Russia was moving away from neutrality on disputes in the South China Sea.<sup>80</sup> This view was also supported by reports indicating Russian support for China's rejection of the PCA ruling.<sup>81</sup> However, such assessments fail to recognise Russia's long-standing military relationship with Vietnam, whose claims in the South China Sea overlap most extensively with those of China. Vietnam's most expensive naval procurement project has been the acquisition in 2009 of six Project 636 Kilo-class diesel-electric submarines, valued at \$2 billion. Deliveries were completed in 2017.<sup>82</sup> According to the SIPRI arms transfer database, Russia was the sources of over 83% of all Vietnamese arms imports between 2005 and 2019. In 2019, Russian exports to Vietnam were valued at \$138 million with Belarus a distant second, exporting arms worth \$23 million to Vietnam.<sup>83</sup> Apart from the trade in defence materiel, Russia and Vietnam also undertake regular military exercises. The two countries drew up a three-year plan for military cooperation in 2018, and their most recent naval drill in December 2019 focused on submarine rescue operations.<sup>84</sup>

The closeness in the bilateral defence relationship between Russia and China thus seems to be based more on disagreements with Western positions than it is on clear agreement on any given issue. As such this cooperation is predicated above all upon expediency rather than a recognition of common goals and direction.

## CONCLUSIONS

The key to understanding the deepening engagement between Russia and China is the context within which it is taking place. To Russian and Chinese eyes, the existing international system mostly favours the US, the EU and the Western world in general, and puts them at an inherent disadvantage; especially now they are both actively pursuing national security interests and seeking to project their influence into their immediate neighbourhoods. Russia, which is looking to rebuild the relevance

*This cooperation is predicated above all upon expediency rather than a recognition of common goals and direction*

it lost after 1991, is more willing to employ military means in a strategically opportunistic manner to safeguard its political, economic, and security interests. China is more apprehensive about the direct use of force to serve its interests. However, its recalcitrance on

<sup>80</sup> Jesse Johnson, “[Joint China-Russia naval drills in South China Sea focus on anti-submarine, 'island-seizing' operations](#),” The Japan Times, 12 September 2016.

<sup>81</sup> “[China hails Vladimir Putin's backing on South China Sea islands](#),” The Indian Express, 8 September 2016.

<sup>82</sup> “[Vietnam's new found submarine power and where it came from](#),” VNExpress, 2017.

<sup>83</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “SIPRI Arms Transfers Database.”

<sup>84</sup> “[Russia, Vietnam draw up plan of joint military drills in 2018-2020](#),” TASS, 29 January 2018; Vu Anh, “[Russia, Vietnam to hold joint rescue drills in South China Sea](#),” VNExpress, 21 November 2019.

territorial issues and its activities in the South China Sea indicate a readiness to defy accepted norms and international conventions.

Russia's inability to come to a compromise with the West after the events in Ukraine in 2014 have pushed it towards a more pragmatic and increasingly cooperative relationship with China. Beijing has welcomed this development as a counterbalance to the policies pursued by the Trump administration that it views as attempts to constrain its continued economic development.

Although Russia and China have a history of cooperation, it has largely been symbolic. More recently, the goals of actively defying US hegemony and filling the gap in international leadership created by the refocusing of Western attention on domestic concerns have galvanised their cooperation and enabled them to overcome concerns over intentions and implicit competition.

Michael Kofman has said that Russia is a revisionist power in Europe where China seeks the status-quo, and the inverse is true in Asia.<sup>85</sup> There is, however, a nuance to this view. Both countries share interests in regions where they wish to maintain the current situation—China in Belarus, and Russia over the Kuril Islands in north-east Asia. Their political support for each other here is intended to counterbalance regional rivals.

The gradually emerging strategic character of the defence relationship between the two countries is evident in the trade in arms between them, and in their increased defence industrial cooperation on critical military projects. Although the Chinese share of Russian defence exports is now small, new avenues of cooperation indicate that there is great scope for growth. Indeed, if plans to co-produce an early-warning network for China and design a new conventional submarine materialise, the exchange of information and expertise between the two states will be unprecedented. Such cooperation will pose significant risks for the US,

which may be forced to contend militarily with two adversaries in two different theatres, both actively seeking to undermine the existing status-quo. In this context, with increased US focus on Asia and given the gradual withdrawal of US forces from Europe, it seems likely that NATO's European members will need to bear a greater share of the burden of confronting a revisionist Russia.

With regards to military exercises between Russia and China, the presence of combat personnel at key manoeuvres undoubtedly makes for excellent press reports and gives credibility to the notion of an alliance in the making. However, there is no evidence to conclude that the two countries have developed interoperability at the tactical level. It would

*In their cooperation, Russia and China presently succeed more than they fail*

certainly be noteworthy if co-ordination efforts at a strategic level resulted in simultaneous exercises conducted across different theatres.

Although Russia and China have significant incentives to deepen cooperation, some difficult issues in the defence realm are unlikely to be resolved. China will continue to conduct espionage activities in Russia and will likely attempt to reverse-engineer Russian hardware. Also, the demarcation of interests between the two countries in Central Asia is unclear and a potential source of stress.

The fact that Russia and China seek a closer relationship despite these difficulties attests to their political will and commitment to derive benefits from this partnership. Although problems across all spheres of cooperation will undoubtedly remain, and new ones will surface, they presently succeed more than they fail. While a formal alliance may never emerge, this does not detract from the value of Beijing and Moscow's active cooperation in pursuit of their aspirations to shape the existing world order.

<sup>85</sup> Michael Kofman, "[The Emperors League: Understanding Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation](#)," War on the Rocks, 6 August 2020.

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