

# HOW TO THINK ABOUT THE CHINA-RUSSIA PARTNERSHIP

| JAMES SHERR | FRANK JÜRIS |

The unfailingly perspicacious Raymond Aron, had this to say in his *magnum opus*, *Peace and War* in 1966: ‘Occasional allies...have no bond other than a common hostility toward an enemy, a hostility capable of inspiring sufficient fear to overcome the rivalries that yesterday opposed and tomorrow will oppose again the temporarily allied states.’<sup>1</sup> Although there is no suggestion in his 700-page tome that Aron had China and Russia in mind when he wrote these words, his description is highly germane to our subject. Of course, it is not only the authors of this paper who will ask whether the term ‘occasional allies’ is the right way to describe what we dutifully call the China-Russia ‘Strategic Partnership.’

The highest legally binding instrument between China and Russia, the Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation of 20 July 2001, which the two state presidents committed themselves to extend on 28 June 2021 — apparently without amendment — is long on common interests and short on obligations.<sup>2</sup> There is no indication that mutual defence guarantees will follow, either in the treaty’s 25 articles or anywhere else.<sup>3</sup> That does not mean that in other respects, the spirit and substance of alliance is absent.

Whatever our semantic reservations, Aron’s words capture the complexity of our subject and its indeterminacy. For one thing, the ‘sufficient fear’ that Russia and China inspire in their own right and in common is a response to fear as much as a wish to arouse it. It also is an expression of hostility to the West’s ‘rules-based international order’, which both countries view as the aggressive extension of their ‘liberal-democratic order’ internally. In 2013, one of the authors described Russia’s overarching aim as ‘the creation of an international environment conducive to the maintenance of its system of governance at home’.<sup>4</sup> The same can be said of China. But beyond that, Russia seeks the ‘reformatting’ of the international order, recognition of its pre-eminence in its ‘historical zones of influence’ and its entitlement to be a global power. Xi Jinping’s ‘Chinese dream’ (*Zhongguo meng* 中國夢)

is synonymous with national rejuvenation. Xi’s conception as much as that of Putin and his predecessors is predicated on a seamless interconnectedness between internal development and security and external influence and strength. Some of Russia’s global pretensions are for show (*pokazukha*), China’s less so, but both countries are ambitious and resentful powers.

That brings us to the prophetic side of Aron’s definition. Twenty years after the Treaty, the balance of power and advantage between Russia and China—economic, technological and military—has shifted appreciably from the former to the latter. So far, this shift has not diminished the ‘common hostility’ that binds them together or aroused tension with respect to the core interests set out above. Less charitably, we might say that when it comes to several of these core interests—e.g. Ukraine and Belarus for Russia, Taiwan for China—the other partner could not care less. But when we widen our compass to include other

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important interests—notably Central Asia and the Arctic — these tend to overlap, and there, partnership overlaps with rivalry and mistrust. In 2001 (and especially after the resolution of boundary disputes in 2002) Russia welcomed the emergence of a strong China without reservation. Have reservations now appeared? Will they do so? By 2030, how likely is it that Russia will find itself blessed by the ancient Chinese curse: ‘may all your dreams come true’?

Let us consider these questions with respect to three areas where interests still largely coincide but apprehensions also can be felt.

## CENTRAL ASIA

In this vast region of shared borders, multiple ethnicities straddling these borders and significant hydro-carbon resources, China and Russia are united by a common interest in the stability of the autocratic political orders of these five states and their immunity to penetration, subversion and capture by Islamist and other 'extremist' political movements. The unexpected speed and scale of the Afghanistan *débâcle* has given urgency to these concerns.

In recent years, it widely has been assumed that a *de facto* division of labour has emerged, whereby China assumes a dominant position with respect to economics and Russia preserves primacy with respect to security, reinforced by highly networked ties with national political, defence and security establishments that Russia and its Soviet predecessor cultivated over decades. But the permanence of this never formalised arrangement is coming under question. At what point does economic influence become political influence? In his characteristic manner, Aleksandr Gabuev makes a pointed question more pointed: 'China is becoming not only an ever more important trading partner, but investor and right behind that, creditor. It has so much money that it can give credit on privileged terms. And it can...say: give us a licence over resources, and we will give you credit not only for...resources and ...technology, but also provide budgetary support.'<sup>5</sup>

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Add to this the Belt and Road Initiative, which advances through Central Asia along Chinese constructed standard gauge railways and abruptly turns south, avoiding Russian transit entirely. Where does all of this leave Russia's pet project of yesterday, the Eurasian Economic Union? Gabuev rhetorically asks: 'Why [should China] try to de-stabilise the beast, angering Russia, when it is dying of old age and illness?' If he is correct that China used its economic cards to parlay the replacement of Kyrgyzstan's President, Sooronbay Jeenbekov by Sadyr Japarov, where else might it leverage economic power for political gain?

Then there is the military question. The establishment of a Chinese border guard base in Tajikistan (an ally of Russia) with no attempt to seek Russia's consent, China's convening of a security conference of all five Central Asian states without Russian participation and the deployment of private military companies (PMCs)—composed *de facto* of Chinese servicemen—demonstrate that Russia is no exception to the rule that where China has distinctive interests, it will

advance them without fanfare and consult only itself. What these episodes also illustrate is the extent to which the balance of power, in Central Asia as well as the world, is moving to China's advantage.

## THE ARCTIC

China is becoming an Arctic power, but it is not an Arctic country. Russia shares many of its strategic interests, but it does not always welcome its presence. For China, the strategic value of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) lies in the circumvention of maritime blockade by the USA and its allies, the transformation of the PLA Navy into a blue water force, greater nuclear deterrence and military-scientific cooperation, including acoustic sensor technology and underwater surveillance.

China and Russia have a strong interest in pursuing 'transportation politics'. They have complementary energy markets and share an interest in increasing trade volumes and diminishing transit time through the NSR. But China's ambitions for infrastructure development along the Arctic coast display its penchant for advancing projects with local partners yet without Moscow's fiat. Russia claims the NSR as its sovereign jurisdiction; China adheres to the established international principle of freedom of navigation. In some respects, China's geo-economic schematic complements Russia's own; in others it does not. Whereas Russia fears growing dependence on China, the latter finds its practice of subordinating need and efficiency to rent seeking and corruption an irritant and impediment. In turn, China's construction of two nuclear powered icebreakers will strengthen its own independence and decrease Russia's revenue. With some success, Russia has been able to parlay China's influence against Western and Indian participation in mega-energy projects. Nevertheless, Russia finds itself in a delicate position given its desire to develop the region, the absence of alternative partners outside the energy sphere and insufficient finance.

It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that a Finnish-sponsored project, Arctic Connect, offers the greatest potential to deepen Sino-Russian cooperation and advance mutual interests. If constructed and completed (as originally envisaged, by 2023), the 13,800-km submarine cable will greatly enhance the speed and reliability of data transfer between Europe and Asia. At the same time, Arctic Connect now features prominently in China's Digital Silk Road, itself an adjunct of the Belt and Road Initiative, but with the express purpose of realising Xi's goal of transforming China into a global cyber power.<sup>6</sup> Although owned by an international consortium, with a significant Russian component, its building contractor, the state-owned Finnish company Cinia Oy, has commissioned Huawei

Marine to construct the cable. The defence and security implications of the project were not considered in the Finnish study or approval process. Yet they are considerable. As summarised by Frank Jüris: '[T]he construction of Arctic Connect would enable China to implement underwater surveillance capabilities it has been developing through military-civilian fusion in the South and East China Seas ... [It] can itself be used for underwater acoustic sensing; together with sensors and underwater drones it would enable China to extend its Underwater Great Wall to the...Arctic region. 'Eyes and ears' under the Arctic Sea would significantly improve China's nuclear deterrence by increasing the visibility of an adversary's submarines in the strategically important area.'<sup>7</sup>

## MILITARY COOPERATION

In the view of the American analyst Dmitry Gorenburg, 'the [Russian] military establishment will always see the Chinese military as a potential adversary and plan accordingly'.<sup>8</sup> It would be surprising if it did not. Like the states they serve, the Russian and Chinese military establishments are not given to trust. Nevertheless, Putin and Xi have been forcing them through institutional barriers that, ten years ago, seemed on their way to acquiring topographical permanence. Here as in so many other areas, the impetus has been national interest: on Moscow's part, the conviction that pressure from Europe required a breakthrough in Asia; on Beijing's part, the perception that the PLA (which has not fought a war since 1979) would not be fit for purpose in the Western Pacific without Russian help. The changed dynamic is especially telling in two areas:

**Arms Transfers.** In 2012, Xi and Putin resolved to restore arms trade as a central pillar of the relationship. This has produced a second reversal in thirty years. Between 1992 and 2006, Russia was China's most significant arms supplier. But between 2006-11, Russian transfers fell markedly.<sup>9</sup> This reflected mounting irritation with Russia's policy of supplying 'second best' to China and with China's (successful and unauthorised) reverse-engineering of Russian weapons systems. The discussions with Xi persuaded Putin that Russia had to change course. Despite significant advances in China's production capability, Xi also recognised that Russia continued to possess technologies that China required. Today the latter is (or soon will be) the recipient of weapons systems—e.g. the Su-35, the Mi-171 combat helicopter and the S-400—that promise to be highly advantageous in offensive operations against Taiwan and defensive operations against the United States.<sup>10</sup> According to SIPRI, arms transfers to China increased 49 percent between 2011-20.<sup>11</sup>

**Training, Collaboration and Emulation.** Similar geographical imperatives, a Leninist grasp of the interconnectedness between peace and war and internal and external policy, as well as the axiomatic conviction that deception and 'military cunning' (*voennaya khitrost'*) lie at the heart of warfare have long provided outwardly different military establishments with a common basis of

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understanding.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, different command and operational cultures took root in the Soviet period, some of them pronounced until recently. That is why China's systematic study of Russia's post-Soviet military experience is worthy of attention. Xi was sufficiently inspired by the Serdyukov and Shoygu reforms to use them as a model to empower himself as Commander-in-Chief and re-establish firm Party (CCP) control over a PLA that had become cumbersome, set in its ways, corrupt and resistant to political direction.<sup>13</sup> What is more, doctrinal and structural innovation have been complemented by a rigorous and increasingly ambitious joint exercise/training regime with Russian command structures at tactical, operational and strategic levels. In combination, they have been assaulting what has been a major impediment to effective joint operations: the absence of interoperability.<sup>14</sup>

These changes are significant, but they are a work in progress that might proceed, atrophy or reverse. We are left with the question, has mistrust been overcome? Were China to establish strategic parity with the United States (as some now forecast), would Moscow be pleased that, by virtue of the same feat, it had achieved parity with Russia itself?

## SOME ANSWERS, MORE QUESTIONS

To return to the original question, what is the China-Russia 'strategic partnership' and what are its limits? In classical terms, it does not meet the requirements of an alliance. Analytical rigour and respect for the meaning of words should preserve the maxim: no defence guarantees, no alliance. What then? Analogies provide limited help. One, captivating but unexplored, is the 1936 German-Japanese Anti-Comintern Pact, inspired by ideological and geopolitical hostility to a common enemy, but like the Russia-China partnership, devoid of hard guarantees.

However, unlike Russia-China, it was a shallow partnership, undermined and in the end crippled by the fact that Japan had a second enemy, the United States, to which at the time of Germany's greatest need, it gave precedence.

Michael Kofman suggests that the partnership is an entente.<sup>15</sup> But entente lacks the granularity, spirit of urgency and aggressiveness that informs this multi-faceted and institutionalised relationship. Dean Cheng and Ariel Cohen suggest that China and Russia are 'aligned but not allied'.<sup>16</sup> We can accept that distinction without demur. But that does not stop the relationship achieving many of the goals of an alliance in practice.

With reference to Bobo Lo's 2008 characterisation of the China-Russian relationship as an 'axis of convenience', possibly it is time to go further.<sup>17</sup> Today, it has become an axis of necessity. Strategic necessity dictates that mistrust be accepted, slights endured

and divergences of interest managed. But how well and for how long?

When one looks at the issues that have the greatest probability of leading to war with the designated adversary — Belarus and Ukraine in the case of Russia, Taiwan in the case of China — it is clear why neither partner has an interest in concluding a defence treaty with the other. Their common interests diverge just where their specific interests are most acute. But that gives rise to an infernal question. Might one partner see the other's war as an opportunity to start its own? And to give the infernal question a more devilish twist, might they have a joint interest in coordinating such opportunities beforehand? The fact that these possibilities are far-fetched does not make either of them inconceivable or prudently ignored by those who would suffer the consequences. They form part of the calculus of uncertainties that accompany this 'strategic partnership' and might continue to do so in future.

## ENDOTES

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (Kindle Edition) (London: Routledge, 2017), 28.

<sup>2</sup> The strongest obligation is set out in Article 9: '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' [author's emphasis]. See: [Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation](#), 16 July 2001, Moscow.

<sup>3</sup> As Nicholas Trickett noted: 'The Putin-Xi meeting...emphasized performance over substance, limited by domestic political considerations and the scope of the two countries' mutual interests. There's a sense that there is no clear consensus over what order in Central Asia and Eurasia more broadly ought to look like'. Nicholas Trickett, ["China-Russia: A Strategic Partnership Short on Strategy"](#), *The Diplomat*, 30 June 2021.

<sup>4</sup> James Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad* (London: Chatham House, 2013), 96.

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Solov'ev, ["«Роль Китая не может играть ни одна страна». Александр Габуев о растущем влиянии Китая в Центральной Азии"](#) ["The role of China cannot be performed by any other country." Aleksandr Gabuev on China's growing influence in Central Asia], *Kommersant*, Supplement Central Asia, No 22, 9 February 2021: 8.

<sup>6</sup> ["中央网络安全和信息化领导小组第一次会议召开"](#) [Central Leading Small Group for Internet Security and Informatisation convened for the first time], Central People's Government, 27 February 2014; ["Xi Vows to Build China into a Cyber Power"](#), Xinhua via CRI, 27 February 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Jüris, ["Handing over infrastructure for China's strategic objectives: 'Arctic Connect' and the Digital Silk Road in the Arctic"](#), Sinopsis, 7 March 2020, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Dmitry Gorenburg, ["An Emerging Strategic Partnership: Trends in Russia-China Military Cooperation"](#), Security Insights, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, April 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Weitz, ["Why China Snubs Russian Arms"](#), *The Diplomat*, 5 April 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Schwartz, ["The Changing Nature and Implications of Russian Military Transfers to China"](#), CSIS, June 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Pieter D Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova & Siemon T Wezeman, ["Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2020"](#), SIPRI Fact Sheet, SIPRI, March 2021.

<sup>12</sup> It is scarcely incidental that Sun Tzu has been a powerful influence on the Soviet/Russian military curriculum second only to Carl von Clausewitz. See James Sherr, ["The Militarization of Russian Policy"](#), German Marshall Fund, 21 August 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Anatoliy Eduardovich Serdyukov, Minister of Defence (2007-12), Sergey Kuzhugotovich Shoigu, Minister of Defence (2012-present).

<sup>14</sup> Mansip Singh, ["Learning from Russia: How China used Russian models and experiences to modernize the PLA"](#), Mercator Institute for China Studies, 23 September 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Kofman, ["The Emperors League: Understanding Sino-Russian Defence Cooperation"](#), War on the Rocks, 6 August 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Dean Cheng & Ariel Cohen, ["How Washington Should Manage US-Russia-China Relations"](#), Background Paper No 2841, The Heritage Foundation, 29 August 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

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