Russo-Chinese Security Cooperation: Realities, Motives, and Responses

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There is no matter more pressing to the future of the international system than the strategic triangle between the United States, China, and Russia. Specifically, growing alignment between Russia and China poses profound challenges to the United States and the liberal order it leads (Lo 2019). Comprehensive security cooperation between Russia and China would indeed present the greatest threat to American primacy since the Cold War. This assessment explores the reality and viability of such alignment through Russian Foreign Policy. First, I outline a framework to assess security cooperation and utilize this to analyze Russia and China’s relationship. I then posit several factors that explain Russian security ties with China and discuss their relative significance in past and future developments. I find that Russia and China’s relationship is best characterized as a strategic partnership, with growth driven primarily by Russian perceptions of threat from the West. This has several implications for future Russo-Chinese security cooperation and Western responses.

Security Relationships: An Analytical Framework

The majority of scholarship on security cooperation has addressed alliances rather than broader alignment. As a result, there have been few attempts to create a taxonomy of alignment (Müller 2002, Wilkins 2012). However, such a framework is critical to understanding different security relationships and will be useful in the Russo-Chinese case. Here, I put forward the following four typologies in ascending order of cooperative intensity and strategic alignment: Engagement, Strategic Partnership, Entente, and Alliance.

*Engagement* may be defined as cooperation intended to ease tensions and build friendly relations yet lacking in substance or ulterior goals. *Strategic Partnerships* and *Ententes* can both characterized by more serious cooperation driven by a common goal or threat and a simultaneous
lack of institutionalization. *Strategic Partnerships*, though, will exhibit greater hedging and some conflictual interests while *Ententes* entail greater unity and full strategic alignment. Finally, *Alliances* consist of formal cooperation that typically counters a specific threat or foe, ensure mutual defense and security, and often consist of ideologically aligned members. How would we assess which typology a given relationship falls under? I propose four variables that, while incomplete, provide analytical footing.

First, *institutionalization*—the extent to which cooperation is formalized. Alliances will be uniquely characterized by security/mutual defense institutions and/or treaties, while the existence of non-security institutions may support the existence of an entente or strategic partnership. Second, *defense postures* give clues as to the level of alignment and mutual trust (Schwartz 2019)—states in engagement and strategic partnerships will hedge through maintaining defensive and/or offensive capabilities, while those in entente will likely minimize such postures. Third, *arms sales* are important indications of cooperation and their scope reflects the degree of security cooperation (Pierre 1981; Pierre 1982, 14-24; Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper 2016). Finally, *joint exercises* facilitate interoperability in combat, suggest low perceptions of mutual threat, and serve as signals of alignment. Thus, their scope and depth will suggest the extent of the relationship (Lewis 1999; Tertrais 2004; Schwartz 2018, 48-49).

**Russia and China: From Engagement to Strategic Partnership**

Russian and Chinese rhetoric has recently touted strengthened ties, with some Russian defense officials going so far as to label the relationship a quasi-alliance or functional alliance.

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1 The basis for this framework relies on several sources including: Wilkins (2012) Müller (2002), Lo (2019), and Chidley (2014).
(Lo 2019; Allison 2018). Given the unreliability of such public positions, though, it is essential to assess the relationship through the lens outlined above.

**Institutionalization**

The institutional grounding of the Russo-Chinese relationship paints a mixed picture of security cooperation. First, there is a clear absence of any bilateral security treaty or multilateral security institution that would be foundational to an alliance (Blank 2018a). The two states do, however, share membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the most serious institutional attempt at regional integration in Eurasia (Ahmad 2018). The SCO was initially formed to facilitate economic and political cooperation yet has developed an increased focus on security (Ahmad 2018, 119; Capie 2018, 342). Security cooperation, however, remains a minor aspect of SCO. Furthermore, Russia has simultaneously emphasized its commitment to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), an alliance that excludes China, and utilized the SCO to forestall Chinese regional advances (Rozman 2018, 16).

**Defense Postures**

Russian and Chinese defense postures towards each other have remained relatively benign yet do demonstrate Russian concerns. Russian military presence in the Russian Far East (RFE) declined substantially after the Cold War and has remained low. Furthermore, Russia and China settled their last remaining border dispute in the 2000s, paving the way for reduced tensions (Blank 2018a; Maxwell 2007). Despite this, there are signs of hedging. Russia has continued exercises designed to counter hypothetical Chinese intrusions and has beefed up its forces in and ties with Vietnam (Schwartz 2019, 101; Blank 2018b, 97). Moreover, it has sought to build defense ties with Japan, another regional competitor of China (Blank 2018b, 99). Such
actions demonstrate Russian attempts to maintain strategic flexibility and reluctance to align with China fully.

*Arms Sales*

The evolution of Russian arms sales to China suggests significant deepening of the relationship. Between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the late 2000s, Russia remained China’s largest supplier of arms, but this aspect of the relationship remained fraught. Prominently, Russian concerns over Chinese reverse engineering precluded sales of advanced weapons (Bolt and Cross 2018, 117-120). Since 2010, however, the degree of arms sales has increased. In 2015, Russia sold Su-35 Flanker jets and S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems, among their most advanced weapons systems, to China. Furthermore, negotiations have begun over the sale of Amur-class submarines, Russia’s most advanced attack submarine (Schwartz 2019, 92-93). These developments suggest that the relationship has shifted from engagement to strategic partnership or entente. Limiting factors that suggest Russian hesitance remain, however—Russia continues to engage in sales with India and Vietnam, for example (Connolly 2018, 127).

*Joint Exercises*

Recent growth in joint exercises suggests increasing alignment. Russia and China held their first joint exercise, the “peace mission,” in 2005, and have continued this biannually. These exercises, though, were initially small and primarily focused on specific issues such as counter-terrorism and counter-piracy (Østevik and Kuhrt 2018, 79). In recent years, however, joint military exercises have increased in scope and depth. “Peace mission” exercises have grown, while the recent Vostok 2018 joint exercise was the largest ever (Schwartz 2019). Furthermore, joint naval exercises began in 2012, with recent maneuvers ranging from the Mediterranean to
the disputed Senkaku Islands (Lukin 2017, 203; Blank 2018a, 82). Despite this, joint exercises have been characterized by an emphasis on scripted, camera-friendly maneuvers rather than tactical integration. While there are signs of improvement, this still limits their significance (Schwartz 2019, 97; Bolt and Cross 2018, 122-125).

It appears clear that Russia and China’s relationship should not be characterized as an alliance due to a lack of institutionalization, yet has moved beyond engagement in recent years. Continued hedging through defense postures, as well as obstacles to arms sales and joint exercises further suggest that the most apt description of the Russo-Chinese security relationship is strategic partnership, rather than a more serious entente. I next seek to answer why.

**Russian Motives: Strategy, Politics, and Identity**

Russia’s pursuit of a strategic partnership with China is the product of multiple opposing forces. I first address factors that limit Russian alignment with China, namely regional competition and Russian identity and prestige. I then outline those forces driving greater Russian security alignment with China—primarily a broad convergence of strategic interests, and secondarily domestic and personal drivers.

**Obstacles to Cooperation**

Regional strategic concerns have prompted Russian reluctance to align with China. Steeped in centuries of conflict on the offense-dominant steppe, Russia views both expansive territorial control and the maintenance of a sphere of influence over its periphery as integral to security (Poe 2003). It comes as no surprise, then, that Chinese advances into central Asia that precipitate diminished Russian influence are a prominent point of discord (Cooley 2019; Christofferson and Zuenko 2018). Central Asia has experienced a boom in Chinese economic
and political inroads in recent years, causing concern in Moscow as the region hosts Russian military bases and has long been considered Russia’s domain (Song 2016; Cooley 2019). Moreover, China has begun to pursue a security agenda, hosting multilateral exercises and proposing regional anti-terror coalitions that exclude Russia (Bolt and Cross 2018, 48). Strategic concerns are not the only factor inhibiting greater cooperation, though—identity and prestige are equally significant.

Russia’s need for great power status and concerns over identity moderate security alignment with China. Throughout history, Russia has viewed its security as inextricably linked to prestige, as it bestowed political parity with great powers of Europe. More recently, policymakers from Primakov to Putin have emphasized the significance of great power status to Russian foreign policy (Tsygankov 2016). This poses a significant obstacle to Russian alignment with China given that by almost every account save for nuclear weapons, Russia is weaker than China, and the disparity will almost certainly continue to grow (Bekkevold 2019b, 303-304). Any entente or alliance would necessarily make Russia the junior partner and diminish its great power status.

Russian conceptions of identity likewise remain an obstacle to greater alignment with China. Throughout history, debate as to whether Russia is fundamentally European or is a unique Eurasian civilization has raged among intellectuals and elites, but Asian identity has historically been resisted (Sakwa 2015; Tsygankov 2016). Such resistance has continued in the present day—Sergei Lavrov has called on Russia to use its “Europeaness” to mediate between East and West, while Putin stated conclusively that Russia “was, is, and will, of course, be a major European power” (Gabuev 2019; Kuhrt 2015, 179). The fundamental concern that any full

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 superscript 2 History of conflict between Russia and China is also important, but is related to identity and is of lesser importance than the factors I outline here.
alignment with an economically and culturally more powerful China would directly compromise Russian identity is likely to remain a prominent force in Russian policy towards China.

*Drivers of Cooperation*

The primary factors driving closer security alignment are strategic as well as domestic and personal. The primary domestic political motivation stems from the powerful defense industry. Following Western sanctions on Russia, China has only grown in importance as a destination for Russian arms exports (Connolly 2018, 142-143). As a result, the Russian defense industry has recently been a staunch advocate of closer ties (Connolly 2018, 142-143; Gabuev 2018, 69-70). Second, we should not understate the role of personal relations between Presidents Putin and Xi in strengthening ties. While not necessarily causal, the shift from engagement to strategic partnership largely coincided with their simultaneity in power. They have met a record number of times, and factors from their similar ages to worldviews has led to the label “special relationship” (Bekkevold 2019b).

Regional strategic interests are likewise driving greater Russian security cooperation with China. These include North Korea, where both seek to maintain a relatively friendly regime and forestall the possibility of a unified ROK under American influence, the Arctic, where Russia seeks to utilize Chinese economic capacity, and Mongolia, where the cooperation has ensured border stability (Lukin 2018; Hsiung and Røseth 2019; Radchenko 2018). Additionally, shared security interests from the Middle East to Venezuela have driven Russia towards China (Bekkevold 2019a). Ultimately, though, it is a broader strategic motive that is the dominant driver of Russian policy.

Russian perception of threat from the United States its allies is the most significant force driving greater security ties with China. The souring of ties between the West and Russia,
particularly after the Ukraine crisis, is well documented (Bolt and Cross 2018). Russia views American primacy, NATO, and the liberal order as direct threats to its security, its strategic flexibility, and its sphere of influence (Blank 2018b). Internally, it is threatened by the prospect of Western subversion and democracy promotion, which it views as a cover for regime change (Kuchins 2015). China, which similarly feels threatened by American dominance is a natural partner for Russia (Yu 2019). When less threatened by the West, Russia has felt less impetus to align or balance with China, while in periods of heightened tensions Russia has pursued greater security cooperation with China.

A Dynamic View

The relative importance of the above forces in determining the future of Russian security alignment with China depends on how static each is. The three primary obstacles to cooperation that I outline have not changed significantly over the past two decades and are unlikely to do so in the future. Russia will continue to value its great power status and identity, and while regional competition may lessen or intensify somewhat, it is likely to be small in scope. Likewise, although to a lesser extent, two drivers of greater cooperation will not significantly alter the relationship in the future. Military-industrial interests in closer ties with China will likely continue despite increasing Chinese self-reliance, as China has become an essential source of electronics and other parts; and the entrenched governing philosophies and bureaucracies of Putin and Xi will likely ensure similar leadership in the near future. We are then left with the threat of the West.

Russian perception of Western threat is the most dynamic and consequently most important force in explaining changes in policy towards China, such as its recent shift from
engagement to strategic partnership, or future developments in the relationship. Simply put, greater Russian perception of threat from the West will likely induce it to seek closer security cooperation with China, in the form of entente or ultimately alliance. A status quo or improvement in Russian relations with and perceptions of the West will not push Russia closer to China and the Russo-Chinese security relationship will remain limited to strategic partnership or will atrophy. This finding, of course, has important policy implications for the United States and the West.

Policy Responses and Conclusions

Western restraint towards Russia will best forestall Russian pursuit of closer security ties with China. Given that further Russian alignment with China depends on perceived threats from the West, limiting actions that lead to such perceptions is advisable. Such restraint is not retrenchment—rather, America and its allies should for example avoid further expansion of NATO, avoid aggressive support of democracy promotion in Russia’s neighborhood, and refrain from further escalating defense postures in East Central Europe. Bringing in new NATO members in the Balkans, an action that Russia has made clear represents a threat to its interests, is an excellent example; likewise, funding of democracy promotion groups within Russia feeds into fears of regime change and should be curtailed. Apart from restraint, the United States should seek to build a constructive strategic relationship with Russia through shared partners such as India and Vietnam. These states remain important security partners for Russia and are growing in importance to America’s grand strategy towards China.

There are of course inherent risks in these responses that reflect questions about the analysis. Perhaps the most important is that the primary driver of Russian security cooperation
with China is not Western threat, but rather a mutual vision of multipolarity that would remain regardless of Western restraint or rapprochement. This is certainly possible, but there are signs that Russia and China’s views of world order diverge and there is significant doubt over whether such differences are reconcilable (Yu 2019). There are also shortcomings to the contemporary assessment—given general difficulties in determining the state of security cooperation, and challenges due to the authoritarian nature of Russia and China, the relationship may be more advanced than I assess. In this case, forestalling through restraint may be futile and simply open the door to revisionist actions by Russia and China. Some may contend that forces opposing cooperation—competition in central Asia, identity, and prestige—are too great to surmount. This is certainly possible, but given that increases in threat drove the relationship from engagement to strategic partnership, it seems likely that further growth could occur.

Ultimately, it is clear that no assessment of the Russo-Chinese strategic partnership will be complete given its complexity and novelty. Yet the conclusions drawn here make it clear that greater alignment is indeed possible if Western policies continue to threaten Russia; most importantly, the costs of preventing this through policies outlined are far less than the costs of a united Russo-Chinese axis.
References

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