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**NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY JOINT FORCES STAFF COLLEGE**

**JOINT ADVANCED WARFIGHTING SCHOOL**



**Is A Russia-China military alliance at the will of U.S. Foreign Policy?**

**by**

**Christopher J. Phillips**

*Wing Commander, U.K. Royal Air Force*

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Joint Advanced Warfighting School is partial satisfaction of the requirements of a Master of Science Degree in Joint Campaign Planning and Strategy. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Joint Forces Staff College or the Department of Defense.**

**This paper is entirely my own work except as documented in footnotes**

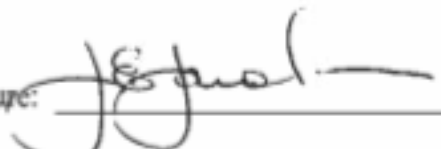
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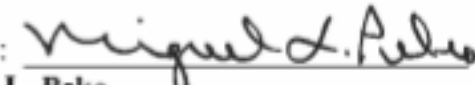
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## **Abstract**

A Russia-China military alliance would have profound implications for U.S. policy. Lack of framework tools to analyze alliances tends to fixate academic analysis on particular indicators or factors rather than consider the entire complex system of the Russia-China partnership. Jeremy Ghez recognized this gap within NATO and established a taxonomy framework that establishes a more holistic understanding of alliance theory. This thesis overlays Ghez's framework on the Russia-China relationship and establishes that they are in a non-formal alliance, which could rapidly formalize if it was in the interests of both states. Furthermore, the complexity of factors that feed into a Russia-China alliance prevents assurance that any realistic changes in U.S. policy could alter the feasibility of it occurring. The only route forward for the U.S, if it is to maintain the initiative within great power competition, is to accept it could occur. Only by acceptance can the U.S. begin to address the challenge of a Russia-China alliance across the full spectrum of the competition continuum.



*For Ewa & Julia*







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## Introduction

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the U.S. has been a liberal hegemony “aiming to turn as many countries as possible into liberal democracies like itself while also promoting an open international economy and building international institutions.”<sup>1</sup> However, the world has become increasingly multi-polar as China ascends towards superpower status and several regional powers, most notably a resurgent Russia, challenge the U.S. dominated post-Cold War world. The U.S. established international order is facing a “grave systemic crisis,” chiefly precipitated through China and Russia.<sup>2</sup>

China’s economy will overtake the U.S. between 2030 and 2040, dependent on its growth rate.<sup>3</sup> China’s economic expansion has enabled it to build a military, which “could reach technological parity with the U.S. in the early 2020s and outpace the Pentagon in the 2030s, if the U.S. military doesn't respond to the challenge.”<sup>4</sup> While debate remains on exactly when and how, China will be a peer global superpower within the next thirty years. Russia, though no longer a global superpower, but driven by the personal aspirations of Putin to be recognized as a global great power, has proven fierce in its post-Soviet Union resurgence.<sup>5</sup> With enormous wealth in oil and gas, a vast inherited nuclear force and a modernizing military, Russia remains a key U.S. competitor.

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1. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (Yale University Press, 2018). 1.

2. Philip Zelickow, “Is the World Slouching toward a Grave Systemic Crisis?,” August 11, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/08/zelikow-system-crisis/536205/>.

3. Joseph Nye, “China Will Not Surpass America Any Time Soon,” *Financial Times*, February 19, 2019, accessed October 1, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/7f700ab4-306d-11e9-80d2-7b637a9e1ba1>.

4. Paul Sonne, “Report: U.S. Military Faces Risk from China.,” *The Washington Post* (*The Washington Post*, June 6, 2019).

5. Deborah Welch Larson, “An Equal Partnership of Unequals: China’s and Russia’s New Status Relationship,” *International Politics* 57 (n.d.): 790–808.

As neighbors and competing regional powers, the national histories of Russia and China have been heavily intertwined. Their relationship was openly adversarial during the Sino-Soviet split from 1960s to the 1980s, but it normalized by 1989.<sup>6</sup> While initially perceived that “divergent interests over issues . . . set limits to the partnership,” the post-Soviet world and the umbrella of U.S. hegemony drew them increasingly together.<sup>7</sup> A fixation on the breakdown in relations during the Sino-Soviet split and an underestimation on the policy consistency of the two sides towards each other, meant that their burgeoning relationship has generally been overlooked.<sup>8</sup> Russia’s illegal aggressive action in Ukraine, and China’s brazenness in the South China Sea proved catalysts for a step change in the association.<sup>9</sup> Putin said in June 2016 in relation to the Russia-China relationship that “to say we have strategic cooperation is not enough anymore. This is why we have started talking about a comprehensive partnership and strategic collaboration. Comprehensive means that we work virtually on all major avenues; strategic means that we attach enormous inter-governmental importance to this work.”<sup>10</sup> He refreshed his definition of the relationship in November 2018 as a “privileged strategic partnership.”<sup>11</sup> China’s September 2019 white paper, *China and the World in the New Era*, states their mutual belief that the: “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination is mature, stable and solid, enjoying the highest level of mutual trust and

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6. Vasily Kashin, “The Current State of Russian-Chinese Defense Cooperation” (Carnegie, August 2018), [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/DOP-2018-U-018184-Final.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DOP-2018-U-018184-Final.pdf).

7. Elizabeth Wishnick, “Russia and China: Brothers Again?,” *Asian Survey* 41, no. 5 (2001): 798.

8. Kashin, “The Current State of Russian-Chinese Defense Cooperation.”

9. Alexander Korolev, “How Closely Aligned Are China and Russia? Measuring Strategic Cooperation in IR,” *International Politics* 57, no. 5 (October 2020): 760–789.

10. Vladimir Putin, “Interview to the Xinhua News Agency of China,” June 23, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52204>.

11. Alla Hurska, “Flawed ‘Strategic Partnership’: Putin’s Optimism on China Faces Harsh Reality,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 175 (December 12, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/flawed-strategic-partnership-putins-optimism-on-china-faces-harsh-reality/>.

coordination and the highest strategic value. The upgrade of the China-Russia relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era marks a brighter future for our bilateral relations.”<sup>12</sup>

This strategic relationship between Russia and China is manifested through increasing defense cooperation.<sup>13</sup> To date, the cooperation has not matured into a formal declared alliance; however, there is wide agreement that the China-Russia military relationship is developing.<sup>14</sup> Alexander Korolev assesses that China-Russia military cooperation is solid, comprehensive, and highly institutionalized, “on the verge of an alliance” with an upward trend.<sup>15</sup> Nurlan Aliyev highlights that “in 2019[,] Russia’s prime minister signed a decree authorizing the defense and foreign ministries to start negotiations with the Chinese defense ministry on a military cooperation agreement.”<sup>16</sup>

Both China and Russia struggle with the liberal ideology that permeates U.S. foreign policy. They share a common frustration with U.S. dominance in the international order, and they both actively maintain geographic spheres of influence that the U.S.

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12. People’s Republic of China, “China and the World in the New Era” (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, September 2019). 45.

13. Andrea Kendall-Taylor, David Shullman, and Dan McCormick, “Navigating Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation - War on the Rocks,” last modified August 5, 2020, accessed September 24, 2020.

14. Ethan Meick, “China-Russia Military-to-Military Relations: Moving Toward a Higher Level of Cooperation” (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 20, 2017); Stephen Blank, “Military Aspects of the Russo-Chinese Alliance: A View from the United States,” *The Asian Forum*, last modified February 19, 2020, accessed September 24, 2020; Dmitry Gorenburg, “An Emerging Strategic Partnership: Trends in Russia-China Military Cooperation,” *Russian Military Reform*, last modified April 29, 2020, accessed September 25, 2020; Vasily Kashin, “Tacit Alliance: Russia and China Take Military Partnership to New Level,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, last modified October 22, 2019, accessed September 25, 2020; Grzegorz Kuczynski, “Russia-China: A Limited Liability Military Alliance - The Warsaw Institute Review,” *The Warsaw Institute Review*, last modified May 18, 2020, accessed September 25, 2020; Richard Weitz, “The Expanding China-Russia Defense Partnership” (Hudson Institute, May 2019), accessed September 26, 2020.

15. Alexander Korolev, “On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation,” *Asian Security* 15, no. 3 (September 2019): 233.

16. Nurlan Aliyev, “Military Cooperation Between Russia and China: The Military Alliance Without an Agreement,” *International Centre for Defence and Security*, last modified July 1, 2020, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://icds.ee/en/military-cooperation-between-russia-and-china-the-military-alliance-without-an-agreement/>.

challenges. The U.S. has been hesitant to adopt an accommodating approach to these rising powers, instead maintaining the hegemonic mindset of the past thirty years. A notable change in rhetoric was apparent with the inauguration of President Trump, but, while he challenged the U.S. liberal approach with words, he never materially altered U.S. foreign policy. In consequence there is every possibility that with the inauguration of President Biden, “American elites will seek to ‘snap back’ to the status quo ante.”<sup>17</sup>

U.S. policy makes both Russia and China feel marginalized and disrespected. From their perspective, it forces strict conditions on them to participate in the international community and threatens their regimes through the perpetual promotion of democracy.<sup>18</sup> However, a Russia-China military alliance is not yet in effect, and “should not be viewed as deterministically irreversible ... the Rubicon has not been and may not be crossed.”<sup>19</sup> Wishnick wrote twenty years ago that “Domestic developments in China and Russia, and U.S. policy toward both countries, will be key in setting the parameters for Sino-Russian partnership in the years to come.”<sup>20</sup> With Russia and China on a seemingly clear path to a military alliance, it is unclear what policy changes might now prevent the alliance, and if the U.S. can make sufficient policy changes in time. To explore this challenge the statement for this thesis is therefore, that a Russia-China military alliance is at the will of U.S. foreign policy.

Examination of the Russia-China relationship through Jeremy Ghez’s alliance framework of tactical, historical and natural premises, suggests that they are already in a

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17. Doug Stokes, “Trump, American Hegemony and the Future of the Liberal International Order,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 134.

18. Michael Mazarr, “The Once and Future Order: What Comes after Hegemony?,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 1 (February 2017): 25–32.

19. Korolev, “On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation,” 248.

20. Wishnick, “Russia and China: Brothers Again?,” 798.

non-formal alliance, underpinned by more than a simple balance of power reaction to U.S. foreign policy. A non-formal alliance provides Russia and China with the initiative, able to leverage their relationship without forcing the international community to react. It also enables them to rapidly transition to a formal alliance should it benefit both parties' national interests. If true, a non-formal Russia-China alliance is the most complex challenge the U.S. has ever faced, and it must react accordingly. As Stephen Walt said, "failure to understand the origins of alliances can be fatal."<sup>21</sup> A Russia-China alliance would require a transformational change in U.S. and NATO grand strategy, and a wholesale review of the Western military construct. The U.S. must credibly deter a combined conventional conflict, while countering increasingly complex coordinated competition in the *grey zone*.<sup>22</sup> The U.S. cannot counter the threat in isolation, they must establish a new global alliance with a shared vision to protect the democratic, values-based, international system.

## Method

This research looks to explore three key questions in order to understand whether a Russia-China military alliance is at the will of U.S. foreign policy. The first question which must be asked is: Are Russia and China in an alliance? This will be considered by examining the strategic relationship between the two countries through Ghez's alliance framework. While there has been extensive alliance analysis of the partnership, it has normally been focused on tactical premises, or narrow elements of the relationship. Korolev highlights that "attempts to develop an analytical framework to assess the degree

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21. Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

22. Lawrence Freedman, *The Future of War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2017), 285.

of alignment between the two countries have been scarce.”<sup>23</sup> To understand its true nature requires a holistic review of all alliance factors, and Ghez’s framework provides a method for structuring that analysis. The thematic analysis for alliance will be drawn from an extensive qualitative research study of secondary data, alongside both content and discourse analysis. This is the only viable approach given the timeframe, the level of access and the language barriers of source material.

Having established the form of alliance between Russia and China, the next question to answer is: what is the impact of U.S. foreign policy on that alliance? The question will be considered by contrasting U.S. foreign policy and causal reactions to it. It is important to understand the impact of U.S. foreign policy because if the alliance is in part a reaction to power balance, the principal threat to both Russia and China is the U.S.

The final question to be asked is: If there is an alliance, how should the U.S. respond? The question will be addressed by drawing on this thesis’ exploration of the nature and character of the alliance to generate potential courses of action and exploring the most viable. Discerning and understanding the type of relationship between Russia and China, and understanding the U.S. role in the development of that relationship, leads necessarily to considering how U.S. policy might change to affect the relationship, thereby reducing the complexity of the threat and aiding in the achievement of U.S. interests.

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23. Korolev, “How Closely Aligned Are China and Russia?,” 2.

## Theory and consequence of a Russia-China Alliance

### Alliance Theory

An alliance is:

A formal agreement between two or more states for mutual support in case of war ... generally defensive in nature, obligating allies to join forces if one or more of them is attacked by another state or coalition. Although alliances may be informal, they are typically formalized by a treaty of alliance, the most critical clauses of which are those that define the *casus foederis*, or the circumstances under which the treaty obligates an ally to aid a fellow member.<sup>1</sup>

Alliances have been a feature of human interaction since modern man established states.

However, Walt identified that “despite the obvious importance of understanding how states select their partners, most scholarly research on alliances had ignored or obscured the question.”<sup>2</sup> He proposed that “alliances are most commonly viewed as a response to threats,”<sup>3</sup> and states will use alliances to either bandwagon or balance the identified threat. Balance being ally against the threat, or bandwagon, ally with the threat.

Balancing behavior is the manifestation of balance of power theory, a realist construct where nation states in a survivalist mode will inevitably look to balance power to prevent another state from dominating international relations, challenging their success and very existence. Walt modified the terminology, changing balance of power to considering balance of threat; the change in thinking appears to align with the lack of balancing during the last twenty years while the U.S. has been by most regards a benevolent superpower in a unipolar world. The concept of balancing can be further refined by

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1. David G. Haglund, “Definition of Alliance in International Relations,” *Britannica.Com*, November 12, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/alliance-politics>.

2. Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security* 9, no. 4 (Spring 1985): 3.

3. *Ibid.*, 4.

determining the manner the states look to balance; it doesn't necessarily require a formal treaty in the form of hard balancing. States could also undertake "Soft balancing, [which] involves tacit balancing short of formal alliances."<sup>4</sup>

Although balancing is the predominate form of allying, bandwagoning remains remarkably common, and the academic reasoning behind the trend would appear to be that "states are attracted to strength,"<sup>5</sup> either to protect or benefit themselves. Walt identifies four components to a state's perception of threat that influences whether and how it allies: aggregate power, proximity, offensive capability and offensive intentions.<sup>6</sup> An added layer of complexity to power-based alliances within the modern world is the growing perception that globalization may push "traditional powers away from national agendas."<sup>7</sup> Papayoanou highlights "economic interdependence in the great power system [has] had a profound effect on balance of power politics."<sup>8</sup> However, economic ties do not always result in political alignment.<sup>9</sup> Globalization adds complexity to economic interdependence because it is less controlled, far more individualistic, and therefore it is less deliberate than actions controlled by states. While globalization is critical to understanding economic interdependence, it challenges the idea of identity in alliances. Globalization provides for greater awareness of political identities and ideologies,

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4. T.V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004): 3.

5. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," 7.

6. *Ibid.*, 9.

7. Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*: 1.

8. Paul A. Papayoanou, "Economic Interdependence and the Balance of Power.," *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (March 1997): 114.

9. Mark Brawley, "The Political Economy of Balance of Power Theory," in *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004).

particularly after the existential threat of the Soviet Union dissipated.<sup>10</sup> The instability of identity through globalization might undermine or strengthen concepts of alliance.

While ideology has been of increasing relevance to alliance theory since the end of the Cold War, its twentieth Century origins lie in the ruins of WWI from total war. In lieu of the 400-year-old Westphalian empires were “ideological camps, defined by their private articulated ethics,” stemming, ironically, from a concept that created the Westphalian model in the first place after the horrors of absolute religious war in Europe.<sup>11</sup> Morgenthau used the pre-Westphalian thinking to explain the resulting alliances formed through communism or democracy during the Cold War as ideological solidarity.<sup>12</sup> Walt provides the simple assessment that “the more similar two or more states are, the more likely they are to ally.”<sup>13</sup> States may ally because they are less fearful of an ideological partner, and allying enhances legitimacy of their cause.

Barletta and Trinkunas identified in a study of Latin America that the unifying concept of ideology exists when it is shared by the political leadership in a constructivist concept. They labelled the term, “balance of identity,” and defined it as the “human struggle for security centers not on the relative distribution of military capabilities among states but on the distribution of political actors’ identities with respect to their control over states.”<sup>14</sup> Identity solidarity is also an intrinsic component of Huntington’s 1993

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10. Jeremy.J Ghez, “The Enduring Partnership? The Trans-Atlantic Community as a Natural Alliance” (PHD, Pardee RAND Graduate School, 2010): 13.

11. Petar Popović, “Hans Morgenthau and the Lasting Implications of World War I,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 19, no. 2 (April 2, 2020): 125.

12 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York: Knopf, 1973): 183.

13. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” 19.

14. Michel Barletta and Harold Trinkunas, “Regime Type and Regional Security in Latin America: Toward a ‘Balance of Identity’ Theory,” in *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004): 334.

proposal that conflict will increasingly be influenced by seven civilizations of the world, rather than nation states.<sup>15</sup> He defined a civilization to be “the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have, short of that which distinguishes humans from other species.”<sup>16</sup> Conflict and alliances in consequence becomes less about, “which side are you on,” and rather “what are you?”<sup>17</sup> While Huntington’s work has created quite strong reaction, particularly as it doesn’t accommodate the blending of civilization through globalization, it reinforces the potential merits of identity on alliances, as “cultural affinities [that] cooperate with each other.”<sup>18</sup>

Ghez strongly supports the importance of identity-based alliances as an additional factor relevant to the traditional view of balance of power. He argues that shared political culture and constructed identity lead to improved strategic coordination and predictability within an alliance.<sup>19</sup> Yet, ideology is only one part of Ghez’s framework. Unlike most theories, he proposed a systematic, holistic method for considering state alliances, under the terms, “tactical, historical and natural.”<sup>20</sup> Tactical alliances are opportunistic and soft, constructed to address a specific issue, typically a tension in power or threat. As they are instrumental in nature, they are unlikely to last once the issue is resolved or changed.<sup>21</sup> Historical alliances draw on a shared history to provide assurance of sustained cooperation that will accept some compromise. They will “outlast time-specific contingencies”<sup>22</sup> and build long-term relationships. Natural alliances are a continuance of

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15. Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22.

16. *Ibid.*, 24.

17. *Ibid.*, 27.

18. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon&Schuster hardcover ed. (Simon & Schuster, 2011).

19. Ghez, “The Enduring Partnership? The Trans-Atlantic Community as a Natural Alliance,” 13.

20. *Ibid.*, 16.

21. *Ibid.*, 90.

22. *Ibid.*, 95.

historical alliances but draw on common identity and political culture as recognized by both parties. The additional depth of association associated with shared identity means that reciprocity is both wide and deep.<sup>23</sup> Ghez's framework provides a holistic method for assessing the Russia-China relationship to get the most assured understanding of the true nature and character of the partnership.

### The Theory of a Russia-China Alliance and Why It Matters

Based on a flawed interpretation of the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s and perceived cultural animosity, Russia and China are generally assumed unlikely partners. The assumption masks the basic evidence of increasing cooperation, particularly in terms of their military relationship. The consequences of a Russia-China alliance would be profound and potentially shattering if the West somnambulates into the result. Zbigniew Brzezinski stated that when "analyzing threats to American interest, the most dangerous scenario would be a grand coalition of China and Russia, united not by ideology, but by complementary grievances."<sup>24</sup> The even more dangerous scenario would be if those grievances directly result from U.S. and western policies.

A Russia-China Alliance would require the U.S. and NATO to adapt to a strategic change that will affect both entities' security constructs. The new alliance would intrinsically link Europe, Asia, and the Arctic into a single joint operating area of overwhelming complexity. The nuclear and military technology of Russia would be wedded with the military capacity and economic weight of China. While China is the

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23. Ghez, "The Enduring Partnership? The Trans-Atlantic Community as a Natural Alliance," 101.

24. John S. Van Oudenaren, "America's Nightmare: The Sino-Russian Entente," States News Service, January 12, 2019, accessed November 7, 2020.

only contender that will rival the U.S. as a global superpower in the near future; Russia can reinforce the ambition of Beijing through resources, military capability, and international position. Arms and technology races could result, and the international order would be greatly challenged by the alternative world system that could form. U.S. economic prosperity hinges off the economic interdependence and peace across the international system, therefore, its progressive degradation by Russia and China will increasingly harm U.S. national interests. If Russia and China enhance their influence through an alliance, then the impact for the U.S. is even more pronounced.

It is important to understand the risk of a Russia-China alliance forming so states and organizations can prepare; however, it is also important to comprehend the nature of the alliance. The nature of the alliance will enable the West to both understand how to manage but also potentially defeat it. Balance of power theory itself would suggest that there is logic in an alliance forming to counter the United States. Paul, et al., suggested that hard balancing would only occur when “states face an intense military challenge to their security, face extinction to increasing power of a rising state, [or] states are engaged in intense enduring rivalries.”<sup>25</sup> The list was meant to provide reassurance that hard balancing was unlikely in a calm international environment. The assessment was written in 2004, however, between then and now, the environment has significantly changed.

History suggests assurance in the fact that at some point U.S. power will prove intolerable and hard balancing will occur, that hegemony can never be permanent, and that power will always be challenged.<sup>26</sup> China was unlikely to balance the U.S. in 2004

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25. Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, 365.

26. *Ibid.*; Kenneth N. Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War.,” *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 37.

because it lacked allies and needed to concentrate on building its economy.<sup>27</sup> The twin routes of traditional hard balancing, through arms build-ups and coalition forming, both take significant time to enact.<sup>28</sup> However, the international picture is now different; China has accrued significant wealth and military capability, and it has also invested heavily in its relationship with Russia. Realist theory would suggest that the environment will inevitably transition into hard balancing for power.<sup>29</sup> Yet, Yoder maintains that an alliance will depend on Russian and Chinese motivations, their national goals, beliefs and external incentives that have pushed them increasingly closer.<sup>30</sup> Could cultural and societal barriers block basic realist principles, or do they even exist? Even Huntington accepted that “People can and do redefine their identities and as a result the composition and boundaries of civilizations change.”<sup>31</sup>

Kissinger encouraged a policy of rapprochement with China against the Soviet Union, because “in a triangular relationship it was always better to align with the weaker side.”<sup>32</sup> Why would China not undertake the exact same calculation now? In fact, Chinese national security experts postulate that China should consider forming an alliance with Russia.<sup>33</sup> In 2000, Waltz stated that:

To alienate Russia by expanding NATO, and to alienate China by lecturing its leaders on how to rule their country, are policies that only an overwhelmingly powerful country could afford, and only a foolish one be tempted to follow. The U.S. cannot

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27. Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, 371.

28. *Ibid.*, 370.

29. Brawley, “The Political Economy of Balance of Power Theory.”

30. Brandon K Yoder, “Theoretical Rigor and the Study of Contemporary Cases: Explaining Post-Cold War China–Russia Relations,” *International Politics* 57, no. 5 (October 2020).

31. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” 28.

32. Henry Kissinger and Clare Boothe Luce, *White House Years.*, 1st ed. (Little, Brown, 1979), 178; Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” 6.

33. “Terrorism Surging in China: Blue Paper,” *Global Times*, May 7, 2014, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/858869.shtml>.

prevent a new balance of power from forming. It can hasten its coming as it has been earnestly doing.<sup>34</sup>

Since 2000, the U.S has not heeded Waltz's warning, and undertaken many actions, which have further increased tension with Russia and China and therefore could also encourage a consequential balancing effect, as he predicted. Many academics have been expecting a rebalancing, and the fact it hasn't happened to date has been a puzzle.<sup>35</sup>

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34. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," 38.

35. John G. Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 3; Jack S. Levy, "What Do Great Powers Balance Against and When?," in *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 30.

## A Russia-China Alliance Analyzed Through Ghez's Alliance Framework

### Economic Interdependence, Military Cooperation and a Casus Foederis

Tactical Alliances are pragmatic and deliberately designed to address a specific threat and nothing more.<sup>1</sup> By their nature, tactical alliances are logical, practical, and beneficial mutually. They initially require less trust and are often underpinned with a formal declaration of joint action should either nation be threatened, a *casus foederis*. As a tactical alliance evolves and interdependence increases, however, it is inevitable that trust becomes increasingly important. As mutual benefit is a key component for this form of alliance, economics are a factor. The greater the economic interdependence the more committed each nation will be to its success. A second key factor is evidence of military cooperation. While not essential for a tactical alliance, evidence of cooperation increases the likelihood of alliance, because military cooperation creates efficiency, resilience, and the performance improvements necessary to respond to a threat collectively.

Economic ties indicate a mutual interdependence that typically reduces tension between states, avoids disruptive balancing and encourages wider cooperation.<sup>2</sup> Russia and China have established strong economic links, although the relationship is unbalanced due to the size and strength of the Chinese economy. Both nations have been keen to draw away from the U.S. international order to enable greater freedom from Western influence. It was only in 2010, however, that both countries began to utilize their own currencies for bilateral trade, and 2020 was the first year where less than 50% of the

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1. Ghez, "The Enduring Partnership? The Trans-Atlantic Community as a Natural Alliance," 181.

2. Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, 81.

trade was in U.S. dollars.<sup>3</sup> Last year bilateral trade reached \$110 billion between Russia and China (equivalent of the U.K.-U.S. bilateral trade) and Putin has set the goal of attaining \$200 billion by 2024.<sup>4</sup>

China has become the principal trading nation of Russia. While Russia only represents 0.8% of China's total trade, it predominantly consists of energy and arms sales, both critical to its national security.<sup>5</sup> Russia is their top supplier of crude oil, increasing the volume supplied by 60% since 2015. Chinese investment has flowed into Russia, irrespective of corruption and red tape.<sup>6</sup> One project which hinged off this investment was the \$55 billion Power of Siberia pipeline, which began to supply natural gas to China in December 2019.<sup>7</sup> The 1,800-mile pipeline is part of a \$400 billion deal to supply China with natural gas for thirty years. After the Russian seizure of Crimea, and subsequent international sanctions, China was the main source of foreign loans, providing \$32 billion to prop-up state industries.<sup>8</sup> In defiance of international condemnation for the annexation of Crimea, China assisted Russia in building an energy bridge to the peninsula, crucial for maintaining Russian control.<sup>9</sup> Major projects like the Yamal liquid natural gas plant, and the Moscow-Kazan high speed railway have also been underpinned with Chinese 'Silk Road' investment. The Chinese State is similarly a 20% shareholder in

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3. Julia Chapman, "China, Russia Move Away from the U.S. Dollar in Mutual Trade," CGTN, September 17, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-09-17/China-Russia-move-away-from-the-U-S-dollar-in-mutual-trade-TRCsZBLRtK/index.html>.

4. Jonathan Hillman, "China and Russia: Economic Unequals," Center for Strategic and International Studies, last modified July 15, 2020, accessed September 25, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-and-russia-economic-unequals>.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ariel Cohen, "The Strategic Upside behind Russia's \$55 Billion 'Power of Siberia' Pipeline to China," Forbes, December 6, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielcohen/2019/12/06/is-there-strength-behind-russia-and-chinas-new-power-of-siberia-pipeline/?sh=701c60aa1faf>.

8. Kashin, "The Current State of Russian-Chinese Defense Cooperation," 25.

9. Ibid., 25.

Sibur, Russia's largest petrochemical company. In 2018, Russia's Central bank reduced its U.S. assets by 66% while at the same time significantly increasing its Chinese holdings. It also halved its dollar reserves whilst increasing its Yuan holdings.<sup>10</sup>

While there has been a significant increase in Chinese economic investment in Russia, some Chinese firms have been put off by potential U.S. penalties should they invest in Russian firms. Furthermore, Russia has deliberately maintained control of all critical national infrastructure to ensure economic autonomy, as it is hesitant about the conditions of Chinese investment.<sup>11</sup> A non-tariff trade facilitation agreement became effective in October 2019, but to date there remains no-free trade agreement between Russia and China. There would appear to be two key issues in the evolving economic relationship between Russia and China, which may influence a future alliance: economic imbalance and the U.S. factor.

China's economy dwarfs Russia, and therefore Russian industries may struggle to compete within an overly accommodating free trade agreement with China. In relation to the second issue - the U.S. factor - Beijing has continued to retain strong economic ties to the U.S. and it must be mindful of the impact to them if it overly commits to Moscow. The situation partly explains why Beijing continues to utilize U.S. dollars during bilateral trade with Russia. Chinese banks have also been unwilling to ignore U.S. sanctions on Russian entities, concerned about retaliatory action on China's trade with U.S. firms.<sup>12</sup> U.S. economic pressure, however, has not restrained arms sales and military collaboration between the two countries.

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10. Artyom Lukin, "The Russia–China Entente and Its Future," *International Politics* (June 13, 2020), accessed September 26, 2020, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41311-020-00251-7>.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Van Oudenaren, "America's Nightmare: The Sino-Russian Entente."

Since 1989, military cooperation has been the most important component of the bilateral relationship between Russia and China.<sup>13</sup> Military sales are both an economic activity and an alliance building tool. What is being sold can derive the degree of trust between two nations, and it provides for improved cooperation through common technology. The early arms sales from Russia to China after the fall of the Soviet Union were dominated by Russia's dire economy and China's pursuit of technology. Even at such an early point there was indication of greater calculations at work; China became the first international customer of the SU-27, 4<sup>th</sup> generation fighter. Yet, India was unable to attain the same standard aircraft from the Russians, demonstrating decisions were not being made purely from a financial perspective.

Military sales reduced in the mid-2000s, but it was not a stagnation of the relationship simply an evolution. Russia was concerned that China was selling reverse engineered Russian defense products on the international arms market.<sup>14</sup> The Russian domestic market for defense sales was booming alongside their economy and improved domestic manufacturing within China was satisfying national demand.<sup>15</sup> The countries signed an intellectual property bilateral agreement for military cooperation in 2008, removing the first barrier and providing a bridge for more complex technologies. Jet engines, anti-aircraft weapons and infantry military vehicles comprised the bulk of resulting sales; however, in 2015, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin announced that arms discussions had evolved further into three major projects. The first project was associated with space flight and satellite navigation, the second was the

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13. Aliyev, "Military Cooperation Between Russia and China: The Military Alliance Without an Agreement."

14. Korolev, "On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation," 241.

15. Ibid.

development of a heavy lift helicopter, and the third was the sale of the S-400 air defense system.<sup>16</sup> China was the first foreign customer for the S-400, as it had been for the system's predecessor. As these initial programs concluded and aided by further reductions in technology sharing barriers, there has subsequently been the sale of peer fighter jets, collaborative work on submarines and anti-ship missiles.<sup>17</sup>

A \$2.5 billion deal for twenty-four SU-35 aircraft was completed in 2019, and more importantly the 5<sup>th</sup> generation SU-57 fighter was cleared by Russia for export July 2020, paving the way for future sales to China. For the first time in these recent arms sales Russia was prepared to establish contracts with Chinese firms for components and conduct joint design and production. While arms sales have been predominately one-way, there are sales going to Russia in the form of electrical components, drone technology, and warship engines. There is even the possibility that Russia may purchase warship hulls from China.<sup>18</sup>

Recently, there have been significant announcements in the space arena, most notably the announcement by Putin that Russia is working with China on a joint missile defense system.<sup>19</sup> In addition, both countries have announced plans to merge their national satellite positioning systems.<sup>20</sup> They have already conducted trials to test equipment along Belt and Road transportation routes and agreed to host each other's base stations.<sup>21</sup> Reportedly, there is even "growing mutual interest in cooperation in the

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16. Korolev, "On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation," 241.

17. Kashin, "The Current State of Russian-Chinese Defense Cooperation."

18. Lukin, "The Russia-China Entente and Its Future."

19. Stephen Blank, "The Un-Holy Russo-Chinese Alliance.," *Defense & Security Analysis* 36, no. 3 (September 2020): 250.

20. Dana Goward, "Russia, China Alliance on Navigation Satellites Threatens GPS," n.d., <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2019/8/23/viewpoint-russia-china-alliance-on-navigation-satellites-threatens-gps>.

21. Hillman, "China and Russia: Economic Unequals."

artificial intelligence field.”<sup>22</sup> Possibly only hyper-sonics and nuclear submarines remain coveted national programs; however, it would seem likely, given the evolution of the relationship to date, that even these might be areas for future joint development.<sup>23</sup> There are very few avenues of military capability cooperation that remain as bastions of technology nationalism.

Traditional nationalist restraint in military sales has virtually dissipated, indicating that neither nation views the other as a threat. The evolution of military arms sales and technology sharing demonstrates the increasing trust and acceptance of interdependence by both sides. Common military capabilities provide a strong platform for further collaboration and coordination as there is mutual understanding of capabilities employed. Integration and combined command and control become a simple evolution with effective training and exercising.

Planning for combined exercises began in 2003–2004 when Russian Chief of Staff, General Yuri Baluyevsky, confirmed the Chinese strategic partnership as a Russian priority.<sup>24</sup> The complexity and scale of mutual training has evolved and grown ever since.<sup>25</sup> The first large scale combined exercise between Russia and China, PEACE MISSION occurred in 2005, involving 8,000 Chinese personnel and 2,000 Russians. The exercise has become a bi-annual event, evidence of a notable shift from the traditional Chinese strategy of non-alignment.<sup>26</sup> Exercise JOINT SEA, commenced in 2012 as a bilateral naval exercise that provided a platform to mature interoperability globally while

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22. Kashin, “The Current State of Russian-Chinese Defense Cooperation,” 21.

23. Blank, “The Un-Holy Russo-Chinese Alliance,” 259.

24. *Ibid.*, 257.

25. *Ibid.*, 254.

26. Korolev, “On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation,”

also acting as a visible demonstration of the burgeoning Russia-China relationship. Exercises have been undertaken in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and even in the contested South China Sea.

PEACE MISSION and JOINT SEA ensure that the Russians and Chinese are exercising at a significant force level once or twice a year. In addition, in the past few years, four or five smaller, more focused and discrete exercises have taken place in the functional areas of ballistic missile defense (BMD), simulation and border control.<sup>27</sup> In both 2016 and 2017, a combined BMD exercise took place, focused on the defense of Moscow against conventional ballistic and cruise missile strikes. In 2019, during Exercise TSENTR, the nations exercised collaborative nuclear weapon defense and strike for the first time.

In addition to bespoke combined exercises, the Russians have also hosted China on long established national exercises. Exercise VOSTOK is traditionally the largest of Russia's annual strategic exercises, and always occurs in the Far East military district. In 2018, the Chinese attended for the first time with over 3,000 personnel and thirty aircraft. The inclusion of Chinese forces is significant for several reasons. First, it provides a degree of transparency as the Far East military district is the Russian force that would initially oppose any Chinese aggression. Inclusion also reduces any tension of large military maneuvers near the border and ensures there is no misunderstanding. Finally, Russia reshaped the national exercise from a land centric focus to a more joint operations focus, with naval and air forces engaging an invading expeditionary force. In doing so, it refocused the Far East district from countering Chinese aggression to working with China

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27. Korolev, "On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation," 245.

against Western aggression.<sup>28</sup>

Combined exercising provides the critical opportunity to effectively integrate independent national forces, establish common procedures and, with sufficient political will, increasingly build interdependence and organizational efficiency. As a mark of the importance of the interoperability, Chinese military personnel are frequently adopting and learning Russian command systems and language.<sup>29</sup> The increasing complexity of the exercising demonstrates both improving interoperability and strengthening trust. Virtually all aspects of their combined military force have now been tested through exercise.

While training has progressed significantly on the exercise fields, combined training is also being conducted at a more elemental stage in the academic professional development of officers. In 1996, Russia was the first foreign education location for Chinese officers and remains the only one for long-term programs. In addition to the officer training, more than 3,600 Chinese military personnel have been trained in Russian military universities.<sup>30</sup> Russian education appears to be no bar to senior positions in the Chinese military, and, in fact, may enhance promotion. Most notably, Cao Gangchuan, who studied in Russia for six years, was the Chinese Defense minister from 2003 to 2008.

While there is no evidence of combined doctrine to date, the intensive exercising will inevitably attain this informally, or such information may be classified.

Communication appears to be frequent, robust and at a senior level. Russian and Chinese

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28. Lukin, "The Russia–China Entente and Its Future."

29. Kashin, "The Current State of Russian-Chinese Defense Cooperation," 246.

30. Sergey Shoigu, "Opening Ceremony of the II All-Russian Youth Forum" (Speech, Moscow State Institute of International Relations, February 21, 2017), <https://www.memri.org/reports/russian-defense-minister-shoigu-attempts-us-led-west-impede-establishment-new-fair-world>.

military leadership now have open comprehensive discussions about U.S. nuclear offensive capability and the threat of BMD.<sup>31</sup> Military to military senior bilateral engagements between Russia and China are currently conducted every two weeks on average, aside from meetings associated with exercises and those at a regional level.<sup>32</sup>

In 2001, Russia and China signed, *The Treaty of Good-Neighborhood, Friendship and Cooperation*. This treaty remains the principle cooperative agreement between the nations. Article 9 of the treaty provides a mandate to communicate to remove any emerging threat, stating that:

In case there emerges a situation which, by opinion of one of the Participants, can create threats to the peace, violate the peace or affect the interests of the security of the Participant, and also in case when there is a threat of aggression against one of the Participants, the Participants immediately contact each other and start consultations in order to remove the emerging threat.<sup>33</sup>

Article 9 demonstrates a commitment to mutual collaborative activity, but it is not a *casus foederis*, a commitment that an attack on one state is an attack on all with the consequence of combined response. The treaty was planned to expire in July 2021; however, as neither side rescinded the treaty, it will likely extend automatically in current form until 2026.<sup>34</sup> The main treaty is actually just one of more than 200 bilateral inter-governmental treaties generated between Russia and China since the end of the Cold War.<sup>35</sup> In 2019, Russia's Prime Minister authorized negotiations with China on a "military cooperation agreement."<sup>36</sup> While little detail regarding the security cooperation

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31. Graham Allison, "China and Russia: A Strategic Alliance in the Making," *National Interest*, December 14, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-and-russia-strategic-alliance-making-38727>.

32. Korolev, "How Closely Aligned Are China and Russia?," 11.

33. People's Republic of China, "Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation," n.d., [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/2649\\_665393/t15771.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t15771.shtml).

34. *Ibid.*

35. Korolev, "How Closely Aligned Are China and Russia?," 237.

36. Aliyev, "Military Cooperation Between Russia and China: The Military Alliance Without an Agreement."

agreement is available, it would appear that there is an intent to improve the coordination of the bilateral military engagement. The lack of a *casus foederis* prevents a formal alliance being declared, but more importantly it prevents either party from influencing external threats with collective defense. However, such a defense pact is not essential to an alliance and it may be in the interests of both parties to retain a less formal nature to avoid forcing a reaction from the U.S. and the wider international community.

Based on military cooperation, it appears that China-Russia relations are close to a tactical alliance - highly functional and able to coordinate effectively in response to a crisis. The degree of cooperation is more nuanced in the economic sphere, albeit arms sales demonstrate a level of trust. Both sides attain their national interests through economic interdependence, but it is logically bounded. China needs the U.S. and the international system to fund its prosperity, while Russia must protect its own industries from being overwhelmed by the Chinese economic juggernaut. Although to date there is no *casus foederis*, there are extensive bilateral agreements. An informal alliance might be deliberate, it might be classified, or it might be evolving; greater insight can be attained by exploring the shared history between Russia and China.

### Shared History

Historical alliances draw on a shared history to provide assurance of sustained cooperation and inherently accept some compromise; they will “outlast time-specific contingencies”<sup>37</sup> and build long-term relationships. The modern states of Russia and China are the progeny of great civilizations and world powers. History perpetuates in

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37. Ghez, “The Enduring Partnership? The Trans-Atlantic Community as a Natural Alliance.”

both countries as “a sense of aggrieved victimhood and nostalgia for the glorious past.”<sup>38</sup> They both share the over three-hundred-year history of the brutal invasion, occupation, and oppression by the Mongols; however, there was never any combined response or even solidarity in suffering.<sup>39</sup> Lo maintains that China and Russia’s shared history was one of “mutual alienation”<sup>40</sup> until the end of the Cold War. Other academics, however, view the absence of issues more positively, some even identifying Russia’s relationship with China as its most peaceful one.<sup>41</sup> Both countries experienced inept monarchical rule, endured the deconstruction of revolutions, and a transition into socialism. Through their shared histories, the fact that Russia and China both evolved into autocratic market economies seems a natural course of events.

While border tension and conflict were inevitable between two great power states over many centuries of competition, it proved remarkably fleeting when compared to other neighbor state power dynamics. Swathes of Siberia changed control several times in the 1600s and tensions over the border continued until the 1960s, culminating in the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict where military action occurred on disputed river islands. The conflict has often been used as evidence of a wider rift, even though it was localized. No attempt was ever made to challenge the million and a half square kilometers that Russia pressured from China through the Treaties of Aigun and Peking in 1858 and 1860, respectively. Boundary disputes continued but were calmly, incrementally, and progressively resolved by 2004. The near peaceful settlement of a 2,600-mile border

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38. Larson, “An Equal Partnership of Unequals: China’s and Russia’s New Status Relationship,” 795.

39. Bobo Lo, *A Wary Embrace: What the China-Russia Relationship Means for the World*, A Lowy Institute Paper (Australia: Penguin Random House, 2017), 32.

40. Lo, *A Wary Embrace: What the China-Russia Relationship Means for the World*.

41. Kashin, “The Current State of Russian-Chinese Defense Cooperation,” 2.

demonstrates the restraint undergirded by a desire from both sides to resolve differences and remove obstacles to their relationship. A most notable aspect of the historic Russia-China relationship is the absence of significant conflict. It is very rare for such significant powers to be so close and yet never resort to war.

Until the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia actively supported political movements in China to influence the balance of power, which included: The Second Opium War (1856-60), the Sino-Russian Treaty against Japan (1896), support for the Kuomintang during the Warlord era (1921-1926), support for both communist and nationalist factions to oppose the Japanese (1927-1945), and finally support to the Chinese Communist Party (1945-60). In 1949, the Soviet Union and China formalized a military alliance through the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance. Article One of the treaty included a *casus foederis*, stating that “In the event of one of the contracting parties being attacked by Japan or any state allied with it and thus being involved in a state of war, the other contracting party shall immediately render military and other assistance by all means at its disposal.”<sup>42</sup> The Article brought China under the nuclear umbrella of the Soviet Union, and the Chinese displayed their commitment to the treaty by entering the Korean War on assurance of Soviet air force support, and the gifting of Soviet weaponry for one hundred Chinese divisions. The Chinese Communists had only just won a protracted and bloody civil war, so the fact that Mao committed them to a further war against the U.S. in advance of receiving the air support, demonstrates the trust he attached to the Soviet relationship.<sup>43</sup> Potentially,

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42. “The Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance between the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union” (U.S. CIA, February 14, 1950), <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01443R000300050007-8.pdf>.

43. Hao Yufan and Zhai Zhihai, “China’s Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisited,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 121 (1990): 111.

Chinese involvement in the Korean War was in part reciprocated through Soviet support to the Chinese nuclear weapon program.

From 1954 until 1960, Soviet scientists and military personnel provided wide and deep support to the Chinese nuclear capability. Initially they focused on establishing civilian nuclear facilities, but the support expanded to include nuclear bombs and missile technology. The support only ceased when China undertook military action against Taiwan without informing the Soviet Union. As the Soviet Union was in formal alliance with China, China's actions against Taiwan risked dragging the Soviet Union into direct conflict with the U.S.<sup>44</sup> The Taiwan incident was one of several incidents around the period that undermined the alliance and created what is termed the Sino-Soviet split. While there remains significant academic debate over the reasons and chronology, it is clear that the perception of ideological differences driving a wedge between the countries "artificially inflates the differences."<sup>45</sup>

Tension appeared after Stalin's death in 1953 and continued until Mao's death in 1976. Mao was frustrated in what he saw to be collaboration between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, culminating in Khrushchev's 1959 U.S. tour and a deliberate relaxation of superpower tension. In his view, "Khrushchev had ganged up with China's enemy to bully an ally."<sup>46</sup> The chronology of the Sino-Soviet rift adds further evidence that it was predominately a consequence of the senior leadership. Mao was ultimately replaced by de facto Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, who maintained Mao's deep reservations about Russian intent. Drawing on the realist perspective that my enemies' enemy is my friend,

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44. Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia, "Between Aid and Restriction: The Soviet Union's Changing Policies on China's Nuclear Weapons Program, 1954-1960," *Asian Perspective* 36, no. 1 (2012).

45. Sergey Radchenko, "The Sino-Russian Relationship in the Mirror of the Cold War," 274.

46 *Ibid.*, 276.

he even positioned China alongside the U.S. to counter Soviet posturing. It was only towards the end of Xiaoping's reign in the 1980s that both countries began to move forward, rebuilding a fresh constructivist approach in their relations. Even while there was tension in the bilateral relations, they never reneged the Sino-Soviet treaty, and China only acted against some territorial agreements in the treaty after its formal expiration in 1979.

Overall, the Russia-China historical relationship appears peaceful or collegial, a situation almost without example between bordering great powers. The Sino-Soviet rift was more a consequence of the perspectives of senior leadership rather than competing national interests. Moving forward, both China and Russia will draw on their shared history to propel future alliance, knowing that their relationship has had periods of great cooperation and periods of tension, but has survived and never escalated into significant conflict.

### Common Identity and Political Culture

China and Russia have a significant common history, including a military alliance until 1979. However, there are also considerable differences between their cultures that challenge the assumption they could ever be natural alliance partners. Natural alliances are a continuance of historical alliances, but draw on common areas of identification and culture that is recognized by both parties, often political.<sup>47</sup>

Considering common identification first, Huntington defined civilizations to be the "highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity . . .

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47. Ghez, "The Enduring Partnership? The Trans-Atlantic Community as a Natural Alliance." 96.

defined both by common objective elements, such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and by the subjective self-identification of people.”<sup>48</sup> He also stated that “people can and do redefine their identities, and, as a result, the composition and boundaries of civilizations change.”<sup>49</sup> He positioned Russia in an Orthodox Christian camp with some countries of Eastern Europe and the Balkans. He identified China as Sinic and distinct, with the exception of Korea and Vietnam. What is very apparent from Huntington’s global map of civilizations is the relative cultural isolation of both countries in the world. China and Russia are their own civilizations, although Rozman argues that Communist legacies created convergent national identities in Russia and China.<sup>50</sup>

Russia’s isolation from the West has only increased as their actions have forced sanctions and restrictions. The invasions of Georgia and Ukraine, support proffered to Syria, clandestine novichok poisoning, and overt suppression of democracy are all actions that created additional barriers to reintegration in the West and pressure to look East. In autocratic Russia, power is focused through a few pro-Putin nepotistic elite giving them significant influence over policy. Shagina argues Russia has “failed to embrace Asian values,” as it pivoted East because “Russian elites have remained Western-centric.”<sup>51</sup> However, there is a growing recognition that disillusionment with the West sparked a new idea to what it is to be Russian, an idea termed “Eurasianism,” that offers a balance of European and Asian identities.<sup>52</sup> While the Western view comes with

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48. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” 24.

49. Ibid.

50. Gilbert Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order: National Identities, Bilateral Relations, and East versus West in the 2010s* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2015).

51. Maria Shagina, “Russia’s Pivot to Asia: Between Rhetoric and Substance,” *Orbis* 64, no. 3 (January 1, 2020): 460.

52. Yong Deng, “Remolding Great Power Politics: China’s Strategic Partnerships with Russia, the European Union and India,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no. 4 (2007): 876.

conditions and expectations, the Eastern view “has no political or cultural mission to carry out.”<sup>53</sup> It is therefore easier for Russia to move East than West. The Russian elite, however, cannot shift cultural identity in isolation it does require a level of support from the Russian populace.

Demographics are a factor in the thinking of the Russian people. Although the Russia-China border area is unbalanced, with far more Chinese than Russians, neither side has threatening demographics. The Chinese border region has remained “relatively poor and actually underpopulated, with low-birth rates,”<sup>54</sup> and there is a net outflow to more prosperous Southern provinces. On the Russian side, it is sparsely populated and creates no concern for the Chinese. There will inevitably be cultural friction, as demonstrated by a mass protest against Chinese presence around Lake Baikal in 2019, but there is not significant widespread concern.<sup>55</sup> Since at least 2006, public opinion research centers have identified positive perceptual dynamics.<sup>56</sup> In 2014, “more than 60 percent of ordinary Russians considered Russia-China relations to be friendly,” while as early as 2006 a Chinese public survey indicated more than 70 percent believed Russia-China relations to be good or very good.<sup>57</sup> In a 2017 Gallup International poll that considered international alliances, both the Russian and Chinese public overwhelmingly rated the other as their preferred ally in the world.<sup>58</sup> The improving social relationship is reinforced by the increasing number of cross-border points on the Russia-China border.

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53. Sergei Karaganov, “We Have Used up the European Treasure Trove,” September 25, 2018, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/we-have-used-up-the-european-treasure-trove/>.

54. Kashin, “The Current State of Russian-Chinese Defense Cooperation,” 6.

55. Blank, “The Un-Holy Russo-Chinese Alliance,” 263.

56. Korolev, “On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation,” 246.

57. Ibid.

58. “Four NATO Nations Would Pick Russia to Defend Them If Threatened: Poll,” Bloomberg, February 17, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-02-17/melania-trump-s-slovenia-would-pick-russian-over-u-s-protection>.

In fact, Kaczmarek considers that the increasing China-Russia cooperation a consequence of increased social interaction more than deliberate political interventions.<sup>59</sup> After so little investment for hundreds of years, two recently completed bridges across the Amur River improved connectivity, trade, investment, and communication, and the infrastructure will likely only strengthen the positive views of both sides by enabling interaction.

A mutual perception of foreign threat is at the forefront of the political culture of the two nations, driving the leadership to push Russia East. Allison noted that "when Chinese and Russian leaders think about current threats, the specter they see is the U.S., and they imagine an American government that's seeking to undermine their regimes, or even to overthrow them."<sup>60</sup> Yong argued in 2007 that the increasing relationship between China and Russia was a consequence of the pursuit of status, not balance of power.<sup>61</sup> The Russian and Chinese political models of state-centric autocracies, have grown "increasingly close in their concepts of political governance," therefore they "have a greater stake in mutual support to counter political pressure from the West."<sup>62</sup> In addition to a common threat, they also increasingly see collaboration opportunities to attain "a values-neutral global order that advantages authoritarians."<sup>63</sup>

Authoritarian rule would appear to be the bedrock for a robust friendship between Putin and Jinping. Since Jinping assumed the position of General Secretary, they have

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59. Marcin Kaczmarek, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order* (New York: Routledge, 2015): 165.

60. Allison, "China and Russia: A Strategic Alliance in the Making."

61. Deng, "Remolding Great Power Politics: China's Strategic Partnerships with Russia, the European Union and India." 865.

62. Lukin, "The Russia-China Entente and Its Future."

63. Van Oudenaren, "America's Nightmare: The Sino-Russian Entente."

met at least twenty-two times, and Jinping's first foreign visit was to Moscow.<sup>64</sup> When Jinping awarded China's Medal of Friendship to Putin, he referred to him as his "best, most intimate friend."<sup>65</sup> There is no competition for leadership within the relationship; Putin stated in 2014, "the main struggle, which is now underway, is that for global leadership and we are not going to contest China on this."<sup>66</sup> The rhetoric between Russian and Chinese leadership has been consistently constructive, emphasizing the breadth of common ground. Putin said in 2016, that "Russia and China stick to points of view which are very close to each other or are almost the same in the international arena."<sup>67</sup>

With both popular and leadership support from both countries, Russia and China could potentially establish a Sino-Soviet civilization, building a shared identity and political culture, both factors for a natural alliance. The beginnings of a natural alliance are evident where one of the potential alliance members acts in support of the other without regard to immediate self-interest. Such an instance occurred when the Hague rejected China's claim to sovereignty over islands in the South China Sea, but Russia maintained their support for the Chinese cause.<sup>68</sup> Russia has repeatedly deployed naval and aviation assets alongside China in contested areas of the South and East China Sea, physically demonstrating a similar attitude. For example, in July 2019, a Russian A-50

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64. Blank, "The Un-Holy Russo-Chinese Alliance," 253.

65. Allison, "China and Russia: A Strategic Alliance in the Making."

66. Stephen Blank, "China's Latest Encroachment on Russia's Sphere of Influence," *Real Clear World*, July 29, 2019, [https://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2019/07/29/chinas\\_latest\\_encroachment\\_on\\_russias\\_sphere\\_of\\_influence\\_113064.html](https://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2019/07/29/chinas_latest_encroachment_on_russias_sphere_of_influence_113064.html).

67. "China, Russia Eye Closer Friendship amid Tensions with West," *The Straits Times*, June 25, 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-russia-eye-closer-friendship-amid-tensions-with-west>.

68. Reuters Staff, "Putin: Outside Interference in South China Sea Dispute Will Do Only Harm," September 5, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-g20-russia-china/putin-outside-interference-in-south-china-sea-dispute-will-do-only-to-harm-idUSKCN11B1QC>.

early warning and control aircraft accompanied Russian and Chinese bombers into South Korean airspace over the contested Dokdo islands.<sup>69</sup> China has tended to be less overt in backing Russia's foreign policy, but has not stood against it. Even in relation to the Crimea crisis, China successfully adopted a neutral position, being very "careful to avoid direct criticism of Russia while consistently condemning the West's sanctions policy."<sup>70</sup> China has cooperated with Russia to veto six U.N. Security Council resolutions for Syria, even in relation to the use of chemical weapons, in addition to others against Libya.<sup>71</sup>

Geography creates further alignment between Russia and China's cultural and shared interests. The border area of Siberia is poor in natural resources and creates challenging natural conditions, so neither Russia nor China have any accessible benefits to gain through limited conflict. Furthermore, given the size of both countries, neither side could conceivably control the other through force and will inevitably face nuclear consequences if it attempted.<sup>72</sup> While neither country has much to gain from the immediate surroundings, both are actively looking North to the Arctic that holds promise for both and potentially the strongest mandate for a natural alliance. The economic and military potential of the Arctic could transform China's geostrategic position and Russia is the key to that potential. A navigable northern passage provides a welcome alternative to the contested choke points of the Suez and Panama canals, and to take advantage of the

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69. Jonathan Marcus, "Russia and South Korea Spar over Airspace 'Intrusion,'" BBC, July 24, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49091523>.

70. Alexander Gabuev, "Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese Relations after the Ukraine Crisis" (Carnegie Institute Moscow Center, June 29, 2016), <https://carnegie.ru/2016/06/29/friends-with-benefits-russian-chinese-relations-after-ukraine-crisis-pub-63953>.

71. Larson, "An Equal Partnership of Unequals: China's and Russia's New Status Relationship," 799.

72. Kashin, "The Current State of Russian-Chinese Defense Cooperation," 6.

opportunity, in 2017 the Chinese extended their Belt and Road initiative to include the Arctic Region.<sup>73</sup>

The Russian Arctic holds tremendous potential for natural resources, particularly oil and rare minerals, but it requires significant investment to build the facilities, the mines, and the infrastructure. China has already begun to invest in the Russian Arctic through both state and private entities. In addition to economic opportunity, the Arctic provides firing positions for Chinese nuclear submarines that are 6,000 miles closer to key European and U.S. targets than the East China Sea, and therefore within range of existing Chinese capability.<sup>74</sup> While Chinese submarines could cruise from mainland ports to the Arctic, they will have to navigate areas of intense surveillance around the Japanese archipelago and the Bering Strait; an alternative is basing in Russia, a concept already debated amongst analysts.<sup>75</sup> The Arctic is an overlooked geostrategic component to a future alliance. The most recent special report from the Bureau of Asian Research on China-Russia relations, only mentions the continent three times, all of which are linked to U.S. access and not Russia-China opportunity.<sup>76</sup>

Russia and China have clear potential to be natural alliance partners. They have a burgeoning common identity, increasingly shared by the political elite and public of both countries; and emphasized through geographic realities and national interests. Both countries maintain a common view of political culture, driven through the personalities and vision of their leaders, and exacerbated by increasing isolation from the West.

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73. Frederic Lasserre and Olga Alexeeva, "An Analysis on Sino-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic in the BRI Era," *Advances in Polar Science* 29, no. 4 (2018): 269.

74. Kuczynski, "Russia-China: A Limited Liability Military Alliance - The Warsaw Institute Review."

75. *Ibid.*

76. Robert Sutter, "China-Russia Relations: Strategic Implications and U.S. Policy Options" (The National Bureau of Asian Research, n.d.).

## Assessment of a Russia–China Alliance

Yoder, in reference to the Russia-China relationship, stated that it is “often difficult to conceptualize and measure ideational causes separately from the outcomes they are purported to produce,”<sup>77</sup> so there is inevitably a challenge in proving causality. Analysis of the entire relationship through Ghez’s framework, however, reveals the challenge in proving causality is a distraction from the overall vector for the relationship. The Russia-China strategic partnership is an informal alliance, which has a multifaceted form with components which are, tactical, historical and natural. Academic analysis tends to focus on the tactical alliance and the absence of an explicit *casus foederis*, setting aside the wealth of historical and natural factors that appear to carry greater influence.

The breadth of alignment through Ghez’s framework suggests there is potentially significant resilience in a China-Russia alliance. The informal nature of the alliance without an explicit treaty is not surprising given China’s continued reliance on the international system to grow and build. Informality will likely remain unless there is a significant shift in the strategic environment, where declaring an alliance is of advantage to both parties. Even so, this non-formal alliance may already be as effective as many of the U.S. led treaty alliances.

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77. Yoder, “Theoretical Rigor and the Study of Contemporary Cases: Explaining Post-Cold War China–Russia Relations,” 752.

## The U.S. Factor

### Impact of U.S. Foreign Policy

The very existence of the U.S. and its liberal world order creates a common enemy for Russia and China to unify behind, as an anathema to their political values. Analysis of Russia-China meetings would indicate increasing concern of the U.S. involvement in international politics and the necessity for joint reaction to it.<sup>1</sup> The threat of the U.S. is not just held by the social and political elite of Russia. A 2018 survey reported that 69% of Russians held a negative view of the U.S., and 66% perceived the U.S. to be the enemy, while only 2% considered China to be their enemy.<sup>2</sup> This attitude has been in part fueled by U.S. military activity around these countries, challenging both countries in their perceived spheres of influence.

In Eastern Europe for the past twenty years there has been a progressive U.S.-led NATO expansion into the ex-Soviet countries of Eastern Europe, pressing Russia's Western flank and undermining the nation's hard-fought strategic depth. The U.S. even actively encouraged Ukraine to pursue membership in 2008. In November 2020, Poland and the U.S. signed a partnership deal which increased U.S. military presence to 5,500 in Poland, including the establishment of a Corps Headquarters for multinational operations.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. maintains a large standing military in the region and undertakes a breadth of exercises that openly focus on countering Russian aggression. A recent step-

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1. Korolev, "On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation," 240.

2. Allison, "China and Russia: A Strategic Alliance in the Making."

3. The Associated Press, "Polish Leader Signs Deal Enhancing U.S. Military Presence," Military.com, November 9, 2020, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2020/11/09/polish-leader-signs-deal-enhancing-us-military-presence.html>.

change in the deployed capability is the introduction of Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) installations in Europe. While the stated claim is that they are to counter Iran, they clearly undermine Russian military capabilities, forcing a reaction.

In the Far East, hegemonic policies have led the U.S. - on behalf of regional allies and the international order - to challenge China on contested islands across the South and East China Seas. In previous eras, these uninhabited islands would inevitably be absorbed into a superpower's grasp, but the U.S.-led international order won't permit it, preventing resolution and maintaining this open wound. Missile defense capabilities have also now been deployed across the Pacific region. While again the primary threat which they are countering is a third party, in this case North Korea, they also impact China's military assumptions, necessitating a balancing response.

While China has an increasingly capable military, it is years from matching the U.S. in certain high-performance capabilities, power projection capacity and certain technology areas, including BMD. Russia can address most of these deltas, so a combined China-Russia military alliance is a credible counter to U.S. military strength, not least in terms of nuclear weapon parity. Although the Chinese have invested heavily in nuclear modernization, without inordinate cost and time, nuclear balance with the U.S. requires Russia, either through dependence on Russia's nuclear arsenal or collaboration with Russia to attain a national nuclear capability in the Arctic region.<sup>4</sup> In both cases, for the deterrent to be credible, a formal treaty would need to be in force with Russia.

From the mutual position of Russia and China, recent U.S.-led interventions, including in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Libya, have been a trail of hostile

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4. Larson, "An Equal Partnership of Unequals: China's and Russia's New Status Relationship," 800; Andrew H. Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*. (Princeton University Press, 2005).

take-overs, removing political entities similar to themselves and imposing Western values. The failure of democracy in most of these conflicts empowers the Russia-China narrative that U.S. liberal action was imposed, flawed and not representative of the real international system. These policies further isolate Russia and China when they are lambasted for undertaking actions they justify as similar. While very different in terms of values, the Kosovo War will always be used to defend Russia's seizure of Crimea.

The resulting sanctions that the U.S. applies when Russia and China breach the expectations of the international system, adds a further driving force to push Russia and China towards each other to avoid isolation and marginalization. Larson assesses that U.S. sanctions are creating a shared identity in Russia and China, one which is very different than the West.<sup>5</sup> China remains under an arms embargo for the Tiananmen Square massacre, inevitably pushing it towards Russia for arms. Similarly, businesses, high net worth individuals, and politicians isolated through sanctions are naturally encouraged to reach out within this bilateral strategic partnership, strengthening ties. This shifting perspective is reflected as well in Russia, where political isolation and wide-ranging sanctions from the West, have occurred at the same time that it has seen opportunity in the East. Sergey Karaganov, The Honorary Chairman of Russia's Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, stated in 2018 that the "Westernizer today is a thing of the past and that those looking forward, into the future, must show an interest in the East."<sup>6</sup> Shagina highlights that "the Trump administration's bellicose policies towards Moscow and Beijing greatly contributed to their more genuine engagement ... ratcheting

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5. Larson, "An Equal Partnership of Unequals: China's and Russia's New Status Relationship," 807.

6. Karaganov, "We Have Used up the European Treasure Trove."

up sanctions against Moscow and waging a trade war against Beijing.”<sup>7</sup> Before the 2014 U.S. response to Russian aggression in Ukraine, over 40% of ordinary Russians viewed China as a threat in one poll, yet by 2018, 58% recognized China as a key friend.<sup>8</sup>

As the primary threat encouraging a balance of power reaction, U.S. liberal foreign policy has been a key factor behind a Russia-China alliance. However, there is no current theory or method for establishing the depth of that causality, and there is clear evidence through Ghez’s Framework of other factors also at work. The U.S. cannot afford to fixate on its own policy position, assuming it’s the causal driver of a Russia-China military alliance, while ignoring the increasing breadth of alliance evidence that is more than just balancing of threat.

### A Route Forward

Allison described the U.S. response to the burgeoning relationship between Russia-China as the "hardest question," for U.S. policymakers.<sup>9</sup> Yoder proposed drawing on theory to focus on the most important causal factors rather than presenting a reproduction of reality, so avoiding a “kitchen sink” assertion of alliance.<sup>10</sup> Through the employment of Ghez’s taxonomy, this thesis proves the complexity Yoder and Allison describe, and explains that complexity through the form of the relationship. It is not just a complex tactical alliance, but one which has historical and natural elements that will resist any simplistic response. Inevitably, as a complex system, it is difficult to prove causality, but it is clear that Western academics are rapidly running out of metrics to

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7. Shagina, “Russia’s Pivot to Asia: Between Rhetoric and Substance,” 458.

8. *Ibid.* 451.

9. Van Oudenaren, “America’s Nightmare: The Sino-Russian Entente.”

10. Yoder, “Theoretical Rigor and the Study of Contemporary Cases: Explaining Post-Cold War China–Russia Relations,” 747.

assess the level of alliance between Russia and China. It is now at the point that even if they are not formally in an alliance, they could transition very quickly if desired or forced. The expediency with which Russia and China could draw on their current partnership to formally ally makes it dangerous to wait for confirmed theory to prove the key causal factors. The U.S. must act with existing information, or potentially be on the back foot if a Russia-China alliance comes to fruition.

There are three potential options available to the U.S. in response to this thesis' finding. First, the U.S. could actively change its foreign policy to reduce the perception of threat by Russia or China, thereby increasingly accommodating their values and perspectives in the international system. However, without assured causality, it would be more luck than judgment to correctly gauge the change needed and whether it would create the desired impact. Furthermore, in all likelihood, the changes required would be unacceptable to U.S. politics, because it would require a transition of the international system back to the basic laws of international relations, interests and power.<sup>11</sup> The current values-based system would disintegrate, splintering U.S. alliances and greatly damaging national prosperity. Russia and China would be greatly strengthened in an alternative, more realist, international system, able to attain the regional hegemonies to which they aspire, and increasingly allow them to influence globally.

Second, the U.S could attempt to drive a wedge between Russia and China. Unfortunately, the opportunity to create this effect was at the demise of the Soviet Union, and after thirty years of improving Russo-Sino cooperation, the relationship is

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11. Michael Kofman, "The Emperors League: Understanding Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation," War on the Rocks, August 6, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/the-emperors-league-understanding-sino-russian-defense-cooperation>, Allison, "China and Russia: A Strategic Alliance in the Making."

sufficiently robust to resist most interference. The complexity of the relationship hinders the ability to identify what a wedge could be comprised of. Without assured causality, the U.S. is unlikely to risk undermining its own security through any concessions in sanctions or arms sales. The existing relative political isolation of the two countries exacerbates this situation. A wedge is simply not a viable strategy for the U.S.<sup>12</sup>

Third, the U.S. could accept the potential emergence of a Russia-China alliance, because as stated by Kendall-Taylor et al, “denying this reality or holding out hope that differences in their objectives will ultimately drive them apart ignores the more immediate damage they could do to U.S. interests.”<sup>13</sup> A strategy of acceptance does not mean waiting for the inevitable. On the contrary, acceptance requires the U.S. to actively re-posture to accommodate the potential appearance of a Russia-China alliance on the international stage, whether formal or non-formal. The U.S. must adjust and enhance its alliance network and military force laydown. NATO must be a part of this re-balance. NATO could be the construct for a multi-national response, assuming a global remit, with credible alliances and capability across the Pacific, the China Seas and the Arctic. Alternatively, it could be half of the answer by managing Europe and the Atlantic, while a new alliance construct stands up in the Pacific region.<sup>14</sup> In either case, the global effect must be synchronized to present a credible deterrent for Russia-China. Such alliance adjustments must be done carefully, managing the beneficial messaging of deterrence

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12. Kofman, “The Emperors League: Understanding Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation”; Kendall-Taylor, Shullman, and McCormick, “Navigating Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation - War on the Rocks.”

13. Kendall-Taylor, Shullman, and McCormick, “Navigating Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation - War on the Rocks.”

14. Nicholas Burns and Daniela Schwarzler, “Stronger Together: A Strategy to Revitalize Transatlantic Power” (Belfer Center Harvard Kennedy School, December 2020), <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Transatlantic/StrongerTogether.pdf>.

against discernments of containment, which could exacerbate the perception of threat. Effective coercion of such a significant threat, requires, synchronized, coordinated effect, multi-nationally and globally. This is enabled by effective interoperability, underpinned through training, exercising, and shared doctrine.

The U.S. should also look to adjust to this new challenge within its own force structure. Although the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff released an instruction for “Implementing Global Integration” in December 2018, aiming to address issues that are beyond a single Combatant Command (COCOM), it was not conceived for managing the complexity of a Russia-China alliance.<sup>15</sup> The scale and nature of a Russia-China alliance merits expanding that thinking, actively looking to eliminate any seams and gaps, both in terms of geography and capability. The U.S. could merge U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and U.S. European Command, they could also allocate the entirety of the Arctic to one Combatant Command. Either, or both, evolutions of the Unified Command Plan construct would assist the U.S. in managing the complexity of strategic competition that would result from a Russia-China alliance. Furthermore, to ensure an effective whole-of-government approach and provide the mandate to invest in this problem long-term, a grand strategy is required. Only through grand strategy can the U.S. ensure the effective coordination of all its levers of national power to manage the breadth of the competition continuum against a Russia-China alliance.

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15. Kenneth F. Mckenzie, “Implementing Global Integration” (U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, December 31, 2018).

## Conclusion

Russia and China are in a non-formal alliance, an evolution of the relative peace these states have sustained for hundreds of years, a rarity in contrast to all other great power neighborhoods. They share a history of external intervention and despotic rule driving both to autocracy. They are the only great powers to wrestle with communism, and while their respective journeys had very different outcomes, they have both found themselves as authoritarian political constructs in a liberal international system. The U.S.-led international order has pursued liberal policies that have challenged the influence of Russia and China, forcing reactions and increasingly driving them together.

The response to Russia's aggression in the Ukraine was a watershed moment, forcing Russia to look East, accept Chinese leadership, and turn away from Europe. For China, the evolution of the partnership has been much more measured as the economic interdependence of globalization is fundamental to its success. China has been progressively building the strategic partnership with Russia since the fall of the Berlin Wall, recognizing the opportunity of its neighbor, but also the future threat from a Westernized Russia. Under the political vision and friendship of their current leaders, they incrementally expanded tactical collaborative activity across the breadth of their military capabilities, culminating in joint nuclear and ballistic missile defense (BMD) exercising. Russia and China have removed virtually all barriers to technology sharing, and now have active combined procurement and development programs even in nationally sensitive areas like submarines, anti-ship missiles and BMD.

The transition of the alliance to a formal construct is unlikely and will only conceivably be a consequence of either a direct military threat or economic isolation. An

overt existential threat will force China to balance U.S. nuclear weapons. It could achieve this through a formal alliance with Russia that offers the Russian nuclear umbrella or assures the Chinese access to the Arctic for their nuclear missile submarines. The second reason for formal alliance is if the U.S. was to aggressively interfere with Chinese economics. China's success is a consequence of its deep integration in the global economy, enabled by the U.S.-led international order. Isolating China economically would undermine China's future and force it to consider an alternative world order that a Russian alliance would enable through mutual security.

U.S. foreign policy has been the primary threat that has encouraged the alliance to form. A Russia-China alliance, however, is much more than just a simple reaction to balance of power, it includes aspects of identity, culture, politics and history. The U.S. cannot adjust its posture or the international system with any assurance that such activity would alter Russia's or China's calculations. Furthermore, the U.S. cannot flex very far in its foreign policy before it undermines its own standing and the cohesion of its allies and partners. The U.S. only stands to lose in an international system more accommodating to Russia and China, while conversely, Russia and China only stand to gain. In consequence, the only viable route that the U.S. now has available to manage the threat of a Russia-China alliance is to accept its reality.

The consequences of not proactively managing the risk of a Russia-China alliance would be profound should it materialize formally, but the challenge is no less potent as a non-formal alliance. Building and maintaining robust alliances take time and commitment. The scale of a counter for a Russia-China alliance, whether through an expanded NATO or series of coordinated separate alliances, will exacerbate the time and

investment to make them fully effective. The U.S. also needs to change its own mindset, in terms of command and control and capability if it intends to lead a response to a Russia-China alliance. The current Combatant Command boundaries, as laid out in the Unified Command Plan, are a potential source of weakness due to the global complexity of a Russia-China alliance. Additionally, the capability investment to counter the combined militaries of Russia-China requires reappraisal and potentially formal recognition of a dependence on allies.

If the U.S. is to be prepared, then it must be able to manage the consequences of both a formal and a non-formal Russia-China alliance across the competition continuum. This will likely appear as increasingly collaborative grey-zone conflict carefully limited below the threshold of war. Such activity requires a whole-of-government response from the U.S. under a new grand strategy to synchronize effect and maintain the edge. Formal or non-formal, a Russia-China alliance is the new reality, and the U.S. must accept and respond to this new level of competition. Drawing from Korolev's metaphor, while the Rubicon hasn't been crossed for a Russia-China alliance, they've completed a bridge.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. cannot simply ignore it!

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1. Korolev, "On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation," 248.

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## Vita

### **Wing Commander C.J. Phillips, BEng, MSc, Royal Air Force**

Wing Commander Phillips is from the county of Buckinghamshire, in the United Kingdom. After high school, he was sponsored by the Royal Air Force (RAF) to read mechanical engineering at the Royal Military College, from which he graduated in 2001. Upon completion of university, he commenced initial officer training and subsequently flying training, attaining his pilot wings in 2003 and posting to the C130J Force.

After completing the operational conversion unit, Wing Commander Phillips subsequently undertook four frontline tours as a C130J pilot, including a special operations tour and sub-unit command, attaining 3,000 flying hours on the C130J. During these flying tours he has operated extensively alongside the U.S. for Operations IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF), ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) and INHERENT RESOLVE (OIR). He has also deployed for national operations in North and West Africa. In 2009, Wing Commander Phillips was deployed to OEF as part of a Deployable Air Integration Team, tasked to identify opportunities to improve Air Land Integration. For his work in this role, he was awarded a 3\* Operational Commendation. In 2016 he led a C130J contingent to Chile where they airdropped fuel to the British science teams in Antarctica.

Between flying tours Wing Commander Phillips was posted to the U.K. Permanent Joint HQ, in 2012. During this tour he was actively involved in J5 Middle East Contingent Planning, J35 roles for Syria and Mali, and was the Chief of Staff for the J3 operations team coordinating the U.K. military response to the Philippines humanitarian crisis after Typhoon Haiyan. In 2018 on promotion to O5, he assumed the role of capability change manager for the RAF tactical air mobility fleet, which was responsible for the C130J and A400M fleets in addition to military parachuting. Between 2011 and 2015 he completed part-time a Masters in Defense Acquisition Management at Cranfield University.