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Future Scenarios for Sino-Russian Military Cooperation

Possibilities, Limitations, and Consequences



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Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this publication.

ISBN: 978-1-9774-1334-5

Cover: Veronaa/Getty Images; Li Ziheng/Xinhua/Alamy Live News

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About This Report

In this report, the authors explore possible future cooperation scenarios in which the Russian Armed Forces and the People's Liberation Army could potentially operate together as coalition partners. They examine historical patterns of Russian and Chinese alliance behavior as well as current military-to-military engagements between these two militaries that include exercises, training events, such operational activities as joint maritime and air patrols, and high-level exchanges. Given these military engagement trends, three scenarios that illustrate how Russian and Chinese forces might operate together under different strategic and operational circumstances are then identified. These scenarios are then used to identify the prospects and pitfalls for future Russian and Chinese military cooperation in conflict and to explore implications for U.S. policymakers, commanders, and planners.

The research reported here was completed in December 2023 and underwent security review with the sponsor and the Defense Office of Prepublication and Security Review before public release.

National Security Research Division

This research was sponsored by the Russia Strategic Initiative of the United States European Command and conducted within the International Security and Defense Policy Program of the RAND National Security Research Division (NSRD), which operates the RAND National Defense Research Institute (NDRI), a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense intelligence enterprise.

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Kristen Gunness and Andrew Scobell for their careful input and thoughtful comments on the initial draft. Their thorough review significantly enhanced the report.

Summary

Beijing's consistent, if cautious, support for the Kremlin since February 2022 demonstrates how important the Sino-Russian relationship has become for both countries. Despite the People's Republic of China's sustained support, the growth and constraints that surround the Sino-Russian relationship are real and include expanded interaction between the two countries across a range of strategically important areas. Simultaneously, historical animosity and mistrust between Russia and China are not mere remnants of a distant past—the adversarial relationship that developed in the decades following the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s is something that senior leaders on both sides lived through and experienced in some form. As recently as the late 1980s, China and the Soviet Union were enemies who devoted significant defense and military resources to countering each other along the extensive border that separated the two countries. Today's Russia-China relationship may be best characterized as a marriage of two imperfect partners who share a deeply cynical view of the current U.S.-led international order but hold often divergent visions of the order that they believe should replace it. In this same vein, these imperfect partners realize that some level of shared, albeit unequal, dependency is necessary while simultaneously harboring deep suspicions about whether they can trust or rely on the other. Ultimately, the backdrop and motivation for any future military cooperation—particularly in terms of an operational partnership—is based much more on dissatisfaction with the U.S.-led order and a common dislike for the United States than it is on a shared strategic vision and common values.

It is unclear whether these motivations can provide a sufficient basis for meaningful military cooperation in the future. As the partnership with “no limits” continues to progress,¹ there are several issues that will dictate the extent to which military cooperation in wartime between Russia and China is possible, including (1) a lack of trust in both militaries that exists not only within their own ranks, but also in relation to foreign counterparts and partners, (2) the degree of compatibility and interoperability between two militaries that are on divergent strategic trajectories as China continues its aggressive modernization while Russian forces are mired in a protracted war in Ukraine, and (3) a history of previous alliances and partnerships that frequently proved to be both heavy-handed and dismissive of their allies, often creating unproductive and adversarial relations with their erstwhile partners. This final issue raises questions about how China and Russia will respond to their own de facto and unstated roles as “senior” and “junior” partners in the relationship and, for the purposes of this study, as coalition partners in a combined operation.

¹ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” Office of the President of Russia, February 4, 2022.

Issue

In this report, we explore possible future cooperation scenarios in which the Russian Armed Forces and the People's Liberation Army could potentially operate together as coalition partners. We examine historical patterns of Russian and Chinese alliance behavior as well as military-to-military engagements between these two militaries that include exercises, training events, such operational activities as joint maritime and air patrols, and high-level exchanges. Given these military engagement trends, we then examine three scenarios to illustrate how Russian and Chinese forces might operate together under different strategic and operational circumstances. We use these scenarios to identify the prospects and pitfalls for future Russian and Chinese military cooperation in conflict and provide implications for U.S. policymakers, commanders, and planners.

Approach

Our research was guided by two primary questions. First, under what possible scenarios and circumstances might Moscow and Beijing agree to participate in a combined military operation with each other? Our second research question centered on what roles Russia and China might accept in these future scenarios. To address this question, we considered how Russia and China might handle their respective roles from one or more standpoints, including as (1) a “junior” partner, (2) an equal partner in a coalition, and (3) a “senior” partner. With these different terms, we intended to highlight and examine how the evolving power balance in the relationship might affect leadership roles, the division of operational tasks and responsibilities, and the willingness of both Beijing and Moscow to accommodate the needs, concerns, and risk tolerance of their operational partner.

In this report, we examine Russian and Chinese historical interactions with allies and partners to identify patterns in both nations' expectations, behavior, and apparent risk tolerance as alliance partners. The research team focused on four cases that provide a broad perspective on China and Russia in their relations with clients, as trainers, and as senior partners. The cases selected include (1) the Warsaw Pact, (2) North Korea, (3) Egypt, and (4) Vietnam.

This report also explores several aspects of the Sino-Russian relationship, including the core drivers of the relationship in recent decades, current defense policies and military reform efforts, and synergies and tensions likely to shape military cooperation in a future conflict scenario.

With these considerations in mind, we then examined three illustrative scenarios involving military cooperation between Russia and China, including (1) Japan, (2) the Korean Peninsula, and (3) Iran and the Persian Gulf. We considered several factors for these scenario analyses, such as (1) the depth of interest, (2) the degree to which Russia's and China's interests align, (3) the degree to which those interests are competitive or involve sensitive bilateral issues that do not involve the other party, and (4) the possibility that Moscow and Beijing

would consider using military force to protect and defend the interests embedded in each scenario. We evaluated the scenarios using a RAND-developed interoperability framework to identify possible areas for military cooperation.

Key Findings

The strategic importance that Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping place on their relationship and their continued commitment to the Russia-China partnership since Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrate that Moscow and Beijing remain committed to sustaining their mutual support even in the most-difficult situations. Regardless, despite the claims from Putin and Xi prior to 2022, there are limits for both Moscow and Beijing in what they are willing to do. Other key findings include the following:

- From Moscow's perspective, partnership with China is a strategic imperative for Russia to maintain its claim to great-power status. China's support has helped Russia withstand some of the most negative consequences of Western sanctions, particularly through China's purchase of record amounts of energy from Russia. Their continued engagement at the highest levels of their respective governments also signals China's intent to maintain its relationship with Russia despite international pressure .
- The Russia-China partnership is critical for Beijing. With no alliances of its own, Beijing views Moscow's mutual support as its most important strategic relationship and an effective counterweight to U.S. power. As the de facto "senior partner" in the relationship, Beijing simultaneously sees a significant opportunity to exploit Russia's weakness, which it has leveraged to gain access to inexpensive energy, advanced military technology, and strategic resources.
- Strategic cooperation and coordination in the overall military-to-military relationship suggests that expanded cooperation might eventually include some form of combined military operation, but this possibility remains uncertain at best. However, cooperation is not the same as interoperability.
- At the time of writing, the likely costs of direct military confrontation with the United States make the willingness of either country to enter into such an operation—either independently or as a coalition—unlikely, especially from Beijing's perspective.
- Short of a mutual defense treaty, other forms of military cooperation should be expected to intensify.
- Deeper integration would likely result in more-complex and more-frequent training and exercises between Russian and Chinese forces—interactions that would likely engender expanded technology and skills transfers. Similarly, increased integration could potentially lead both militaries to consider operating in new geographic areas or domains, perhaps with new operational concepts they develop jointly.

Implications

The findings in this report have several implications for planners and policymakers:

- Efforts to break apart the relationship are unlikely to succeed and may end up motivating both Russia and China to strengthen the relationship. This strategic partnership is vital to Putin and Xi, but its importance preceded them and will extend beyond their tenures. Elites in Russia and China have viewed and will continue to view this relationship as vitally important to both countries' interests in spite of the many disagreements and areas of friction that may exist.
- The most effective way for the United States to counter the Russia-China strategic partnership is by ensuring the health of its own alliances and pursuing ever greater cooperation among its most important allies and partners. Strategically, the success of the United States network of allies and partners has led to Russia's and China's desire to pursue strategic cooperation. This U.S. network of alliances is a significant advantage.
- While the possibilities for cooperation in a combined operation appear to be limited, U.S. planners and policymakers need to consider the circumstances under which Russia and China might pursue cooperation and factor those considerations into planning efforts. The limitations that exist now may not exist in the future, depending on whether Putin and Xi perceive a significant degradation in the international security environment that would require enhanced cooperation. Accordingly, policymakers and planners need to consider how Russian and Chinese combined operations would alter the United States' strategy and posture.
- Policymakers and planners should avoid overestimating the state of military cooperation and operational integration that exists between Russia and China. The scope and complexity of combined Russia-China military activities strongly suggests that the primary value of these actions remains symbolic and designed to demonstrate the combined resolve of leaders in Moscow and Beijing. Accordingly, the messaging involved with exercises and joint patrols is likely intended to serve as a deterrent directed at the United States and its allies.
- Deterrence issues in the context of the Russia-China relationship will become increasingly complicated because of Moscow's and Beijing's differing risk calculations and perspectives on the role of nuclear weapons. Although the United States is unlikely to undermine the strategic partnership in general, such areas of friction provide an opportunity to inject doubt into the minds of senior leaders in Russia and China about the costs and risks associated with a conflict involving the United States and its allies.

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Introduction

The U.S.'s policy of simultaneously deterring Russia and China, as well as all those who do not bend to American dictation, is getting ever more fierce and aggressive. The international security and cooperation architecture is being dismantled. Russia has been labeled an 'immediate threat' and China a 'strategic competitor.'

Vladimir Putin, March 2023¹

The international community is well aware that no country in the world is superior to all others. There is no universal model of government and there is no world order where the decisive word belongs to a single country. Solidarity and peace on the planet without splits and upheavals meet the common interests of all mankind.

Xi Jinping, March 2023²

When Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping departed their final meeting during Xi's visit to Moscow in March 2023, Xi assured Putin that the two countries would work to build a new international order. Xi declared "There's a change coming that hasn't happened in 100 years. When we are together, we are driving this change."³ Putin agreed. The buildup to Xi's visit as well as the substance of their meetings provided a clear picture of how the two leaders viewed the United States, the international system, and the Russia-China relationship. Xi's comment—ambitious and grandiose—is a clear synopsis of where both leaders stood one year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The two powers, facing increasingly tense and combative relations with the United States and its allies and partners across the globe, made a point of demonstrating solidarity as Russia was becoming increasingly bogged down in its costly and damaging war in Ukraine.

¹ Vladimir Putin, "Russia and China: A Future-Bound Partnership," *People's Daily*, March 18, 2023. This quotation is translated and quoted in Francesca Ebel and Lily Kuo, "Xi and Putin Hold Talks in Russia, Trading Compliments, amid War in Ukraine," *Washington Post*, March 20, 2023.

² Xi Jinping, "Forging Ahead to Open a New Chapter of China-Russia Friendship, Cooperation and Common Development," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, March 18, 2023. Translated and quoted in Ebel and Kuo, 2023.

³ Robyn Dixon and Lily Kuo, "Xi and Putin Showcase Alliance but Offer No Path to Peace in Ukraine," *Washington Post*, March 21, 2023.

The timing of Xi's trip was an act of defiance toward the United States and its allies as they continued to work to isolate Russia. It was also an unambiguous show of support for China's most important strategic partner. Three days prior to Xi's arrival in Moscow, the International Criminal Court in the Hague indicted Putin on war crimes.⁴ Speculation about Chinese support, particularly arms sales, set the Kremlin's expectations high and caused great concern among Western leaders that Beijing's earlier and seemingly restrained policies regarding the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) support for Moscow might have been changing to include more-overt forms of military and technical support.⁵ Beijing also unveiled Xi's "peace plan" in an attempt to demonstrate the PRC's neutrality and credibility as a responsible, peaceful nation capable of solving those problems that Chinese and Russian leaders argued that the West created.⁶ Beijing sought to build on the role it played in reestablishing diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia just weeks earlier.

In the months following Xi's visit to Moscow, Beijing grew more vocal in its support for the Kremlin. Beijing's relationship with Washington remains contentious despite the United States' attempts to ease tensions.⁷ At this point in the war, China's economic, political, and technological support remains a critical lifeline for Russia and is essential to the Kremlin's ability to sustain its military efforts in Ukraine and maintain some semblance of global influence, particularly in the Global South, where leaders have been reluctant to condemn Russia's actions and frequently assign Ukraine, Russia, and the West equal amounts of blame for causing the war. Prominent countries, such as Brazil, South Africa, and India, have all largely avoided criticizing Russia's invasion.⁸ Likewise, Russia's economic trade, particularly energy, with China and much of the Global South has remained robust, demonstrating a general lack of support for international sanctions among a significant portion of the globe.⁹

⁴ Anthony Deutsch and Toby Sterling, "ICC Judges Issue Arrest Warrant for Putin over War Crimes in Ukraine," Reuters, March 17, 2023.

⁵ Erin Banco and Phelim Kine, "China Weighs Sending Drones, Ammunition to Russia for Ukraine War," *Politico*, February 24, 2023; Humeyra Pamuk and Michael Martina, "Blinken Warns China's Wang Yi Against Aiding Russia in Ukraine," Reuters, February 19, 2023; Patricia Zengerle, Simon Lewis, and Humeyra Pamuk, "China Watching World's Response to Ukraine War, Has Not Crossed Lethal Aid Line – Blinken," Reuters, March 22, 2023.

⁶ Eduardo Baptista, "Xi Heads to Russia Next Week After China Touts Ukraine Peace Plan," Reuters, March 17, 2023; Edward Wong and Steven Erlanger, "China as Peacemaker in the Ukraine War? The U.S. and Europe Are Skeptical," *New York Times*, March 19, 2023.

⁷ Nicole Hong, "Despite a Handshake, a 'Thaw' in U.S.-China Relations Seems Far from Reach," *New York Times*, June 1, 2023; Joe McDonald, "Yellen's Visit to Beijing Aims to Heal Rifts over a Daunting Array of China-US Antagonisms," Associated Press, July 7, 2023.

⁸ Maria Siow, "Asia's Russia-West Balancing Act on Show with Push for Peace in Ukraine from Indonesia's Prabowo," *South China Morning Post*, June 10, 2023; Liz Sly, "A Global Divide on the Ukraine War Is Deepening," *Washington Post*, February 23, 2023.

⁹ "Russian Oil Exports to China Hit New All-Time Record," *Moscow Times*, July 21, 2023; Eugene Chausovsky, "The Global South Is Keeping Russia's Energy Economy Afloat," *Foreign Policy* blog, June 26, 2023; Andy Lin and Greg McMillan, "China Imports Record Volumes of Russian Oil in First Half of 2023,"

Reports of Chinese military equipment in the Russian military's inventory highlight what has been one of the major concerns about the Sino-Russian relationship since the beginning of the war: To what extent will these two countries support one another militarily? Press reporting from February 2023 that China was preparing to send unmanned aerial systems (UASs) to Russia likely caught Beijing off guard.¹⁰ No deliveries have been identified to date. However, press reports from July 2023 claimed that Chinese small arms, body armor, and armored vehicles have been delivered.¹¹ On the eve of Ukraine's second major counteroffensive in June 2023, many Western leaders were concerned that Beijing would eventually become more willing to send arms, technology, and technical assistance to prevent a Russian military collapse and avoid the damage that would follow for China's most important strategic partner.

Imperfect Partners

Beijing's consistent, if cautious, support for the Kremlin since February 2022 demonstrates how important the Sino-Russian relationship has become for both countries. Since the end of the Cold War, a large body of work has cataloged the expansion of the Russia-China relationship in multiple dimensions, including defense, technology, energy, and critical resources, whether those resources are economic, military, or political.¹² Likewise, several studies have examined contemporary and historical challenges that have also shaped the relationship.¹³ In general, many observers have cast the relationship as a continually growing threat to the West and its allies and partners, while others have emphasized the historical animosity and mistrust that constrains what Moscow and Beijing realistically can achieve in their relationship.¹⁴

Financial Times, July 20, 2023; "China's Trade with Russia Surges at Double-Digit Pace in Jan-Feb," Reuters, March 7, 2023.

¹⁰ Natasha Bertrand and Zachary Cohen, "Intelligence Suggests China Is Considering Sending Drones and Ammunition to Russia, Sources Familiar Say," CNN, February 24, 2023.

¹¹ James T. Areddy and Austin Ramzy, "Chinese-Built Armored Trucks Make Appearance in Chechnya," *Wall Street Journal*, June 9, 2023; Erin Banco and Steven Overly, "China-Linked Russian Body Armor Is Landing on the Battlefield in Ukraine," *Politico*, March 28, 2023; "China Supplying Equipment to Russia It Should Not, French Diplomat Says," Reuters, July 21, 2023.

¹² Dmitry Gorenburg, Paul Schwartz, Brian Waidelich, and Elizabeth Wishnick, *Russian-Chinese Military Cooperation: An Increasingly Unequal Partnership*, Center for Naval Analyses, March 2023; Andrew Radin, Andrew Scobell, Elina Treyger, J. D. Williams, Logan Ma, Howard J. Shatz, Sean M. Zeigler, Eugeniu Han, and Clint Reach, *China-Russia Cooperation: Determining Factors, Future Trajectories, Implications for the United States*, RAND Corporation, RR-3067-A, 2021.

¹³ Alexander Korolev, "On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation," *Asian Security*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2019.

¹⁴ Pavel K. Baev, *The Limits of Authoritarian Compatibility: Xi's China and Putin's Russia*, Brookings Institution, June 2020; Alexander Gabuev, "What's Really Going on Between Russia and China: Behind the

The growth and constraints that observers have identified in the Sino-Russian relationship are real. It is difficult to ignore the expanded interaction between the two countries across so many strategically important areas. Simultaneously, the historical animosity and mistrust between Russia and China is not a mere remnant of a distant past. Indeed, the adversarial relationship that developed following the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s is something that senior leaders on both sides lived through and experienced in some form. As recently as the late 1980s, China and the Soviet Union were enemies who devoted significant defense and military resources toward countering each other.¹⁵ In this respect, the Sino-Russian relationship is probably best characterized as a marriage of two imperfect partners who share a deeply cynical view of the U.S.-led international order but often hold divergent visions of the order that they believe should replace it. In this same vein, these two imperfect partners realize some level of shared, albeit unequal, dependency while simultaneously harboring deep suspicions about whether they can trust or rely on the other. Ultimately, the backdrop and motivation for any future military cooperation—particularly in terms of an operational partnership—is based much more on dissatisfaction with the U.S.-led order and a common dislike for the United States than it is on a shared strategic vision and common values.

Can these shared motivators provide a sufficient basis for meaningful cooperation in the future? Under many circumstances, they most likely can. In this report, we examine the extent to which these shared motivations will be able to support deeper forms of military cooperation, particularly in terms of future scenarios that could plausibly involve some level of coalition warfare or wartime cooperation. As the partnership with “no limits” progresses,¹⁶ there are several issues that will dictate the extent to which military cooperation in wartime between Russia and China is possible. Trust is one of these issues. Russian military adventures since 2008—Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, Syria in 2015, and Ukraine in 2022—have all taken place without the Kremlin consulting Beijing. This has left China in awkward positions because of either Russia’s timing or the contradictory positions that Chinese leaders were asked to defend following Russia’s military actions.¹⁷ There was no coordination prior to any of these operations, and, in his final decision in each of the four military actions, Putin chose not to inform Xi. Putin’s choice reflects a deeper issue that has

Scenes, They Are Deepening Their Defense Partnership,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 12, 2023.

¹⁵ Throughout this report, Russia, the Soviet Union, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) are used to refer to the Russian state in the 20th and 21st centuries.

¹⁶ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” Office of the President of Russia, February 4, 2022.

¹⁷ Catherine Wong, “‘Sheer Fiction’: China Denies Xi Asked Putin Not to Invade Ukraine During Beijing Winter Olympics,” *South China Morning Post*, January 24, 2022; Edward Wong and Julian E. Barnes, “China Asked Russia to Delay Ukraine War Until After Olympics, U.S. Officials Say,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2022.

shaped both militaries—a lack of trust not only within their own ranks, but also of foreign counterparts and adversaries.¹⁸

Compatibility is a second issue. Since 2005, the Russian and Chinese militaries have continually expanded their interactions with each other, particularly in terms of high-level exchanges, military exercises, competitions, and training. For most of these exercises, the types of forces involved, the exercise scenarios, and the overall nature of the training have expanded in both scope and complexity; however, many reports on these activities have shown that despite building closer ties, the level of integration and interoperability between the two militaries remains limited.¹⁹ From a training standpoint, prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) viewed the Russian military as a key source of operational know-how and much-needed experience. It viewed these exercises as a critical opportunity to gain valuable operational experience that the PLA lacked.²⁰ It is unclear the extent to which, if at all, the PLA's views of the Russian military have changed based on its performance in Ukraine. That said, it does appear that the two militaries are moving in different directions in their quests to modernize: The PLA continues on its path toward an informatized, systems warfare-oriented force capable of conducting nonlinear, noncontact, and asymmetric warfare, while the Russian armed forces are mired in a conflict that raises significant questions about its future and what the reconstitution of Russia's depleted military will look like.²¹

A final issue that emerges in our examination of Russia and China as imperfect partners is their past experiences dealing with other allies and partners. When considered alongside both nations' central roles in their respective regions, these relationships and interactions offer a frame of reference that highlights several potential difficulties that plagued their alliance relations and partnerships in the past. More specifically, Russia and China have both shown themselves to be difficult partners. In their relationships with client states, they have proven frequently to be heavy-handed and dismissive of their partners, oftentimes creating unproductive and adversarial relations with their supposed erstwhile partners. As has been demonstrated in Ukraine and in multiple instances in the past, when engaged in a relationship with peers—particularly each other—Russia and China have shown themselves to be

¹⁸ Mark Cozad, Jeffrey Engstrom, Scott W. Harold, Timothy R. Heath, Sale Lilly, Edmund J. Burke, Julia Brackup, and Derek Grossman, *Gaining Victory in Systems Warfare: China's Perspective on the U.S.-China Military Balance*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1535-1, March 1, 2023; Dara Massicot, "What Russia Got Wrong: Can Moscow Learn from Its Failures in Ukraine?" *Foreign Affairs*, February 8, 2023.

¹⁹ Richard Weitz, *Assessing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises: Past Progress and Future Trends*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 9, 2021, p. 3.

²⁰ Mark Cozad, Keith Gierlack, Cortez A. Cooper III, Susan G. Straus, Sale Lilly, Stephanie Anne Pillion, and Kelly Elizabeth Eusebi, *Preparing for Great Power Conflict: How Experience Shapes U.S. and Chinese Military Training*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1554-1, 2023b.

²¹ "Russian Military Announces Plan to Expand, Create New Units," Associated Press, December 21, 2022.

operating on different assumptions about the world, different approaches to statecraft and diplomacy, and with frequently different objectives.²²

The Future of Sino-Russian Military Cooperation

Russia's invasion of Ukraine that began in February 2022, has revealed the degree to which both Russia and China depend on one another in a variety of areas, but it has also brought to light significant boundaries in the friendship with "no limits."²³ The war placed China in an extremely difficult position: It performed a complicated balancing act that involved supporting its most important strategic partner, Russia, while avoiding damage to broader global relationships in the Asia-Pacific region and strategically important markets in Europe, and at the same time ensuring that it did not incur penalties for violating international sanctions against Russia. After nearly three decades since the end of the Cold War, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has finally presented for the first time an extremely difficult and risky task for one of the two partners. China's measured response and cautious support for Russia after it was surprised by the invasion raises important questions about how far these two partners may be willing to go in future conflict scenarios. Beijing's response also hints at the limits of trust that exist between Russia and China.

Trust and compatibility are only two of many issues that will have a significant impact on the degree to which the Russian Armed Forces and the PLA will be able to fight together in future conflict scenarios. Russian and Chinese concepts for how they might cooperate in future scenarios could also be far different from the emphasis that the United States and its allies and partners have placed on interoperability and coalition warfare, particularly over the past several decades. If military-to-military exchanges and exercises are any indicator, the Kremlin and Beijing would likely focus their cooperation on some target well below that of two fully integrated partners with common command, control, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) architectures, interoperable platforms, compatible operational concepts and doctrine, and common planning processes and systems. The extent to which these developments are possible relies on several factors that will be addressed in this report—historical patterns of behavior as an ally or partner, present and future defense planning and policies, meaningful military exchanges and training, and a shared concept of operational objectives and core threats in specific operational scenarios.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also renewed understanding of the important role that nuclear weapons and escalation will likely play in future wars, particularly those involving

²² Elian Peltier, "Xi Condemns Killings in African Nation Where Russian and Chinese Interests Compete," *New York Times*, March 20, 2023; "Russia, Proxies Compete with China for Africa," VOA Africa, April 25, 2023.

²³ Office of the President of Russia, "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development," February 4, 2022.

major powers.²⁴ This issue may also prove to be one of the most significant cleavages that exists between Russia and China. Both nations' historical experiences with nuclear weapons and their assumptions about their effectiveness as both a deterrent and possible tools for escalation differ significantly.²⁵ On the one hand, Russia and its predecessor, the Soviet Union, possessed a vast arsenal that contained strategic, intermediate, and tactical nuclear weapons along with a wide variety of delivery platforms and a vast inventory of warheads of varying yields. On the other hand, China has focused its nuclear forces on preventing nuclear coercion after their experience dealing with U.S. nuclear threats in the 1950s. At no point did Beijing pursue the type of vast and diverse arsenal that the United States and the Soviet Union possessed. It focused on maintaining a sufficient retaliatory capability and made clear that its core doctrine was one of "no first use."²⁶ Even at a time when the PLA's nuclear capabilities are expanding significantly, senior Chinese leaders have made clear to the Kremlin that nuclear threats and nuclear weapon use were unacceptable.²⁷ These diverging perspectives must be considered in any discussion of Sino-Russian cooperation in future conflict scenarios, particularly those that might involve the United States and its allies.

Approach

In this report, we explore potential future military cooperation scenarios in which the Russian Armed Forces and the PLA could potentially operate together as coalition partners. We do so by examining military-to-military engagements between these two militaries (including exercises and training events), operational activities (including joint maritime and air patrols), and high-level exchanges among other areas of cooperation. We also frame these interactions in a broader context that, as of this writing, addresses the likely future direc-

²⁴ Bryan Frederick, Samuel Charap, Scott Boston, Stephen J. Flanagan, Michael J. Mazarr, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, and Karl P. Mueller, *Pathways to Russian Escalation Against NATO from the Ukraine War*, RAND Corporation, PE-A1971-1, 2022; Bryan Frederick, Samuel Charap, and Karl P. Mueller, *Responding to a Limited Russian Attack on NATO During the Ukraine War*, RAND Corporation, PE-A2081-1, 2022; Bryan Frederick, Mark Cozad, and Alexandra Stark, *Escalation in the War in Ukraine: Lessons Learned and Risks for the Future*, RAND Corporation, RR-A2807-1, 2023.

²⁵ Eric Heginbotham, Michael S. Chase, Jacob L. Heim, Bonny Lin, Mark Cozad, Lyle J. Morris, Christopher P. Twomey, Forrest E. Morgan, Michael Nixon, Cristina L. Garafola, and Samuel K. Berkowitz, *China's Evolving Nuclear Deterrent: Major Drivers and Issues for the United States*, RAND Corporation, RR-1628-AF, March 15, 2017; Jeffrey Lewis, *The Minimum Means of Reprisal: China's Search for Security in the Nuclear Age*, MIT Press, 2007.

²⁶ "China Blasts US Report, Reiterates 'No 1st Use' Nuke Policy," Associated Press, December 6, 2022; U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2022, p. 95.

²⁷ Max Seddon, James Kynge, John Paul Rathbone, and Felicia Schwartz, "Xi Jinping Warned Vladimir Putin Against Nuclear Attack in Ukraine," *Financial Times*, July 5, 2023.

tions that senior leaders in Moscow and Beijing are considering for both militaries over the next decade.

Our research was guided by two primary questions. First, what are possible scenarios that might lead to a joint decision from Moscow and Beijing to conduct a combined military operation? To answer this question, we focused our research on identifying potential courses of action in these scenarios and outlined how the Russian Armed Forces and PLA might divide their responsibilities, particularly if their operations and actions are directed against the United States and its allies. Our research also briefly outlined crisis pathways for three hypothetical future conflict scenarios and did a preliminary analysis to identify the possibilities and limitations for both Russia's and China's potential contributions to a combined operation. Our second research question centered on the roles that Russia and China might accept in these future scenarios. To address this question, we considered how Russia and China might handle a variety of roles from one or more standpoints, including as (1) a "junior" partner, (2) an equal partner in a coalition, and (3) a "senior" partner. We use these terms as shorthand to indicate whether one side is contributing a relatively greater number of forces in a particular scenario.

A central factor to understanding the degree to which Russia and China may cooperate in the future is their historical interactions with allies and partners. Our exploration of past alliance behavior provides a mechanism to account for each nation's expectations, behavior, and apparent risk tolerance for alliances in general. This report does not provide an exhaustive list of cases, nor does it address those relationships and events that have been more widely studied in the context of the Sino-Russian relationship. Instead, we focused on four cases that provide a broad perspective of China and Russia in their relations with clients, as trainers, and as senior partners. The cases selected include (1) the Warsaw Pact, (2) North Korea, (3) the Soviet Union and Egypt, and (4) Vietnam. Our examination of alliance behavior also considered but did not address the Sino-Soviet relationship, China's relationship with Pakistan, and Russia's relationship with Syria, Libya, and Egypt.²⁸

In two of these cases—the wars in North Korea and Vietnam—both China and the Soviet Union had deep ties to both countries. In both cases, there were also several competitive elements that provided important insights into their historical alliance behavior, particularly because both China and the Soviet Union wanted to assert themselves in planning and policy decisionmaking processes. Ultimately, the review of historical cases is not meant to suggest that past actions portend or predict future behavior. At the time of writing, the circumstances driving decisions in the Kremlin as well as in Beijing are vastly different than they were in these earlier examples. The main objective is to identify elements of both countries' strategic cultures and worldviews that have influenced their behavior while in those alliances and partnerships. As the title of this report implies, there are many examples from these cases that suggest that some aspects of cooperation will be difficult for both Russia and China in

²⁸ Each of these cases has been studied extensively. For this reason, this report focuses on how both countries have approached varying aspects of their relationships, including competitive aspects.

the future. These challenges might well affect the extent to which both countries are able and willing to cooperate militarily.

In this report, we also explore the current dynamics in the Sino-Russian relationship, which include the core principles of “good-neighborliness, friendship and cooperation” as well as those areas that have been traditional drivers of the relationship in recent decades.²⁹ We briefly examine defense policies and military reform efforts. Finally, our research identified a number of tensions in the relationship that are likely to shape the prospects for future alignment that will be necessary for military cooperation in a conflict.

The final component of the report involves an analysis of three scenarios. We were able to identify a wide variety of future conflict scenarios for both countries based on strategy documents, military science publications, and historical security interests. To select potential candidates for scenarios that might involve Sino-Russian military cooperation, we identified a series of crosscutting issues that addressed the following criteria: (1) the depth of interest, (2) the degree to which Russian and Chinese interests align, (3) the degree to which those interests are competitive or involve sensitive, bilateral issues not involving the other party, and (4) the potential that the Kremlin and Beijing would consider using military force to protect and defend the interests embedded in each scenario. From this process, three scenarios emerged that center on (1) Japan, (2) the Korean Peninsula, and (3) Iran and the Persian Gulf. We then evaluated each scenario to identify possible areas for military cooperation by applying an interoperability framework developed by RAND researchers.

Scope

This report is not intended to address the full spectrum of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. Its main focus is one specific element—the prospects and possibilities for operational cooperation between Russia and China in future conflict scenarios. Although we touch on broader issues—such as both countries’ past behavior toward allies and partners and strategic issues in the relationship—we do so only to identify and understand factors that may shape the decisions and ability of both sides to pursue some type of combined operation. In addition, we address issues related to military cooperation and, more specifically, operational cooperation. We address other important issues, such as diplomatic and economic support, in only a limited capacity. Nor do we address technology or arms transfer in depth. Although critical, these areas fall outside the report’s core focus of military operational cooperation.

This report is also not a forecast of future Russian and Chinese actions. It also does not discount the possibility of Russian and Chinese operational cooperation in the other scenarios we considered but did not address in this report. The three cases that we chose to exam-

²⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation,” webpage, July 24, 2001.

ine are all hypothetical scenarios of varying probability, but all three are tied to important strategic relationships that are likely to become more contentious in the future. When the project began, we attempted to rely on Russian and Chinese military science literature and official strategy publications to find common scenarios of concern for both countries. We also attempted to identify and build on the exercise scenarios used during Sino-Russian combined exercises in recent years. In both cases, neither approach provided sufficient information to develop a set of scenarios because of a lack of detailed, publicly available information, particularly in terms of specific potential future geographic contingencies.

Additionally, this report is not intended to be a military-capabilities or technical analysis detailing specific considerations on the interoperability of weapon systems. It also does not address the specific content of both Russian and Chinese operational concepts.³⁰ All of these issues are critical to understanding the type of cooperation that can take place and the extent to which both militaries can work together; however, in light of Russia's experiences in Ukraine and the general contours of the Sino-Russian relationship, there are several first-order issues that must be addressed prior to these capability and technical considerations. These issues include trust, strategic culture, self-perceptions, commonly accepted ideas about warfighting, and the alignment of interests. Each of these areas likely would play a major role in the Kremlin's and Beijing's deliberation about whether to join in a coalition operation with the other.

In the end, this report is an initial examination of the potential for Sino-Russian military cooperation in the future. It highlights several issues that require future research. Each of the major areas that we address in this report could be independent studies in their own right. Other areas—most notably, the scenario selection methodology and the interoperability framework—provide an initial, if incomplete, approach that can be employed in the future to do much more-detailed analysis on the circumstances and scenarios that might spur the Kremlin and Beijing to pursue common action and the real prospects and limits they might face in terms of interoperability.

Finally, this study was first conceived prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We began our research in the early stages of the invasion when the Russian Armed Forces' performance was surprisingly poor but it had not yet experienced the massive losses and setbacks that would follow. For this reason, our report does not address several issues that undoubtedly will shape the possibilities for future operational collaboration between Russia and China in the future. First, there should be an examination of how Russia's losses and its choices regarding reconstitution will shape its ability to conduct combined operations and in which scenarios in the future. For example, Russia's aerospace forces and navy are largely intact and

³⁰ For discussions of these topics, see Scott Boston and Dara Massicot, *The Russian Way of Warfare: A Primer*, RAND Corporation, PE-231-A, 2017; Edmund J. Burke, Kristen Gunness, Cortez A. Cooper III, and Mark Cozad, *People's Liberation Army Operational Concepts*, RAND Corporation, RR-A394-1, 2020; Cozad, Engstrom, et al., 2023; Clint Reach, Alyssa Demus, Michelle Grisé, Khrystyna Holynska, Christopher Lynch, Dara Massicot, and David Woodworth, *Russia's Evolution Toward a Unified Strategic Operation: The Influence of Geography and Conventional Capacity*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1233-8, 2023.

have experienced limited losses, while its ground force losses have been substantial. A future study might consider how this reality might shape the types of scenarios Russia could support in the future. Second, we do not fully understand if and how China's view of Russia as a suitable coalition partner might have changed based on its planning and performance in Ukraine. This is not meant to suggest that China will reconsider the value of its relationship with Russia or perhaps turn away. This is highly unlikely. However, there may be questions in Beijing about whether, in most scenarios, Russia's value as a coalition partner has been diminished and that it might be more of a strategic liability than an asset. These questions remain open and deserve in-depth study in the future.

Assumptions

This report relies on five major assumptions that, if changed, could lead to different scenarios, outcomes, and conclusions. First, the scenarios in the report are based on an assumption that the Ukraine conflict has ended or is in a state where the Kremlin may be willing to devote forces to address other security problems. Second, we assume that relations between Washington and Beijing and Washington and Moscow continue to deteriorate, and there has been no significant rapprochement in either relationship. Third, the United States remains in stable alliances and Russian and Chinese efforts to divide the United States from its key allies have not been successful. Fourth, Beijing and Moscow both continue to see their strategic partnership as critical, with leaders in both countries maintaining close personal ties and directing their subordinate institutions to follow suit. In this sense, both countries continue to build on their military-to-military relationship with neither Moscow nor Beijing ruling out military cooperation despite any existing differences over key policy issues and regional interests. Finally, we assume that Beijing and Moscow will be unlikely to consider asking for support or agreeing to support each other in those scenarios that address large-scale conflicts involving either country's most-sensitive security challenges. This assumption deals primarily with a Russian conflict with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or a Chinese conflict over Taiwan. In both cases, this assumption is based on the presence of unacceptable risks that would most likely expose and exacerbate the two countries' most-significant policy differences, including nuclear weapon use.

Report Organization

This report is divided into six chapters, including this introduction. In Chapter 2, we examine historical examples of Russian and Chinese alliance behavior and how those experiences may still shape both countries' approach to alliances today. In Chapter 3, we address the broad issues of today's friendship with "no limits." More specifically, we address the core tenets and drivers of the relationship, underlying tensions, the impact of the Ukraine war, and future prospects. In Chapter 4, we explore cooperation between the two militaries, particularly in terms of military-to-military engagements, exercises, and high-level substantive

exchanges. In Chapter 5, we provide an overview of the potential scenarios in which Russia and China might collaborate. It outlines the road to war, the general details of Russian and Chinese actions, and a breakdown of how both countries might support a combined operation. In Chapter 6, we examine the prospects and potential challenges for future cooperation. We also present implications for policymakers, commanders, and planners.

Russian and Chinese Alliance Behavior

When compared to the United States, China and Russia have considerably different experiences with alliances and partnerships, both during the Cold War and since its conclusion. Since the end of World War II, alliances and partnerships have been indispensable to the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS). Accordingly, the United States still maintains deep bilateral and multilateral alliances across a range of strategically important regions. China and Russia have placed less emphasis on alliances than the United States has, and, in those cases where they pursued alliances, they have frequently tried to ensure their own central leadership role and a tight grip on decisionmaking. In nearly all cases outside the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance (i.e., the Sino-Soviet Alliance) that existed in the early phases of the Cold War, these relationships have been characterized by major power imbalances and a patron-client (perhaps “senior-junior”) relationship in which Russia (and, earlier, the Soviet Union) and China played the senior role. In China’s cases, its role in the nonaligned movement also demonstrated a level of skepticism toward formal alliances that still shapes its worldview.¹ Both countries continued to maintain a variety of partnerships that include their mutual strategic partnership; membership in regional security organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO); and bilateral arrangements with key partners, including Belarus (Russia) and Pakistan (China).

This chapter examines how Russia (and previously the Soviet Union) and China have behaved in earlier iterations of alliances and military cooperation partnerships. To help build this understanding, we explored a limited number of historical examples that shed light on specific cases in which both countries have had to interact with allies and partners. At times, these interactions between Russia and China have been cooperative; at others, they have been competitive. For this report, we selected four major examples involving the Soviet Union prior to its dissolution, including the Warsaw Pact, North Korea, Egypt, and Vietnam. We also examined the PRC’s alliances with Vietnam and North Korea. We did not focus on present-day relationships. Instead, our intent was to identify historical patterns both in (1) Russian and Chinese approaches to their individual bilateral relationships and (2) cases in which their mutual support for such nations as Vietnam and North Korea was com-

¹ Nadège Rolland, “China’s Vision for a New World Order: Implications for the United States,” National Bureau of Asian Research, October 2, 2020.

petitive. In addition, we attempted to gain insight into how both countries have approached past allies and partners politically, militarily, socially, and culturally. Because of the scope of the report, we were able to address only a small number of possible examples. Further exploration into the cases that we were unable to explore would provide valuable additional context to future research.

Because of the historical and strategic circumstances behind each of these earlier alliances, we do not intend for this section to serve as a tool for predicting Russian and Chinese behavior, should they decide to cooperate militarily in a future crisis or conflict. These cases are also not meant to demonstrate the strength or weakness of the current Sino-Russian strategic partnership. Instead, they provide insights that may augment and contextualize more-recent observations of Russian and Chinese behavior since the end of the Cold War. Finally, these examples identify characteristics that provide insights into potential boundaries, tendencies, and expectations that may aid or inhibit today's strategic partnership, particularly in terms of military cooperation.

Alliances and Strategic Partnerships

We examined a large body of literature that addresses alliance formation and behavior.² We draw on this review to frame Russian and Chinese approaches to past alliances. For this report, we adopted Stephen Walt's definition of an *alliance* as "a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states."³ Although expansive, this definition accommodates the informal character of Russian and Chinese relationships in which they are not established by treaty or, if a treaty exists, do not contain explicit security components or guarantees in the individual agreements.

This report also makes a distinction between alliances and strategic partnerships, particularly in terms of the security cooperation element that is central to alliances. We make this distinction based on the PRC's traditional reluctance to enter formal alliances and its willingness to adopt partnership arrangements with individual states. Strategic partnerships

² Brett V. Benson, *Constructing International Security: Alliances, Deterrence, and Moral Hazard*, Cambridge University Press, 2012; Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 2, Spring 1990; Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2, January 1978; Jesse C. Johnson, "The Cost of Security: Foreign Policy Concessions and Military Alliances," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 52, No. 5, 2015; Alexander Lanoszka, *Military Alliances in the Twenty-First Century*, Polity Press, 2022; George Liska, *Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962; Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, Cornell University Press, 1997; Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, Simon and Schuster, 2008; Stephen M. Walt, "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 1997; Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell University Press, 1987.

³ Walt, 1987, p. 12. See also Michael Barnett and Jack Levy, "Domestic Sources of Alliances and Alignments: The Case of Egypt, 1962–73," *International Organization*, Vol. 45, No. 3, Summer 1991, p. 370.

have become a common feature of the current international landscape, particularly following the end of the Cold War. The term itself is only vaguely defined and frequently used to denote both competitive and cooperative relationships between states.⁴ However, the patterns of and motivation behind *strategic partnerships* have tended to take on five general characteristics: alliance-building, reassurance-based cooperation, managed great power decline, justification for cooperation within a contentious relationship, and a mechanism to balance against competing power.⁵ The strategic partnership between China and Russia clearly falls into the final category because both nations see their relationship as an essential counterbalance to the United States' dominance of the post-Cold War international system.

Perhaps the most significant and widely studied historical example of cooperation between Russia (albeit the Soviet Union) and China is the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, which was signed in early 1950. The initial impetus behind the relationship was to ensure a strong communist-bloc response to the United States and the capitalist world. At the time the treaty was signed, the Soviet Union was clearly the more powerful of the two nations because China had just emerged from a highly destructive civil war and long period of Japanese occupation prior to that. Ideological, industrial, economic, and military elements all factored heavily into the arrangement, with the Soviet Union enjoying advantages in each area. As such, it played a "senior" role in the alliance, a fact that disturbed China's leaders, most notably Mao Zedong. Ultimately, following Joseph Stalin's death, disagreements about both countries' ideological directions as well as Beijing's anger over the Kremlin's unwillingness to share the Soviet Union's most sensitive and advanced military technology and equipment led to a deterioration in relations and eventually the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s.

Both parties' experiences during the period of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance highlight several themes that shaped their future relationship and are present in today's Sino-Russian strategic partnership. First, the Soviet Union enjoyed a significant advantage in most aspects of state power—economic, industrial, military, technological, and diplomatic. However, the Soviet Union's "senior" position in the relationship proved unsustainable for Chinese leaders who viewed themselves as equal partners. Second, the Soviet Union's unwillingness to share sensitive technologies with the PRC demonstrated a lack of trust in its alliance partner. Third, the same unwillingness to share sensitive technologies reflected the Soviet Union's unwillingness to loosen its grip on any of its most significant advantages. Today's relationship in many respects has moved in the opposite direction with China as the stronger power and Russia seeking to maintain its status. Ultimately, many of

⁴ Thomas S. Wilkins, "Alignment', Not 'Alliance' – The Shifting Paradigm of International Security Cooperation: Toward a Conceptual Taxonomy of Alignment," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1, January 2012; Sean Kay, "What Is a Strategic Partnership?" *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 47, No. 3, May 2000, p. 15.

⁵ Kay, 2000, p. 16.

these behaviors as well as more competitive dimensions have been displayed by both countries in multiple subsequent partnerships.

Russia and China as Allies and Partners: Historical Examples

We will now highlight several key relationships for both the Soviet Union and China through the end of the Cold War. Ultimately, both countries have long histories as the dominant powers in their respective regions. In some cases, these spheres of influence were distinct. In others, they overlapped. Similarly, Russian and Chinese strategic cultures are both rooted in the self-perception that their nations are great civilizations and great powers, a view that factored prominently in their approach to alliance relations. These self-perceptions of greatness are central to how Russia and China approach their respective peripheries: Both powers see themselves as a mix of protector, cultural center, economic driver, and indispensable leader. For Russia, these relationships have included Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe. For China, they have defined the regional order in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and parts of Central Asia. In numerous cases that we will discuss, these cultural and competitive characteristics played a significant role in shaping both nations' key relationships.

Warsaw Pact

The Warsaw Pact, established on May 14, 1955, was the Soviet Union's most important alliance during its existence.⁶ Under Stalin, military relations between the "people's democracies" and the Soviet Union were bilateral. The Red Army occupied most of Eastern Europe, and those states that aligned with the Soviet Union were simply tasked with territorial defense. However, in the 1950s, several events led to the creation of the first formal communist alliance in the post-Stalin era. The Warsaw agreement was a response to the Federal Republic of Germany's (FRG's) admission into NATO—a move that eventually provided a sizable increase to NATO force structure. By establishing the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet Union could make up for the conventional reductions—a total of 640,000 Red Army personnel—that Nikita Khrushchev ordered in 1955. As reflected in its changing military doctrine during the 1960s, Khrushchev sought to rely more on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' (USSR's) growing nuclear arsenal and less on its ground forces. However, many Kremlin leaders still saw the need for a conventional force comparable to, and capable of countering, NATO. The Warsaw Pact alliance allowed the USSR to gain access to large numbers of Eastern European forces from its new allies.

The Warsaw agreement imposed formal ties with Moscow on the Soviet Union's new Eastern European allies. In doing so, it was designed to prevent individual states from

⁶ United Nations, Treaty of Friendship, Co-Operation and Mutual Assistance, signed at Warsaw on May 14, 1955, No. 2962, October 10, 1955.

choosing neutrality in the same manner as Austria and Finland. The day prior to the Warsaw agreement, the Soviet Union signed the Austrian neutrality agreement, which included the removal of Soviet forces from Austria—a move that Moscow did not want to see replayed with its newly minted allies. No such independence would be afforded to the communist states of Eastern Europe. With its mandated fealty, the new alliance thus served one of the Kremlin's major political goals: a security dialogue with the West that could eventually lead to the dissolution of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact, leaving the Soviet Union as the dominant military power in Europe. In fact, Article XI of the Warsaw Treaty contemplated its own elimination in case of the conclusion of a general European treaty of collective security.⁷

From its establishment in 1955 to its collapse in 1991, the Warsaw Pact served several purposes. Its primary role as a military bloc was to defend the communist states of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union from attack by NATO forces. Designed to augment Soviet forces, Moscow provided military equipment to the Pact members, often at subsidized costs.⁸ Non-Soviet Pact forces became more integral to Soviet military planning for conflict with NATO, and the alliance conducted regular exercises. For the leadership of the Warsaw Pact's non-Soviet members, the agreement was a hedge against any future return of German militarism and a means to assert some level of independence within the Soviet orbit. The satellite states used the Warsaw Pact to amend their relationship with Moscow as well as shore up their own regimes. Regardless, it was clear from the beginning that Warsaw Pact decisions would serve the Soviet Union's security interests.

Command and Organization

The Warsaw Pact's initial organizational structure was defined in a classified Statute of Unified Command.⁹ The Supreme Commander—always a Soviet General—was the Pact's most senior military leader. The postwar system of Soviet advisers within socialist armies remained in place. The Political Consultative Committee (PCC) supervised member states, but this body met only on a biannual basis and the Soviet Union largely determined its agenda. Unlike NATO, the Warsaw Pact lacked a secretariat and military committee for its day-to-day functioning. However, the treaty called for the PCC to provide political direction to the alliance in war and peace, and it provided a way to resolve military disputes among the member states.

Leadership of Warsaw Pact forces under the Unified Command remained under the Supreme High Command of the Soviet Armed Forces, although it did anticipate situations

⁷ United Nations, 1955, Article IX.

⁸ Condoleezza Rice, *The Soviet Union and the Czechoslovak Army, 1948–1983: Uncertain Allegiance*, Princeton University Press, 1984.

⁹ Lena Sirota, trans., *Statute of the Unified Command of the Member States of the Warsaw Treaty*, September 7, 1955.

in which part of an ally's army might remain under national command.¹⁰ Most Warsaw Pact countries placed only part of their forces under the Unified Command in peacetime. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) (East Germany)—which was allowed to establish its own army in 1956—was the sole exception, placing all of its forces under the Unified Command. In the end, the Soviets retained a monopoly on the Warsaw Pact's command and control (C2).

Within the PCC, Moscow exercised a great deal of discretion. In cases in which an ally would not agree with the direction of Soviet policy, that ally would be excluded from military discussions. Poland was excluded from military discussions for a short period after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution because Moscow viewed it as promoting its own reform agenda of the Warsaw Pact.¹¹ In December 1961, Albania, still a member state at the time, was precluded from attending PCCs because it supported China; China, which had observer status, was also restricted from attending PCCs unless it included the highest PRC leadership.¹² Romania was excluded from the military discussions because of its response to the Prague Spring, when Nicolae Ceaușescu criticized the Brezhnev Doctrine of limiting sovereignty, justifying the 1968 military intervention in Czechoslovakia. In 1966, the Polish leadership proposed revisions to the Statute of Unified Command that included the creation of a military staff, a military council, and a committee on technology. While most Warsaw Pact states favored the revisions, Romania frequently objected to the bulk of the reforms because it sought to keep its forces away from Soviet command.¹³ Romania also sought to prevent the use of Pact forces on a member state's territory without its consent. In the wake of its intervention in Czechoslovakia, the Kremlin acknowledged the need for reform, and the Warsaw Pact's command organization was restructured. The Unified Command appointed a permanent representative to each Warsaw Pact state along with several technical specialists.¹⁴ The Statute of Unified Command was amended, placing troops of the individual member states under national control in peacetime. Furthermore, at its meeting in March 1969, the PCC established a committee of defense ministers, a military council, and a committee on technology.

Plans and Exercises

During the first five years of the alliance, the Warsaw Pact's primary objectives centered on territorial defense and the dissolution of both the Warsaw Pact and NATO through a Euro-

¹⁰ Vasilii Dani Sokolovskii, Herbert S. Dinerstein, Leon Gouré, and Thomas W. Wolfe, *Soviet Military Strategy*, RAND Corporation, R-416-PR, April 1963, p. 495.

¹¹ Vojtech Mastny and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *A Cardboard Castle? An Inside History of the Warsaw Pact 1955–1991*, CEU Press, 2005, pp. 9–10.

¹² Mastny and Byrne, 2005, pp. 19–20.

¹³ In 1968, Romania objected to the creation of a Military Council; in 1976, it opposed the creation of a standardization agency for the alliance; and, in 1980, when member states adopted a statute on unified forces and wartime command, Ceaușescu left the meeting without signing the agreement.

¹⁴ Mastny and Byrne, 2005, p. 17.

pean security agreement. In 1961, however, the failure of the United States to yield on the status of West Berlin changed the dynamic of U.S.-Soviet relations and the Warsaw Pact began to transform itself from a territorially defensive organization to one that adopted a strategy employing rapid counteroffensives to fight NATO.¹⁵ This change in Soviet strategy called for greater participation by non-Soviet Warsaw Pact states. The Soviets increased the supply of military equipment and stockpiles of ammunition to Warsaw Pact members and added technicians to accompany some of the new weapon systems. Eastern European air defenses were integrated into the Soviet air defense system.¹⁶ Despite the emphasis on greater integration, Soviet planning remained unilateral and opaque to its non-Soviet members.

Beginning in 1961, joint exercises occurred in Poland with the participation of the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the GDR. Approximately 24 Warsaw Pact exercises were held between 1961 and 1967 with the primary focus on conflict in northern Europe.¹⁷ In April 1961, a separate Polish front was established, and, shortly after the Berlin Crisis that August, the first exercise modeled on a counteroffensive into Western Europe took place. Integrated planning for a conflict with NATO could be seen as early as 1962 with Soviet allies expected to contribute to a conventional and nuclear conflict with NATO.¹⁸

In the early 1960s, Soviet military thinking assumed that any conventional war would rapidly escalate to the use of tactical nuclear weapons, and its plans and exercises were developed accordingly. In April 1963, the alliance held exercise Mazowsze in Poland. Its backdrop was a nuclear war with NATO.¹⁹ In the exercise scenario, the Soviets would launch preemptive nuclear strikes to defeat NATO forces. Non-Soviet Warsaw Pact military leaders recognized that such a strategy would leave their countries in ruin—Soviet doctrine was based on the presumption that conflict with NATO would rapidly pass the nuclear threshold and could cause casualties among an estimated 60–70 percent of the total population.²⁰

Furthermore, Soviet operational plans were poorly coordinated. According to Polish General Tadeusz Tuczapski, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations of the Polish Armed Forces at the time, the Soviets did not share the details of their operational planning. Military staffs of non-Soviet Warsaw Pact members had to divine the general outline of Soviet plans, which were drawn up in Moscow and rarely shared outside the Soviet General Staff.²¹

¹⁵ Mastny and Byrne, 2005, p. 15.

¹⁶ John M. Caravelli, "Soviet and Joint Warsaw Pact Exercises: Functions and Utility," *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Spring 1983, p. 394.

¹⁷ Caravelli, 1983, p. 396.

¹⁸ Caravelli, 1983, p. 397–398.

¹⁹ Mastny and Byrne, 2005, pp. 140–146.

²⁰ Rice, 1984, p. 98.

²¹ Mastny and Byrne, 2005, p. 48.

The most detailed account of the integration between the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies came from a 1964 war plan that surfaced after the collapse of the Soviet Union.²² In that plan, non-Soviet Warsaw Pact states had specific roles in the execution of a conflict with NATO: Poland was to strike Denmark and take parts of northern Germany, the Czechoslovakian army was to push through southern Germany, Hungary was to go through Munich and northern Italy, and Bulgaria was to take on Turkey.²³ The Soviet Group of Forces in Germany was to drive through the Fulda gap on three fronts, with the East German army playing a supporting role because of Soviet concerns about pitting East German forces against those of the FRG.²⁴

In addition to confronting NATO, Warsaw Pact forces on occasion used exercises as a way to try to influence non-Soviet member states that were taking a politically divergent path from Moscow. During the Prague Spring in 1968, Warsaw Pact forces carried out exercise Sumava on Czechoslovakia's territory to put pressure on the government to roll back its reforms. To the consternation of the Czechoslovak leadership, which questioned the legality of Warsaw Pact forces to remain in the territory of a member state without its consent, the Soviet Union extended the exercise.²⁵ Some of those same forces from the Sumava exercise would go on to participate in the August 20 invasion of Czechoslovakia.²⁶ It is notable that during this invasion, which included the participation of five Warsaw Pact states, command of the operation was not given to the Warsaw Pact Commander-in-Chief; rather, it was delegated to the commander of Soviet ground forces.²⁷

After the turmoil of 1968 and substantive reforms to the Statute on Unified Command, large-scale Warsaw Pact exercises resumed through the Brezhnev era. In October 1969, exercise Oder-Neisse—the largest Warsaw Pact exercise to that point—involved Soviet, Polish, East German and Czechoslovak militaries. The exercise led to an agreement by the Warsaw Pact's Military Council to shorten alarm times and a call from the Committee of Defense Ministers for increased conventional and nuclear capabilities. Naval exercises were held in the Baltic Sea in 1971.²⁸

²² Antonín Novotný, "Plan of Action of the Czechoslovak People's Army for War Period," October 11, 1964, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Central Military Archives, Prague, 008074/ZD-OS 64, trans. by Svetlana Savranskaya and Anna Locher, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Record ID 111624, November 20, 2011.

²³ Mastny and Byrne, 2005, pp. 22–23.

²⁴ Mastny and Byrne, 2005, p. 22.

²⁵ Laurien Crump, *The Warsaw Pact Reconsidered: International Relations in Eastern Europe, 1955–69*, Routledge, 2017, pp. 264–265.

²⁶ Romania was the exception because it refused to participate and publicly condemned the action.

²⁷ Caravelli, 1983, pp. 411–412.

²⁸ The naval exercise Herbstsstrum 71 simulated offensive operations against Denmark and the seizure of Gotland Island.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War was a watershed moment for the alliance. Alliance leaders viewed the defeat of Egyptian and Syrian forces as reflecting poorly on Soviet-made equipment, especially air defense systems. As a result, in March 1974, the Warsaw Pact's Military Council called for new air defense systems and more automated C2. The mid-1970s was the height of non-Soviet participation in the Warsaw Pact, with 20–40 percent of offensive forces coming from non-Soviet Pact members. Exercises included the 1977 Zapad exercise in the GDR and the 1979 Shield exercise in Hungary. The Shield exercise was an offensive-oriented action with Soviet, Czechoslovak, and Bulgarian participation. The zenith of exercises with Warsaw Pact member participation—Soviet exercise Zapad-81—took place in September of that year and practiced the Soviet concept of the operational maneuver group.²⁹

The late 1980s saw the emergence of a different political direction with the ascendancy of Mikhail Gorbachev as head of the USSR's Politburo. Gorbachev's emphasis on detente and arms control accelerated as he sought significant reductions in conventional and nuclear forces. Doing so required a revision to the long-standing doctrine of rapid counteroffensives, leading Gorbachev's supporters to argue for a strategy of active or sufficient defense. The new doctrine held that the Warsaw Pact needed sufficient military forces to defend against an attacker only long enough to allow time for a political settlement. The effect on the Warsaw Pact's military strategy was to turn it from an offensive-based doctrine to one of sufficient defense. In 1989, the doctrine was applied to its final Vltava exercise, held in Czechoslovakia, which was defensive in nature and reflected the Kremlin's new strategy.³⁰

Political

A continuing problem for Soviet military planning was the reliability of its other Warsaw Pact members. This unreliability occurred despite the fact that several non-Soviet Warsaw Pact countries had genuine security issues that they thought the alliance could solve. Poland was concerned about the rearming of a German state and sought to have the FRG recognize the Oder–Neisse line as the final border between the two states. The FRG's recognition eventually came with Chancellor Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik ("Eastern Policy") in 1970. Under President Walter Ulbricht, the GDR sought international recognition as a separate German state and viewed membership in the Pact as one way to achieve this objective. However, these security interests did not preclude other members from seeking a greater measure of independence.

In the wake of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956, Budapest, under the short-term leadership of Imre Nagy, tried to leave the alliance only to have the Red Army crack down on Hungary. During the Sino-Soviet split, Albania broke from the Soviet orbit, aligning itself more with the PRC position that was critical of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization effort and his policy of peaceful coexistence with nonsocialist states. Albania was successful in getting the Soviet Navy to leave its port in Vlorë in 1961 and formally left the Warsaw Pact in 1968 after the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Under Ceaușescu, Romania habitually sought

²⁹ Mastny and Byrne, 2005.

³⁰ Mastny and Byrne, 2005.

an independent course, declaring it would pursue its own foreign policy in 1964. As a result, Romania frustrated many of the Soviet initiatives within the alliance, such as agreements on the Supreme Command in wartime that would place Warsaw Pact forces essentially under the command of the Soviet General Staff. While the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 by forces from five Warsaw Pact states demonstrated the ability of the organization to act in coordination for military intervention, it also showed that the alliance could not count on the armed forces of Czechoslovakia.³¹

In addition to the practical defense value of Warsaw Pact, the alliance was used to further Soviet foreign policy goals. Until roughly 1960, joint exercises and structural reforms served to send a political message to the West. The Soviet Union sought reductions in NATO forces and the elimination of the two multilateral alliances altogether.³² Article XI of the Warsaw Pact anticipated a European treaty on collective security that would render the Pact obsolete and, at the same time, exclude the United States as a power on the continent.

The Warsaw Pact formally came to an end in 1991, however, its decline began in the mid-to late 1980s as Gorbachev sought political reform within the Soviet Union. This included a call for substantial reductions in nuclear and conventional forces to match new thinking on military strategy. Beginning at the PCC in May 1987 and amplified in subsequent meetings, the new Warsaw Pact doctrine was intended to be defensive with the objective of preventing war. In 1988, Gorbachev announced a reduction in the Soviet Armed Forces of 500,000 troops, and the Warsaw Pact adopted its new doctrine of defense based on “reasonable sufficiency” to repel an invader’s attack but not being able to launch a surprise offensive themselves.³³ A call for reductions in conventional force structure of the non-Soviet member states followed shortly thereafter.³⁴ Furthermore, Gorbachev was unwilling to maintain the alliance through coercion, and, in 1989, all non-Soviet governments of the alliance collapsed in peaceful or violent transitions of power. The new governments sought a different security relationship in Europe. The first to leave was the GDR on September 25, 1990, in anticipation of its formal reunification with the FRG. Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland followed suit after the Soviet crackdown on Lithuanian and Latvian independence groups in January 1991. By March 1991, the Soviets gave up command of the alliance, and, at the final PCC on July 1 of that year, the Warsaw Pact was formally dissolved.

³¹ Rice, 1984; Matthias Uhl, “Soviet and Warsaw Pact Military Strategy from Stalin to Brezhnev: The Transformation from ‘Strategic Defense’ to ‘Unlimited Nuclear War,’ 1945–1968,” in Jan Hoffenaar and Dieter Krüger, eds., *Blueprints for Battle: Planning for War in Central Europe, 1948–1968*, University Press of Kentucky, 2012.

³² Caravelli, 1983, p. 397.

³³ John G. Hines and Donald Mahoney, *Defense and Counter Offensive Under the New Soviet Military Doctrine*, RAND Corporation, R-3982-USDP, 1991, pp. 27–29.

³⁴ Hines and Mahoney, 1991, p. 30.

Lessons Learned from the Warsaw Pact

The Warsaw Pact served as the Kremlin's first experience managing junior partners in a multilateral alliance. The alliance had the advantage of providing Moscow with additional manpower and material resources in case of conflict with the West. However, it was not without its challenges. Even though the Soviet Union was the senior and dominant partner in the alliance, it had constant difficulties with other members that sought to exercise more independence. Alliance members such as Romania, Czechoslovakia, and—to a degree—Poland sought reforms in the mid-1960s because of a growing frustration with Soviet unilateralism. The initial Statute on Unified Command, which gave a political mask to the alliance while retaining military control through the Soviet General Staff, was always a point of contention within the alliance. The Supreme Command was always a Soviet general, and there was no military staff made up of alliance officers who were knowledgeable about Warsaw Pact plans. The assumption on the part of the Soviets was that the allies would go along with the senior partner's direction even though the junior allies would suffer the brunt of the destruction. Ultimately, the Kremlin had to concede to its junior member states a greater measure of political and military influence.

Related to the issue of unilateralism was the coercive character of the Warsaw Pact, which undermined the Soviet Union's ability to count on several of its allies, as seen in the case of Hungary, Albania, Romania, and Czechoslovakia. Throughout the Soviet Union's existence, there always seemed to be at least one ally that could not be relied on in the case that conflict broke out, as was seen in the case of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Even Romania was an unreliable ally that sought to exclude its forces from the control of the Supreme Command and undermine the political positions of its senior partner within the PCC. These concerns endured as late as 1980–1981, when the Soviets considered intervening in Poland to crush the Solidarity movement. As a result, while planning for conflict with NATO continued throughout the existence of the alliance, a lack of trust was an ever-present characteristic in the relationship.

Soviet Union and Egypt

Soviet military cooperation was not exclusive to countries that shared a similar ideological view. The case of Egypt exemplifies how one of Moscow's strongest alliances was with a non-communist state. The security objectives pursued by the Soviet Union through its alliance with Egypt from 1955 through the mid-1970s varied over the two-decade period. Prior to Stalin's death in 1953, Soviet foreign policy was focused on securing the territories surrounding the USSR. Under Khrushchev, the policy changed. Under the umbrella of *peaceful coexistence*, competition with the West was to be nonmilitary and take place beyond the bounds of Europe.³⁵ The Soviet Union sought to use the nonaligned countries and the decolonization movement to its advantage. This included supporting governments that did not adhere

³⁵ Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War Two to Gorbachev*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 44.

to a communist ideology but instead pursued what was referred to as a “non-capitalist road of development.”³⁶ This was no truer than in its relations with Egypt from the 1950s until Khrushchev was ousted in October 1964. In fact, even President of Egypt Gamel Abdel Nasser’s 1959 crackdown on Egyptian communists did not preclude Moscow’s close relationship with Cairo.

Nasser sought out a deeper relationship with Moscow after being rebuffed by the West when he sought greater military assistance to balance against Israel. For the Soviets, establishing a cooperative relationship with Egypt was a means to counter Western influence in the Middle East, which was furthered by the Baghdad Pact of 1955 and which Nasser also opposed.³⁷ Under Nasser, Egypt served as a channel for the Soviets to the Arab world; in turn, some in the Arab world, such as Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi, saw Egypt as a conduit to Moscow.³⁸ As a means to achieve greater influence in the Middle East, the Soviets provided economic aid and funding to build the Aswan Dam as well as security assistance in the form of weapons, training, and technical assistance. Still, the relationship between the two countries was tense from the beginning because Nasser and other members of the Egyptian leadership felt betrayed by Soviet actions during the Suez crisis of 1956. When Israel attacked Egypt, the Soviets quickly pulled their trainers out and waited until the crisis was almost over to provide support for Egypt.³⁹ The sense among the Egyptian leadership that the Kremlin would place its own interests before the defense of Egypt continued throughout their relationship.

During the period of 1955 to 1973, Egypt was the leading recipient of Soviet military assistance among the developing countries, receiving approximately \$3.1 billion in military aid from the USSR.⁴⁰ Because the Soviets were trying to balance their relationship between Israel and the Arab world, Czechoslovakia provided initial military assistance to Egypt in 1956. However, much of the equipment that passed through Prague was subsequently destroyed or disabled during the Suez crisis.⁴¹ As a result, both Egypt and the Soviet Union decided to double down on their military cooperation and concluded a formal agreement on military assistance the following year. The Soviet Union provided Egypt with military equipment at discounted prices, including advanced aircraft (such as the Mig-21 and the SA-2 surface-to-air missile [SAM] T-54), T-55 tanks, armored personnel carriers, destroyers, submarines, and

³⁶ Jesse Ferris, “Soviet Support for Egypt’s Intervention in Yemen, 1962–1963,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 4, Fall 2008, p. 25. See also Guy Laron, “Stepping Back from the Third World: Soviet Policy Toward the United Arab Republic, 1965–1967,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2010, pp. 101–103.

³⁷ Walt, 1987, pp. 58–59.

³⁸ Ferris, 2008, p. 8.

³⁹ Golan, 1990, pp. 52–53.

⁴⁰ Roger F. Pajak, “Soviet Arms and Egypt,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 1975, p. 165.

⁴¹ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *Intelligence Report: Soviet Military Aid to the United Arab Republic, 1955–66*, RR IR 67-9, March 1967, p. 14.

small patrol boats.⁴² In addition, the Soviets provided extensive training of Egyptian military personnel. Some of the training occurred in the Soviet Union at its numerous military academies, with Egyptian students making up a significant portion of the 20,000 Arab students who trained in the Soviet Union between 1955 and 1979.⁴³ In addition, the Soviet Union sent hundreds of technicians to assist the Egyptian military in setting up and running the newly procured hardware. Egypt's military was reorganized along Soviet organizational and operational lines.

Egyptian Intervention in Yemen

In late September or early October 1962, around the time of the Cuban missile crisis, Khrushchev responded to an urgent Egyptian request to support intervention in Yemen. North Yemen's leader Imam Muhammad al-Badr was overthrown by Egyptian trained military officers in their attempt to establish a revolutionary government. Nasser sought to back the coup plotters with military force; however, Egyptian Air Force transports lacked the range to conduct an effective deployment and resupply of its forces, and Soviet airlift was needed. The Kremlin provided the requested air support in the form of 15 An-12 transport aircraft that would shuttle Egyptian forces to help the newly established regime in Sanaa.⁴⁴ The aircraft were painted in Egyptian colors and the Soviet crews flying them were disguised as civilian contractors for the Egyptian government.⁴⁵ Several weeks later, two squadrons of Tu-16 bombers, manned by mixed crews of Soviet instructors and Egyptian pilot trainees, conducted sorties against the Yemeni opposition from Cairo. Throughout the conflict, the Soviets provided aircrews to Egypt and a small number of advisors to the government in Yemen. They also provided logistical support to runway construction and replenished Egypt with the supplies and equipment that they transferred to the Yemeni revolutionary forces.

Despite their assistance during Egypt's intervention in Yemen, the USSR sought to limit their role, preferring that Egypt take the lead. Requests for additional Soviet personnel to be deployed in Yemen were turned down. The only exception to this policy occurred in cases in which there were an insufficient number of trained Egyptian pilots to operate the An-12s or the Tu-16 bombers. Once the Egyptian aircrews were trained, they took over the air responsibilities, although this training took up to three years. When Soviet airmen did support Egyptian operations, they usually fell under Egyptian command.⁴⁶

⁴² CIA, 1967, pp. 7–11. For the favorable terms that the Soviets gave Egypt for military purchases, see Pajak, 1975, p. 165.

⁴³ Michael Eisenstadt and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Armies of Snow and Armies of Sand: The Impact of Soviet Military Doctrine on Arab Militaries," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 4, September 2001, p. 553.

⁴⁴ Ferris, 2008, pp. 5–6.

⁴⁵ Ferris, 2008, p. 17.

⁴⁶ Ferris, 2008, p. 32.

Prior to the Six-Day War

The Soviet commitment to Egypt changed after Khrushchev's removal and the Politburo reassessed the value of economic subsidies and supplying nonaligned states with heavily discounted Soviet-made weapons. Now, economic trade was to be emphasized in its foreign relations. As a result, from 1965 until the outbreak of the Six-Day War in June 1967, the Soviets sought to alter Egypt's dependency on its economic aid and military assistance.⁴⁷ The post-Khrushchev Kremlin wanted Nasser to scale back his intervention in Yemen, which was costly and negatively affecting the Egyptian economy.

At the same time, Soviet interest in naval and air basing in the Mediterranean Sea, especially among members of the Soviet General Staff, became acute following the Cuban Missile Crisis.⁴⁸ The Kremlin had a global interest in a military presence in the Mediterranean because of the threat posed by the U.S. Sixth Fleet and U.S. submarines carrying Polaris missiles close to the USSR's southern border.⁴⁹ Moscow had lost its primary port in the Mediterranean Sea when it withdrew its naval forces from the Vlorë naval base in Albania as a result of a dispute between the Kremlin and Enver Hoxha, Albania's prime minister.⁵⁰ As a result, Egypt was viewed by Chief of the Soviet Navy Admiral Sergey Gorshkov as the best location for his forces to monitor and potentially challenge the Sixth Fleet. However, Egypt had resisted Soviet proposals for such basing because Nasser viewed such a foreign presence as characteristic of colonial powers. However, in 1967, Egypt—along with Syria and Jordan—anticipated another war with Israel, and thus Nasser was in need of more Soviet weaponry. This need overcame Egyptian resistance to a greater Soviet presence, and, in 1968, the two countries concluded initial basing agreements desired by the Soviet leadership.⁵¹

Six-Day War

In the mid-1960s, Egypt was viewed as having one of the most-capable militaries in the Middle East. This image was shattered in early June 1967 when the Israeli Air Force rapidly decimated its Egyptian counterpart, and Egypt suffered similar losses of numbers of Soviet-made tanks and ships. Instead of reassessing the value of its alliance with Egypt, the Soviets began to rapidly make up for Egyptian losses, even airlifting replacement weapons during the

⁴⁷ Laron, 2010, pp. 104–108.

⁴⁸ Oles M. Smolansky, "The Soviet Setback in the Middle East," *Current History*, Vol. 64, No. 377, 1973, p. 19; Ferris, 2008, p. 27.

⁴⁹ Dima P. Adamsky, "Zero-Hour for the Bears: Inquiring into the Soviet Decision to Intervene in the Egyptian-Israeli War of Attrition, 1969–70," *Cold War History*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2006, p. 118.

⁵⁰ Mastny and Byrne, 2005, pp. 108–115.

⁵¹ Adamsky, 2006, p. 118. The Soviet-Egyptian Treaty on Military-Naval Privileges was ratified in April 1968.

conflict. By the end of June, Moscow had sent 130 replacement fighters, and, within a year, Egyptian force levels were near the same as they were prior to the war.⁵²

The defeat of Egypt in the Six-Day War ushered in a period of increased military sales and an expansion of the role of Soviet advisors and technicians.⁵³ Egypt desperately needed to rebuild its forces, and the Soviets saw an opportunity to expand their basing requirements and gain a more secure foothold in the Arab world. After the Six-Day War, Soviet military advisors and technical specialists were sent to improve the capabilities of the Egyptian armed services. Nasser allowed Soviet personnel to permeate Egypt's armed forces at all levels. The USSR increased the number of advisors to approximately 3,000. Soviet ground advisors were assigned at the battalion level and sometimes company level to oversee regular training exercises.

Egypt deferred to Soviet advice on some personnel and assignment selection issues.⁵⁴ In the air, approximately 100 Soviet pilots were assigned to the Egyptian Air Force, in which they not only instructed Egyptians but also participated in operational exercises.⁵⁵ More-senior Egyptian officers were replaced by ones who had received training in the USSR. Advisors were an integral part of the Egyptian force structure and supervised the day-to-day training of the Egyptian military. Soviet advisors were present at all echelons of Egypt's military.

In return for its military support, the Soviets gained additional basing access in Egypt.⁵⁶ The USSR received docking and repair facilities in Alexandria and Port Said and was also allowed to base naval patrol aircraft in Egypt to monitor the U.S. Sixth Fleet. Electronic surveillance aircraft, which bore Egyptian markings but were crewed by Soviet military personnel, also operated out of Egypt.⁵⁷

Between the Six-Day War and Anwar Sadat's expulsion of the Russians in summer 1972, the Soviets were highly integrated in the command structures of the Egyptian military. However, assistance to Egypt was not without limitations. For example, prior to the Six-Day War, Egypt requested that the newly operational Soviet Mig-25 reconnaissance aircraft be delivered to its Air Force but was resoundingly rejected. After the Six-Day War, Egypt continued to ask for deliveries of the Soviet Union's most advanced weapons, such as the Mig-23 and Su-27 aircraft, but Moscow refused. The Soviets were concerned about Egypt's ability to utilize the newer systems; in addition, they did not want to allow Egypt to escalate tensions in the Middle East. On the part of the Soviets, there was a perception that its more

⁵² Pajak, 1975, p. 166.

⁵³ For an analysis on the number of Soviet personnel during this period, see Ariel Vitan, "The Soviet Military Presence in Egypt 1967–1972: A New Perspective," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 1995.

⁵⁴ Pajak, 1975, p. 167.

⁵⁵ Pajak, 1975, p. 167.

⁵⁶ Golan, 1990, p. 56.

⁵⁷ Pajak, 1975, p. 168.

advanced weapons could not be managed by Egypt. This attitude bothered Egypt and was viewed as condescending.⁵⁸

War of Attrition

Weapons, advisors, and technical assistance were ultimately not enough to meet Egypt's defense needs, which became clear during the 1969–1970 War of Attrition with Israel. In 1969, Egypt began launching commando raids across the ceasefire line into Sinai. Israel responded by using air power to strike at targets far into Egypt. Egyptian forces were unable to stop the Israeli attacks. At Cairo's request, the Soviets introduced organic military air defense and aviation units to counter Israel's initial air superiority. According to some estimates, the number of Soviet personnel in Egypt rose as high as 20,000. Soviet Sa-3 SAM units along with an influx of Soviet fighter pilots flying the latest version of the Mig-21 provided to Egypt were ultimately successful in bringing the conflict to a stalemate.⁵⁹

According to Dima Adamsky, the original purpose for sending the Soviet Air Defense Forces, which were preparing to deploy well in advance of the Egyptian request in the War of Attrition, was to protect Soviet naval and air assets stationed in Egypt.⁶⁰ Planning for Operation Kavkaz began in the summer of 1969—before Egyptian air defenses had been decimated. The contingent consisted of a Soviet air defense division, two regiments of Mig-21s, and other lighter anti-aircraft systems totaling about 10,000 personnel.⁶¹ The original mission of protecting Soviet assets in Egypt changed as Israel broadened its air campaign and the Soviets saw Nasser's regime as being in jeopardy and its reputation as the primary provider of weapons to the Arab world at risk. The presence and effectiveness of the Soviet air defenses initially caused an escalation in the fight as the USSR and Israel fought over Egyptian skies. Once the main areas of the Egyptian hinterland were secure, Soviet air defenses gradually moved eastward toward the front lines in the Sinai. However, fearing greater escalation, the two superpowers were able to impose a ceasefire on Egypt and Israel in August 1970. With the introduction of organic Soviet air defense and air force units during the War of Attrition, the Soviets had set up a system that mirrored their own doctrine but required that it remain under their own control.⁶²

Yom Kippur War

Despite Cairo's dependence on Soviet military capabilities, the relationship between the Soviet Union and Egypt was a tenuous one, and Egypt pursued its own interests independent

⁵⁸ Laron, 2010, p. 107.

⁵⁹ Golan, 1990, p. 73.

⁶⁰ Adamsky, 2006, p. 128.

⁶¹ Adamsky, 2006, p. 124.

⁶² Adamsky, 2006, p. 120.

of the wishes of Moscow.⁶³ Moscow wanted to be perceived as a strong supporter of its Arab allies but still avoid a military solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. As Galia Golan best summarized it, the Kremlin's perpetual problem was that it wanted to arm the Arab states for war yet limit them to political action.⁶⁴

The relationship between the USSR and Egypt deteriorated rapidly before the Yom Kippur War under Nasser's successor Sadat. Sadat planned to retake Sinai by force and was frustrated with Moscow's reluctance to provide its most modern weapons to Egypt.⁶⁵ The Kremlin wanted to avoid another military conflict in the Middle East and slowly rolled back the weapon sales. At the time, Brezhnev was also trying to achieve his objective of a detente with the West and feared another Arab-Israeli conflict would undermine this objective.⁶⁶

In July 1972, Sadat ordered the withdrawal of organic Soviet military personnel from Egypt, leaving a much smaller number of Soviet advisors behind.⁶⁷ The issue that precipitated the order was the lack of Soviet support to effect a change in the stalemate over the Israeli occupation of Sinai and, as a result, the continued closure of the Suez Canal. While the Soviet Air Force and air defenses had stabilized the conflict in 1970 and stopped Israeli long-range strikes into Egypt, the USSR was unwilling to provide Egypt with more-advanced air-to-ground aircraft and Scud missile launchers, which Sadat saw as indispensable for ejecting Israel from the Sinai Peninsula.⁶⁸ Seeing no benefit from the large Soviet presence and drawing on Egypt's historical opposition to colonial forces being stationed in its territory, Sadat ejected most of the Soviet personnel, allowing only 700–800 to remain.

Despite the humiliation of having its organic forces kicked out of Egypt, the Soviets were not willing to give up on the partnership and, after six months of negotiations, came to a new agreement with Sadat.⁶⁹ The Kremlin would provide Egypt with the new Sa-6 SAM, Soviet advisers, and Scud tactical ballistic missile systems with conventional warheads under Soviet control.⁷⁰ Even though the Soviets were likely aware of Arab plans to strike Israel again in 1973, they did not want to alienate Egypt. In the spring of that year, they proceeded to provide more advanced weaponry to Egypt in exchange for payment in hard currency. Despite what the Politburo viewed as many missteps on the part of Nasser and later Sadat, the Soviets continued to serve as a relatively reliable partner for military equipment.

⁶³ Laron, 2010, pp. 99–100.

⁶⁴ Golan, 1990, p. 71.

⁶⁵ Walt, 1987, pp. 115–116. Specifically, Egypt asked for Mig-23 and Mig-25 aircraft and Scud tactical ballistic missile systems (Golan, 1990, p. 77).

⁶⁶ Golan, 1990, pp. 78–79.

⁶⁷ Smolansky, 1973, pp. 18–19.

⁶⁸ Smolansky, 1973, p. 18.

⁶⁹ Walt, 1987, p. 117.

⁷⁰ Golan, 1990, pp. 82–84.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War saw a repeat of heavy Egyptian military losses. At the outbreak of the war, the Soviets called for an immediate ceasefire, which angered Sadat because Egypt was initially able to retake part of the Sinai. However, the tide turned shortly thereafter, and Israel was able to encircle Egypt's Third Army on the eastern shores of the canal. The Soviets immediately began an air and sea resupply of its allies in the Middle East. The prospect of another resounding defeat of its Egyptian ally that had relied on Soviet weaponry and Soviet advisors was too much for the Kremlin. Therefore, Moscow threatened Israel and the United States with direct intervention in the conflict in the form of ground forces. That threat was credited with persuading the United States and Israel to agree to a ceasefire and save Egypt's Third Army from destruction. To make up for these losses, Soviet arms shipments continued after the ceasefire, and, within a year after the war, Egypt's aircraft and tanks were replenished to close to prewar levels.⁷¹ If Soviet weaponry was not perceived as superior to that of the West, Moscow was going to ensure that it would be a reliable supplier.

In the end, Sadat turned away from the Soviets in favor of Western support, a policy that was continued by his successor Hosni Mubarak. Several factors brought the Soviet alliance with Egypt to an end. No longer confident in the ability to leverage Soviet arms and support to impose a favorable peace settlement on Israel, Egypt turned to the United States to achieve its policy goals through a political settlement. President Sadat sought U.S. support in exchange for peace with Israel and substantial economic aid and expelled the Soviet ambassador in September 1981.⁷²

Egypt Lessons Learned

The Soviet Union's partnership with Egypt was one of many that the Kremlin developed in the Middle East during the Cold War. Iraq, Libya, and Syria all had similar relationships that fluctuated between cooperation and frustration for both the Soviet trainers and their Middle Eastern partners. The Soviet-Egyptian relationship provides insight into Soviet (and by extension Russian) patterns of behavior toward allies and partners in several key areas. First, the Soviets provided Egypt with many of the most-advanced weapons available in their inventory along with training. However, there were limits to what the Soviets would provide. In several cases, the Soviets either denied or were slow to deliver their most advanced systems—even in times of crisis.

Second, despite the strategic significance that Egypt held in Soviet defense strategy, the Soviet Union was reluctant to involve itself in conflicts that might involve the United States and its allies in the region. The Soviets went to great lengths to train Egyptian military officers in multiple areas, such as military planning, command, and staff functions, as well as to supply technical and tactical training specifically focused on Soviet weapon systems. Large

⁷¹ It should be noted that Soviet weapons airlifted during and after the Yom Kippur War were paid for in hard currency and not supplied to Egypt in the form of military aid. Pajak, 1975, pp. 169–170.

⁷² Robert O. Freedman, "Patterns of Soviet Policy Towards the Middle East," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 482, No. 1, November 1985, p. 50.

numbers of Egyptian officers attended military schools and academies in the Soviet Union. Similarly large numbers of Soviet trainers taught Egyptian personnel in Egypt in operations and tactics. However, in wartime situations, the Soviets were careful to separate themselves from their Egyptian military clients and not become actively involved in military operations because of concerns over escalation.

Finally, one of the key sticking points that dogged the Soviet-Egyptian relationship was the disdain that military personnel on both sides felt for one another. Soviet trainers generally looked down on their Egyptian counterparts and were dismissive of their skills and ability to master Soviet operational art and tactics. Similarly, Egyptian officers frequently questioned the skill and technical proficiency of their Soviet trainers and partners and generally considered them to be condescending and disrespectful. Ultimately, these tensions played a significant role in Sadat's decision to terminate Egypt's relationship with the Soviet Union and seek a new one with the United States.

Korea

The Early Experience of Sino-Soviet Cooperation

The first example of Soviet military cooperation with the PRC came during the Korean War. With the blessing of Stalin and Mao, North Korean communist forces of the Korean People's Army (KPA) crossed the 38th parallel in an attempt to reunify the Korean Peninsula as a socialist state on June 25, 1950.⁷³ The initial campaign by the North appeared to go well as the KPA rapidly captured Seoul and drove South Korean forces back to the Pusan perimeter. In response, U.S. President Harry S. Truman committed significant U.S. forces under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) to turn the tide of the war. On September 15, 1950, the United States and its allies made an amphibious landing at Inchon, recapturing Seoul within two weeks and driving the KPA back toward the border of the PRC along the Yalu River.⁷⁴ It was at this point on October 19, 1950, that Beijing entered the war on a massive scale to prevent the collapse of the Kim Il-sung regime and stop UN forces from consolidating control of the entire peninsula. The Soviets also intervened to help North Korea with air power, which the PRC desperately sought from Moscow. Eventually, North Korean and Chinese ground forces were able to push UN forces back to the 38th parallel where the conflict eventually resulted in a stalemate. The conflict lasted more than three years before an armistice was signed in July 1953. This section will describe the military cooperation between the Soviet Union and the PRC during the Korean War as a case study of Sino-Soviet military collaboration.

The War in Korea

The Korean War brought together three communist regimes. At the end of World War II, the Korean Peninsula was occupied in the North by Soviet forces and in the South by U.S. forces,

⁷³ William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History*, Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 10–13.

⁷⁴ Max Hastings, *The Korean War*, Touchstone, 1987, pp. 99–114.

roughly divided along the 38th parallel. Attempts to unify the peninsula under a trusteeship were unsuccessful, and eventually the USSR and the United States agreed to allow two states to be created in their respective occupation zones.⁷⁵ Kim established the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the North in September 1948, one month after Syngman Rhee set up the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the South. Soviet forces withdrew from the North in 1948, followed by the U.S. military withdrawal from the South in 1949. Kim's primary goal was the unification of the peninsula under his tutelage. Kim owed his power to the USSR, relying on Soviet advisers and on Soviet economic and military support to maintain power.

China was coming out of a 20-year civil war in which Mao was finally successful in driving the Nationalist or Kuomintang (KMT) forces from the mainland. The PRC was established on October 1, 1949, but it faced a number of challenges. Economically, the PRC was looking to transition from an agrarian to an industrial nation. Militarily, it possessed a large land army, but manpower was needed to revitalize the economy. The PLA relied on the Soviet Union for its weapons, and it did not establish an air force until November 1949. The lack of an air force was a hindrance to Mao's plans to finish off the KMT. He sought to invade Taiwan in 1950, but the inexperience and lack of resources of the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) resulted in KMT air raids on coastal cities such as Shanghai. As a result, the PRC was deferential to Moscow in its security and foreign policy activities.⁷⁶

At this time, the Soviet Union was recovering from World War II and was embroiled in the initial phases of the Cold War with the West. Stalin was consolidating power in Eastern Europe, and Moscow was working hard to develop its own atomic capability. During World War II, Moscow had provided support to the KMT to the consternation of the Chinese communists. Stalin anticipated that a postwar China would be governed by a regime in Beijing that resulted in a compromise between the two factions. However, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) gained the upper hand in the civil war, Moscow changed its support in favor of Mao and began to view a communist-led China as a strong addition to the socialist bloc.⁷⁷

Stalin's primary concern in the Far East was resolving its claims to the northern islands of Japan and preventing a resurgence of Japanese military power in the future. Therefore, Moscow initially sought a unified Korea that would have friendly relations with the USSR. Once Korea was divided ideologically, Stalin backed the Kim regime. Although he was sympathetic to Kim's desire for reunification, Stalin did not want to start another military conflict with the United States and rebuffed Kim's requests to use military force against the South throughout 1949. Similarly, Stalin did not want the USSR to get involved in a hot war over Taiwan and avoided Mao's requests for direct Soviet assistance in such an endeavor.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Shen Zhihua, *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War: Trilateral Communist Relations in the 1950s*, trans. by Neil Silver, Routledge, 2012, pp. 32–33.

⁷⁶ Shen, 2012.

⁷⁷ Shen, 2012.

⁷⁸ Shen, 2012.

Communist Relationships

The relationship between the USSR and the PRC was largely defined by their two leaders—Stalin and Mao. Key actions were not taken without their mutual agreement, and, in the absence of their approval, critical decisions by those ranking below them were postponed. Within the Soviet leadership, the purges in the 1930s had taught subordinates the importance of obtaining Stalin's endorsement on any actions before moving forward. In the PRC, Mao's legacy during the long civil war had placed him as the dominant voice within the CCP Politburo whose views were almost always adopted. Between the two leaders, Mao would often defer to Stalin on issues of strategic importance, yet Stalin understood the value of reaching a consensus with Mao on key issues. This was apparent at several points during the Korean conflict. Stalin and Mao's relationship with the leader of the DPRK also shaped collaboration between the Soviets and the Chinese. Because Kim owed his political success to Stalin, there were many instances in which Kim would first consult the Soviets without informing PRC leadership and brought the Chinese into the equation only after Soviet approval had been obtained.⁷⁹

The Decision to Go to War

After the establishment of the DRPK, the USSR provided military assistance and an advisory group to the KPA, but that was the limit of its help. Throughout 1949, Kim Il-sung continued to press the case for an invasion of the South to the Soviet Ambassador in Pyongyang, former political commissar Colonel General Terenty Shtykov. Initially, Stalin resisted Kim's requests, but he changed his view in January 1950; there were several possible reasons for this. First, U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson's speech before the National Press Club on January 12, 1950, had not included Korea or Taiwan in its definition of a defensive perimeter in Asia.⁸⁰ This omission suggested that the United States would not intervene militarily in Korea or Taiwan in case of a military conflict. Second, the PRC's success in dislodging the KMT from the mainland allowed for the use of PLA forces in aiding Kim's regime in case of a wider war. With some assistance from the PRC, Stalin thought the KPA would be successful in rapidly defeating the South Korean forces before the United States could intervene. Finally, on August 29, 1949, the Soviets tested their first atomic bomb, eliminating the U.S. monopoly

⁷⁹ Shen, 2012.

⁸⁰ Thomas J. Christensen, *Worse Than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia*, Princeton University Press, 2011, pp. 29–30.

on its devastating capability.⁸¹ According to Stalin, this “changed international situation” persuaded him to reconsider his earlier position.⁸²

Kim met with Stalin in the winter of 1949–1950 to discuss the proposed military action. In April 1950, Kim returned to the USSR to further deliberate the situation. Kim’s plan had several optimistic assumptions. In addition to expecting a revolt in the South by members of the communist party, Kim thought a military victory could be achieved in three days through the capture of Seoul and the elimination of the Rhee government.⁸³ A rapid victory would preclude Western intervention. Stalin agreed to Kim’s proposal for a summer offensive against the South and allowed Red Army advisors to develop an operational plan for the KPA. Stalin also committed to supplying arms and equipment for Kim’s armies. However, Stalin placed Mao’s concurrence as a condition of his approval and instructed Kim to travel to Beijing and persuade Mao to support the plan. If things went wrong, Stalin expected Mao to come to the rescue. Thus, Moscow sought to limit its exposure should the campaign fail by relying on the PRC to provide the military force if the United States became involved.

It is not known whether Kim’s plan for invading the South was discussed when Stalin met with Mao in February 1950. Nevertheless, Kim traveled to China in May to brief Mao. At the initial meeting, it appears Mao was unsure that Kim was conveying Stalin’s views accurately, so he sought confirmation from Moscow. Once confirmed, Mao was in a bind. Mao’s focus was on Taiwan, and the PLA had positioned the bulk of its troops in the south. Should the DPRK require assistance from the PRC, it would spoil Mao’s plans to take Taiwan. Kim reassured Mao that he would not require Chinese manpower. Not wanting to oppose Stalin, who supplied the PRC with arms and economic aid, Mao did not object.

North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950. While the KPA experienced initial successes, one of their key assumptions was proven incorrect. The United States did intervene. In response, Stalin began to define the limits on Soviet assistance. The KPA had approximately 3,000 Soviet advisors, and Red Army personnel had developed the invasion plan. However, as the KPA advanced south, Stalin sought to have those advisors withdrawn from frontline units. He feared that the USSR would be implicated in the conflict if any of the advisors were captured. Stalin also sought to increase the PRC’s assistance to the DPRK. In early July, he recommended that the PRC move nine divisions to the border with North Korea

⁸¹ Another view of Stalin’s motives for supporting Kim’s request has been put forward by Shen Zhihua, who argued that Stalin was seeking additional ports in the Far East and a means for greater influence as the Soviet ports at Lushun and Dalian would be returned to the PRC under the terms of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance of February 1950. Shen, 2012, p. 118.

⁸² The quotation is from a ciphered telegram from Stalin to Mao through Soviet Foreign Minister Andrey Vyshinsky on May 14, 1950, in which Stalin conveys his reason for supporting Kim’s plan to unify the peninsula by force. See Andrey Vyshinsky, “Ciphered Telegram No. 8600, Vyshinsky to Mao Zedong,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, Record ID 115976, May 14, 1950.

⁸³ Vladimir Petrov, “Soviet Role in the Korean War Confirmed: Secret Documents Declassified,” *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3, Fall 1994, pp. 42–67, 65.

and, in exchange, stated, “We will do our best to provide air cover for these units.”⁸⁴ The PLA’s leadership was concerned about intervening without air cover.⁸⁵ The PLAAF was in an infant stage of development and its senior leaders acknowledged it was not ready to confront the U.S. Air Force.⁸⁶ Instead of providing direct air support, Stalin sought to accelerate the training of the PLAAF. On July 22, 1950, Moscow ordered the Soviet Air Force to give its aircraft in Shanghai to the PLAAF, and the 151st Soviet Fighter Air Division was ordered to pre-position in China at Shenyang, Liaoyang, Anshan and other places.⁸⁷ However, the primary mission was to train the Chinese Air Force. Soviet Air Forces were not allowed to cross south to support KPA ground operations.

By August 1950, U.S. and South Korean forces were pushed back to the Pusan perimeter, and many in Pyongyang, Moscow, and Beijing were anticipating a victory before the United States would come to the rescue. However, U.S. air power was taking a heavy toll on the KPA. The Far East Air Force made the North Korean Air Force ineffective and constantly attacked KPA supply lines. Concerned about events in Korea and the presence of U.S. naval power in the Taiwan Strait, Mao took the decision in early August to delay his planned invasion of Taiwan and moved additional PLA manpower toward the border with Korea. As the KPA’s offensive stalled, Mao became more concerned. In late August, Kim sought permission from Moscow to request Chinese assistance, but Stalin did not respond.⁸⁸ This type of noncommittal response from Stalin created uncertainty on the part of his Chinese and Korean allies.

Urgent Intervention

On September 15, 1950, U.S. and allied forces led by General Douglas MacArthur landed at Inchon. Within two weeks, UN forces recaptured Seoul. The amphibious operation threatened to cut off KPA forces in the South, and Pyongyang panicked. The Inchon landing created a dramatic reversal of fortune for the two sides, exacerbating tension within the communist alliance. PRC Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai complained to the Soviets that the KPA was not providing the Chinese with battlefield information and therefore argued that the Soviets should provide more intelligence to the PLA directly.⁸⁹ Stalin blamed his group of military advisors even though it was his decision to restrict their participation in the attack. On September 29, Kim made a desperate plea to Stalin to intervene directly with Soviet forces. Stalin

⁸⁴ Telegram from Stalin to Soviet Ambassador Nikolai V. Roshchin with a message for Zhou Enlai, July 5, 1950. Quoted in Shen, 2012, p. 137.

⁸⁵ Andrew Scobell, *China’s Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 90–91.

⁸⁶ Scobell, 2003, p. 90.

⁸⁷ Zhihua Shen, “China and the Dispatch of the Soviet Air Force: The Formation of the Chinese–Soviet–Korean Alliance in the Early Stage of the Korean War,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2010, p. 217.

⁸⁸ Shen, 2010, p. 218.

⁸⁹ Shen, 2010, p. 220. See also Christensen, 2011, p. 78.

replied that the USSR would continue to supply arms shipments but recommended that Kim consult Mao for additional troops.⁹⁰

By the beginning of October, UN forces had recaptured most of South Korea, and the question then became whether they should continue north beyond the 38th parallel. The Soviets led a diplomatic effort to restrain the UN counteroffensive, agreeing to supervised elections in the North and a ceasefire.⁹¹ The United States thought that such a proposal would only buy time for the KPA, and MacArthur pushed for a drive to the Yalu. In the end, MacArthur got his wish, and UN forces crossed into the North with the objective of capturing the entire peninsula. It was during this period of the Korean War in October 1950, when Stalin wanted the PLA to intervene while Mao sought air support for PLA forces should they intervene, that tensions within the Sino-Soviet alliance became clear.

Stalin's Reaction to Inchon

Stalin responded to the U.S. success at Inchon by advising Kim to redeploy the KPA divisions near Pusan back to Seoul and ordering General Georgy Zakharov to organize KPA forces for a defense of Seoul. At first, Stalin was willing to send Soviet fighters for the air defense of Pyongyang; however, when military leaders informed him that it would be difficult to execute the deployment while denying Moscow's involvement in the war, he reversed his decision.⁹² Stalin criticized his military advisors in Pyongyang for underestimating the threat of an Inchon landing, even though the Chinese had warned about such an operation in early July. Furthermore, Stalin complained that Soviet advisors had not given sufficient guidance to the KPA, yet it was Stalin himself who restricted those advisors from accompanying KPA units south of the 38th parallel.

China also recognized the gravity of the situation. Zhou Enlai initially recommended to Kim that the DPRK would need to engage in a protracted war and split its forces, with half redeploying north and the other half remaining in the South to conduct guerilla warfare.⁹³ Beijing dispatched an advance team to Pyongyang as Mao recognized that the PRC might eventually have to send troops to save the DPRK and fight a defensive war north of the 38th parallel.

Kim initially asked for direct assistance from Moscow, or—if direct Soviet assistance was not possible—from the PRC because the KPA military operations were disrupted by U.S. airpower.⁹⁴ Stalin demurred, saying that the KPA could manage and that he would ask for PRC volunteers. On October 1, 1950, Stalin messaged Mao and Zhou recommending that they send six divisions toward the 38th parallel, but he neglected to inform them that he had

⁹⁰ Shen, 2010, p. 220.

⁹¹ Stueck, 1995, pp. 91–96.

⁹² Shen, 2012, pp. 142–144.

⁹³ Shen, 2012, pp. 144–145.

⁹⁴ Shen, 2012, p. 146.

turned down a similar quest from Pyongyang.⁹⁵ Addressing the response to Inchon was slow and reflected a lack of coordination among the three allies.⁹⁶

On October 2, 1950, Mao responded to Stalin's request. Mao outlined the CCP Central Committee's concerns about intervening—namely, that it could provoke a direct conflict with the United States. He noted that a war with the United States could subject Chinese cities to aerial attack, which would disrupt their struggling economy and cause dissension among the civilian population that had suffered through 20 years of war. Furthermore, Mao stated that should the PRC intervene, it would need the Soviet Union to supply weapons and materiel for the fight as well as air power to counter the U.S. Air Force.⁹⁷ Absent PLA forces, Mao suggested that the KPA could shift to a guerilla war. The Soviets viewed Mao's concerns as a change in position from the summer. Behind the scenes, Mao continued to seek consensus among the CCP leadership to send PLA forces to save the KPA. After a meeting of the Central Committee on October 4 in which the PLA commander Peng Dehuai expressed support for an intervention, the members approved the decision. Stalin was not yet advised of the decision and, fearing that the North would be overrun, authorized the evacuation of Soviet personnel from Korea.

By October 8, 1950, Kim was more desperate and made another request to Stalin. Stalin again demurred, downplaying the U.S. ability for a prolonged war and placing the burden of assistance on the PRC.⁹⁸ That same day, Mao advised both Kim and Stalin of his decision to help and informed Stalin that he would send Zhou Enlai and military leader Lin Biao to Moscow to coordinate support from the Soviets. When Zhou and Lin met with Stalin on October 11th, Stalin promised weapons and equipment for the divisions of the Chinese military that would be sent to Korea.⁹⁹ However, Stalin said the Soviet Air Force could not be ready for another two and a half months and would be used only to protect Chinese airspace, not the PLA inside Korea.¹⁰⁰ The Soviet position was that it would provide cover over the PRC until PLAAF pilots could be trained.¹⁰¹ The lack of air support was of great concern for the PLA's military leadership. Zhou felt that it was a change of position on the part of the Soviets, and Mao responded by hedging his commitment to intervene.¹⁰²

⁹⁵ Shen, 2012, pp. 147–148.

⁹⁶ Christensen, 2011, pp. 76–77.

⁹⁷ Shen, 2012, pp. 151–152.

⁹⁸ Shen, 2012, p. 159.

⁹⁹ Shen, 2012, p. 166.

¹⁰⁰ Shen, 2010, p. 224.

¹⁰¹ Shen, 2012, pp. 167–168.

¹⁰² Scobell, 2003, p. 90.

China Intervenes

By October 13, 1950, Stalin was still unsure of the PRC's willingness to intervene, and another U.S. naval force was reported off the Northeast coast of Korea near Chongjin. Stalin strongly recommended to Kim that he withdraw KPA forces to the territory of the PRC or USSR.¹⁰³ In Beijing, Mao was convinced that, absent PLA intervention, UN forces would pose a direct threat to PRC territory. On October 13th, Mao was able to persuade his military commander Peng Dehuai that Soviet air cover over his supply lines along with Moscow's materiel support was sufficient for their operations and that China had to intervene now to prevent the UN offensive to go beyond the Yalu.¹⁰⁴ On October 14, Mao notified Stalin of the PRC's firm decision to intervene despite his concerns about Soviet air cover, and Stalin immediately informed Kim to disregard his earlier recommendation and await the PLA's help. Stalin had gotten his wish, and the PRC would be responsible for fending off the U.S. troops on the Korean Peninsula.

In the end, Mao's decision to commit the PLA to North Korea's defense despite the lack of air cover may have served to strengthen the relationship between the two regimes. After confirming the deployment of PLA forces into Korea, Stalin ordered the immediate deployment of Soviet Air Forces to Chinese bases near the border. Under the banner of the People's Volunteer Army (PVA), PLA ground troops surreptitiously began crossing the Yalu on October 19, the same day Pyongyang fell to U.S. forces. Then on October 25, the PVA launched its first offensive against UN forces. Soviet fighter aircraft engaged the U.S. Air Force on November 1, much quicker than expected.¹⁰⁵

An Era of Cooperation

Between November 1950 and July 1951, the PVA launched five different phases of their offensive against UN forces in the South. Its initial attacks were successful in recapturing Seoul by January 1951 and driving UN forces back across the 38th parallel. During these operations, the PRC's military leadership pressed Mao to get Stalin to commit Soviet pilots to provide air support inside Korea and in conjunction with ground operations.¹⁰⁶ However, Mao understood that Stalin was not willing to go that far and never insisted in his communications with the Soviet leader. Instead, Mao focused on materiel support for the PLA, going so far as to ask that Moscow equip 60 PLA divisions in 1951. Although such a request was impossible to fulfill in one year, Stalin committed to equipping 16 divisions that year and fulfilling the rest of the request over the next three years, thereby completely equipping the PLA's 106 divisions

¹⁰³ Shen, 2012, p. 170.

¹⁰⁴ Shen, 2012, p. 171.

¹⁰⁵ Shen, 2010, pp. 227–228.

¹⁰⁶ Xiaoming Zhang, *Red Wings over the Yalu: China, the Soviet Union, and the Air War in Korea*, Texas A&M University Press, 2002, p. 115.

with Soviet-made equipment.¹⁰⁷ Moscow also supplied the PLAAF with 22 Air Divisions of jet aircraft.¹⁰⁸

There were instances of friction. Air operations by Soviet and PLAAF pilots that were defending PVA supply lines revealed some difficulties in military cooperation. In the initial six months of the PVA intervention, Soviet pilots flying North Korean–marked Migs took on the allied air forces. At the beginning of 1951, joint flights were conducted with Soviet pilots leading the missions in order to give more supervised combat experience to PLAAF pilots. Language barriers hampered this coordination. In addition, Chinese pilots complained that when they conducted joint sorties, Soviet pilots would break off the formation to pursue enemy aircraft, leaving their less experienced Chinese counterparts to fend for themselves.¹⁰⁹ The Soviets complained that the PLAAF was taking too long to become combat effective.¹¹⁰ Attempts by the PLAAF to be ready to support the PVA spring offensive showed significant deficiencies, and their introduction into Korea was postponed.¹¹¹

Despite Soviet support, UN ground forces backed by U.S. airpower were able to push back the KPA and PVA; retake Seoul in March, and, in a counteroffensive in May and June 1951, ultimately establish a front close to the original demarcation line before the war. While the PVA had a numerical advantage in manpower, the U.S. Air Force continued to interdict PVA supply lines, crippling its ability to contemplate a large-scale offensive.¹¹² The PLAAF gradually took over air operations from the Soviets in September 1951 with mixed results.¹¹³ Soviet advisors remained at the PLAAF control center in Antung, providing guidance for its daily operations.¹¹⁴ Attempts to deny the UN air forces from attacking strategic positions in North Korea did not succeed. The next two years of the conflict included a sustained air campaign against the PVA's supply lines and critical North Korean infrastructure and back-and-forth battles between the North and South Korean forces and their allies, the UN forces and the PVA, respectively. Stalin died on March 5, 1953, and the new Soviet leadership encouraged the PRC to reach an agreement on an armistice. After one final unsuccessful push by the PVA in June 1953, the PRC had had enough. On July 27, 1953, an armistice was signed between the KPA, PVA, and UN Command.

¹⁰⁷ Prior to 1951, the Soviets had equipped 56 of the 106 PLA divisions, which is why Mao requested that they equip the remaining 60 divisions.

¹⁰⁸ Zhang, 2002, p. 207.

¹⁰⁹ Zhang, 2002, p. 106.

¹¹⁰ Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950–1953*, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991, pp. 471–474.

¹¹¹ Zhang, 2002, pp. 108–109.

¹¹² Futrell, 1991, pp. 363–367.

¹¹³ Zhang, 2002, pp. 143–171.

¹¹⁴ Futrell, 1991, p. 401.

Lessons Learned from the North Korean Relationship

The Korean conflict reveals several characteristics about Sino-Soviet cooperation. First, the unequal relationship between the USSR and the PRC allowed Stalin to largely dictate the terms of the cooperation. China had just endured a two-decade civil war and was dependent on Soviet economic and military aid. Mao could not yet afford to be too demanding of Moscow, even though the lack of Soviet air support significantly hindered PVA offensives and increased Chinese casualties. For his part, Stalin used this advantageous position to limit Soviet involvement and reduce the risk of a direct confrontation with the United States. Using vague language, promises of materiel support, and guarantees of protecting PRC territory, Stalin was able to leverage PLA manpower to challenge the West in Korea.

Second, when UN forces landed at Inchon and KPA forces were cut off, both Mao and Stalin understood the gravity of the situation; however, they initially sought to limit their role in rescuing Kim. The PRC was willing to send ground forces as a defensive measure but expected Soviet air cover because the newly created PLAAF was not capable of taking on the U.S. Air Force. Mao hedged his commitment as long as possible while seeking an assurance of air cover from Moscow. Stalin needed Beijing to take responsibility for the communist response and, when it appeared that Mao would not intervene, recommended the withdrawal of the KPA from the peninsula to fight another day. It was ultimately the PRC's assessment that the UN forces posed a danger to its territory and that it had to act regardless of the degree of Soviet support.

Finally, once Mao had committed Chinese forces to the fight and Stalin reciprocated with limited Soviet air cover and almost unlimited material support, the relationship prospered. The trust between Mao and Stalin grew as a result. Even the PVA's demands for more-direct air support from the Soviets were stifled by Mao, who understood the political limits of Moscow's support. Thus, when the two states reached agreement on their roles, cooperation was effective. As the conflict dragged on during negotiations and Moscow viewed an armistice as in its interest, the Soviets began to demand payment for military supplies and hardware. In addition, it appeared to Beijing that Moscow was using the opportunity to hand down its older technology to the PLA and PLAAF. As the strategic stakes diminished, individual interests came to the fore.

Vietnam

To understand Chinese and Russian alliance behavior, the Sino-Vietnamese and Soviet-Vietnamese relationships during the three Indochinese Wars are worth extended examination. In the case of Vietnam and its struggles in the first Indochina War (1946–1954), both the Soviet Union and the PRC allied themselves with the emergent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. The Soviets provided political support but deferred to the recently established PRC to provide military assistance. During the second Indochina War (1955–1975) involving the United States, the Soviets and Chinese began by cooperating with the DRV while Ho sought to continue the struggle for

reunification under communist rule by both military and political means. The communist cause in Vietnam could have been an opportunity for the Soviets and the Chinese to cooperate in their support for Ho's campaign to unify Vietnam; however, Sino-Soviet cooperation rapidly deteriorated as a result of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and his adoption of the policy of peaceful coexistence with nonsocialist states. While both states increased their support to the DRV, the tension between the two reached a crescendo in 1969, which affected the manner in which the DRV received military assistance from the USSR and the PRC. After the victory by the North Vietnamese, China's relationship with Vietnam rapidly deteriorated. After Vietnam's 1978 invasion of Cambodia, China's closest ally in Southeast Asia, Beijing decided to punish Vietnam by invading its northern border regions in 1979.

In the beginning, the strongest supporter of the DRV was the PRC. In 1946, during Mao's campaign against the forces of Chiang Kai-shek, Ho Chi Minh's forces provided refuge for several units across the border inside North Vietnam when Mao's forces from the north were able to route the KMT from the mainland.¹¹⁵ In turn, Mao's forces began to train the North Vietnamese fighters as they prepared to eject the French from Vietnam. Once the PRC was established in 1950, it was the first country to recognize the government of the DRV despite the fact that the Viet Minh, the national alliance committed to Vietnamese independence, did not even control Hanoi and in spite of strong objections by the French. As for the Kremlin, Stalin was preoccupied with Soviet interests along its borders and therefore deferred to the PRC to provide leadership among the regional communist movements in Southeast Asia.¹¹⁶

In 1950, the Viet Minh sought to defeat French forces in the north, starting in the border regions with China and then moving south. The PRC was tied up with a possible invasion of Taiwan that summer and, later in the fall, intervened in the Korean War, which made direct support for the Viet Minh difficult. However, Mao wished to support the DRV and, in April 1950, established the Chinese Military Advisory Group (CMAG), which would provide several hundred military trainers to advise Ho's forces on infantry, artillery, and engineering tactics. The CMAG also helped Ho set up the organizational structure of his forces.¹¹⁷ Mao also sent some of his most able generals to advise DRV's General Vo Nguyen Giap as the DRV pursued the Viet Minh's campaign against the French.¹¹⁸ While the PRC provided Ho with supplies for his army, it rejected an invitation to send combat forces into Vietnam because it was already tied up against the United States and its allies in Korea.

¹¹⁵ Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975*, University of North Carolina Press, 2000, pp. 11–12; Igor N. Selivanov, "Moscow–Hanoi–Tirana Relations in the Context of the Split in the 'Socialist Camp,'" *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 32, No. 2, July 2017, pp. 481–482.

¹¹⁶ Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam 1979–1991*, University of North Carolina Press, 2015, p. 15. One of the reasons for Stalin's disinterest in Vietnam was because he did not want to undermine the position of the Communist Party in postwar France, which saw Vietnam as a part of the French Union. See Zhai, 2000, p. 13.

¹¹⁷ Zhai, 2000, p. 19.

¹¹⁸ Zhai, 2000, p. 63.

General Giap's successful fight to capture Dien Bien Phu paved the way for a political settlement at the Geneva Conference in 1954. Here, the first cracks in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship became evident. Ho did not want to compromise at Geneva and allow for the establishment of two states. He thought that the Viet Minh should continue their struggle to unite the entire country as well as retain influence in neighboring Laos and Cambodia. Both the Soviet and Chinese position, articulated by Zhou Enlai, was that Ho should accept a divided Vietnam and allow for several years of peace before pursuing the DRV's goals militarily.¹¹⁹ Ho deferred to the PRC's and USSR's wishes and signed the accords that called for elections across all of Vietnam in 1956, a ceasefire line along the 17th parallel, and a guarantee that the 17th parallel would not constitute a demarcated border. The Geneva accords also resulted in the declaration of Laos and Cambodia as independent states, which frustrated Ho's objective of retaining influence over his neighboring states to the west. Ho's deference to the wishes of his communist allies was done out of necessity because he needed their material and political support. However, Ho was angered by the position of the USSR and PRC as the first Indochina War came to a close.¹²⁰

It was at this point that Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and his call for peaceful coexistence with nonsocialist states planted the seeds of the Sino-Soviet split that would peak in 1969. Mao labeled Khrushchev's speech as revisionist and viewed it as a threat to the worldwide communist movement. The adoption of the peaceful coexistence policy and Khrushchev's desire to seek better relations with the United States also angered the PRC. The Sino-Soviet split required Ho to execute a careful balancing act between the two powers.¹²¹

Between 1954 and 1959, the DRV sought to improve its economy and rebuild its army while the Geneva process was implemented. This was the policy that both the PRC and the USSR encouraged. The CMAG returned to China, and Moscow sent only a few military advisors to North Vietnam; these advisers were attached to the military attaché's office. The USSR and PRC were relying on the Geneva Accords to afford Ho political progress with unification of the country under communist rule. However, South Vietnam disregarded two of the key terms of Geneva, objecting to elections in 1956 and the use of the 17th parallel as a territorial boundary. The United States presented a proposal at the UN for the admission of South Korea and South Vietnam as member states. Frustrated by the unfulfilled promises of Geneva and unsatisfied with the lack of political progress, the DRV's Politburo decided to resume the military struggle against the South while continuing diplomatic efforts, despite the USSR's and PRC's expressed desire to see the DRV to use nonmilitary means.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Zhai, 2000, p. 51.

¹²⁰ Zhang, 2015, p. 17.

¹²¹ Zhang, 2015, pp. 23–24.

¹²² Zhang, 2015, pp. 18–19.

As Hanoi resumed its military operations, China initially supplied the DRV with most of its support. China's foreign policy in the early 1960s was to support wars of national liberation in Indochina.¹²³ As a result, the PRC's support for the DRV steadily increased. In 1960, the PRC recognized the National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Vietnam. In contrast, the Soviets under Khrushchev remained distant. Moscow was upset at the PRC's position within the socialist camp. Mao's criticism of Khrushchev increased in the early 1960s and reached a boiling point after Moscow signed the 1963 Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Mao viewed the treaty as an attempt by the Kremlin to collude with the United States to prevent China from developing its own nuclear weapons.¹²⁴ The Kremlin saw Ho leaning toward the Chinese position on ideology and Khrushchev reportedly came close to disengaging with Vietnam over the dispute.¹²⁵ However, the Soviet position was about to change, and so was that of its DRV ally.

Escalation of the conflict came in 1964 with the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the likelihood of greater U.S. involvement. President Lyndon B. Johnson used the incident to get congressional authorization for the use of force in South Vietnam, and U.S. air power was employed against North Vietnam. The PRC and the USSR recognized the coming escalation in the war as U.S. Marines landed in Vietnam to protect the airbase in Da Nang. China was the first to respond to requests from the DRV. It began by sending military personnel to take over many of the duties performed by North Vietnamese Army troops in the area between Hanoi and the Chinese border. At its height in 1967, there were approximately 170,000 PLA members serving in North Vietnam. While many personnel served in supporting roles, PLA anti-aircraft artillery and SAM units were active in the North's air defense against American aircraft. PLA personnel were not disguised and wore their national uniforms, possibly as a message to the United States of its willingness to repeat a Korea-like intervention.¹²⁶ Supplies from China to the NLF in the South were sent by sea and routed through Cambodia.

The PRC's support for North Vietnam after 1964 was not without its limitations. China did not want to confront the United States directly unless the United States used its military for an invasion of the North. China offered volunteers should the DRV need to repel a ground invasion of North Vietnam by the United States. If U.S. air and naval power were to be used for a South Vietnamese incursion, the PRC committed to using its own air and naval forces in the defense of DRV territory.¹²⁷ However, a North Vietnamese request to have Chinese pilots fly DRV aircraft within Vietnam or operate from bases just inside Chinese territory was rejected.

¹²³ Zhang, 2015, p. 21.

¹²⁴ Zhai, 2000, p. 148.

¹²⁵ Zhai, 2000, p. 128.

¹²⁶ Zhai, 2000, pp. 135–136.

¹²⁷ Zhai, 2000, pp. 131–134.

Despite the emerging Sino-Soviet rift, the Kremlin still thought it could work with China to support the North Vietnamese. In February 1965, Soviet Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin travelled to Hanoi, stopping in Beijing on the way there and back. One of the purposes of the trip was to coordinate aid to the Vietnamese communists in the form of a unified action that sought to enlist Chinese participation to augment the Soviet assistance being provided to Hanoi. Kosygin was partly successful in that China agreed to allow some rail transport for Soviet aid to North Vietnam; however, an airbridge over Chinese territory was rejected.¹²⁸ Subsequent requests by Moscow for the transit of Soviet troops and the use of airfields along the Sino-North Vietnamese border were also rejected and the Soviet concept of “unified action” was sharply criticized in the Chinese press.¹²⁹ As the war progressed, the issue of railway transit even became contentious between Beijing and Moscow. Moscow was critical of shipments being looted by rival factions seeking to obtain arms during Mao’s Cultural Revolution. For its part, China did not like accusations by the Soviets that it was undermining the war effort in Vietnam over the transit issue. The dispute was finally resolved in 1967 when the parties agreed that Vietnamese personnel would escort the train shipments from the Sino-Soviet border.¹³⁰

For its part, Hanoi was in a difficult position because it wanted assistance from both the PRC and the USSR. Throughout the conflict, the North Vietnamese sought to walk the tight-rope of maintaining good relations with both countries. The Soviets had the advanced military hardware necessary to take on U.S. airpower over the skies of the North. Understanding this, the Soviets calibrated their relations with the North Vietnamese accordingly.¹³¹ First, they did not insist that Hanoi choose sides between the two communist powers and let Hanoi determine its own ideology. Second, they supported Ho Chi Minh’s military strategy of using advanced weaponry against the United States, whereas the PRC had encouraged Hanoi to adopt a protracted “people’s war” strategy,¹³² which the DRV leadership felt this option would take too long. Third, the Soviets were responsive to North Vietnamese requests for specific military assistance, as opposed to China, which had a tendency to push the aid that it thought the Vietnamese communists needed.

The Soviet Union committed to a substantial aid program for the North Vietnamese. Economically, it provided almost \$1 billion in aid between 1965 and 1968, and, militarily, it

¹²⁸ Lorenz Lüthi, trans., “Unofficial Translation of a Letter of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Central Committee to the Socialist Unity Party Central Committee,” Wilson Center Digital Archive, SAPMO-BArch, DY 30/3667, July 1965. See also Nicholas Khoo, “Breaking the Ring of Encirclement: The Sino-Soviet Rift and Chinese Policy Towards Vietnam, 1964–1968,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, Winter 2010, p. 17.

¹²⁹ “Refutation of the New Leaders of the CPSU on United Action,” *Peking Review*, Vol. VIII, No. 46, November 12, 1965, pp. 15–22.

¹³⁰ Zhai, 2000, pp. 150–155.

¹³¹ Ilya V. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War*, Ivan R. Dee, 1996a, pp. 66–67.

¹³² Khoo, 2010, pp. 21, 33.

provided even more with estimates ranging between \$1.4 and \$1.8 billion.¹³³ The CIA estimated that the Soviet Union provided 80 percent of all military aid to North Vietnam in 1967, consisting of SAMs, air defense equipment, radars, anti-aircraft guns and Mig-21 aircraft.¹³⁴ While Soviet sources place the estimate at 50 percent, it would be fair to say that the majority of advanced weaponry needed by the North Vietnamese was supplied by Moscow.¹³⁵ To maintain and operate that weaponry, the USSR sent approximately 1,500–2,500 advisors and technicians. These personnel trained North Vietnamese air defense forces and, on occasion, operated the systems themselves, including flying operational sorties for Hanoi's air force. The Soviets were also aware that some of the troops trained in North Vietnam or back in the USSR would be sent to the South to support NLF operations against U.S. ground forces.

In the latter part of the 1960s, Chinese influence with the DRV appeared to decrease over time. Mao's Cultural Revolution required that its own representatives in Vietnam and its Vietnamese backers within the DRV be more critical of the Soviets. While the PRC continued to provide support for the DRV, Hanoi placed a premium on Soviet weaponry. By 1967, Soviet military aid surpassed that of the PRC, and the North Vietnamese were unwilling to yield to the PRC's suggestions that they sacrifice their relationship with the USSR.

After the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) under the communists, the Soviet Union continued its military support to Vietnam. In response, the SRV allowed the Soviet Navy access to its port in Cam Ranh Bay in 1978. The Soviets used it as a regular naval stop that had repair and replenishment facilities. It also conducted anti-submarine patrols from the airfield at the facility. In November 1978, the two countries signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation, further cementing their political alliance.

The DRV's relationship with the PRC deteriorated after the war. The PRC rejected further assistance after the U.S. forces were out of Vietnam, and it focused on its support for the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. After 1975, the Khmer Rouge and the SRV began skirmishing over disputed territory. The still festering Sino-Soviet rift pushed Moscow to be closer to Hanoi and served as a counter to the PRC's influence among other socialist states. From China's perspective, Soviet relations with Vietnam were part of an effort to surround and contain it while Moscow was also cultivating its relations with India and North Korea.

The relationship between the USSR and the DRV was tested again during two conflicts in 1978 and 1979. In December 1978, Vietnam launched an invasion of neighboring Cambodia. The Kremlin was likely aware of the SRV plans because it had begun airlifting additional military supplies to Vietnam in August 1978. In addition, Soviet aircraft transported troops from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to front areas in Cambodia. The USSR quadrupled its

¹³³ Douglas Pike, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union: Anatomy of an Alliance*, Westview Press, 1987, pp. 138–139.

¹³⁴ CIA, "International Communist Aid to North Vietnam," Report No. 0638/68, March 2, 1968.

¹³⁵ Ilya V. Gaiduk, "Soviet Policy Towards US Participation in the Vietnam War," *History*, Vol. 81, No. 261, January 1996b, p. 49, footnote 19.

military assistance in 1979, although the assistance gradually tapered off to approximately \$1 billion per year. This aid allowed the SRV to maintain its presence in Cambodia.

The Soviet assistance delivered in August 1978 was also likely in response to a Chinese buildup along the border with Vietnam. Two months after the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, China launched a large incursion along Vietnam's northern border, initiating the third Indochina War. In response, Soviet Air Forces airlifted troops from Cambodia back to Hanoi to help fight against the Chinese invasion of the north. Prior to the invasion, Moscow sent a 15-ship task force; however, the ships were primarily sent to gather intelligence. After the initial invasion, there was speculation that the Soviets would intervene on the side of Vietnam. However, the Kremlin conveyed to the PRC that it would not directly intervene so long as the incursion was limited. Public statements by the Kremlin of a potential intervention were made only after the crisis had abated and the PRC signaled its intention to conclude its incursion.

Soviet military assistance to Vietnam after 1979 continued and ensured the Soviet presence in Cam Ranh Bay. That presence included approximately 2,500 personnel and several surface and subsurface vessels. At the height of Soviet presence in the mid-1980s, there were approximately 40 Soviet navy ships based in the port as well as a squadron of Mig-23s and another squadron of Tu-95s.¹³⁶ As the Soviet Union began to reduce its force structure in the late 1980s, its footprint in Cam Ranh Bay also decreased; however, its presence in the port continued after the fall of the Soviet Union. Russian naval forces finally left in 2002.

Lessons Learned from the Vietnam Relationship

The tensions between the Soviet Union and the PRC in Vietnam highlights several insights into the competitive nature of the Sino-Soviet relationship as well as the important roles that ideology, domestic politics, and relations with third parties played in shaping both sides' vacillation between cooperation and competition. One of the most noticeable areas in which this vacillation can be observed in Chinese and Soviet policy in Vietnam was in the disputes over the transit of military assistance. The Soviets sought relatively unlimited access to ship its military aid to the DRV, but China was unwilling to allow an air corridor and the use of airbases in southern China. Perhaps the most significant reason behind the PRC's refusal to allow air access was its concern that the Soviet Union was attempting to encircle it and impinge on its sovereignty. In response, the Kremlin publicly criticized the PRC and argued that Beijing was instead actively trying to prevent Soviet assistance from reaching Vietnam. This example suggests that even in historical cases when both the Soviet Union and China agreed in general on the need to support a common strategic partner—in this case, Vietnam—their distrust of one another and concerns about negative intentions limited their willingness to do so.

¹³⁶ Sally Stoecker, *Clients and Commitments: Soviet-Vietnamese Relations, 1978–1988*, RAND Corporation, N-2737-A, 1989, p. 18.

A second issue involves the importance of military assistance and foreign military aid as a tool for partnership building. As the PRC became more inclined to limit or delay its military aid to Vietnam, the Soviets demonstrated their willingness to increase theirs to further what was becoming an advantageous position vis-à-vis the Chinese following the Sino-Soviet split. Similarly, both countries proved willing to provide materiel, personnel, and expertise to support Vietnam, but the differences in their views regarding the strategy Vietnam should pursue led to a rift between the PRC and Soviet Union, which further limited the extent of their cooperation. In addition, it put their common partner, Vietnam, in a position of having to carefully balance and make choices between what the two communist powers were offering.

Finally, domestic politics and ideology played a significant factor in how both the PRC and Soviet Union pursued their relations with Vietnam and with each other. In the Soviet Union's case, Vietnam's close early relationship with Beijing associated it with Mao's criticism of Khrushchev to the point that the Soviets considered abandoning Vietnam altogether. The tables turned during the Cultural Revolution, when China reoriented its focus internally and the Soviet Union began to provide ever greater support, particularly in terms of advanced weapons and technical support in such critical areas as air defense. In the background of these domestic influences was an ideological struggle between the PRC and Soviet Union following Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, his policy of peaceful coexistence with nonsocialist states, and the Soviets' willingness to pursue arms control with the United States. Likewise, perspectives on war strategy—the PRC's advocating People's War and the Soviet Union advocating a more conventional approach that leveraged advanced Soviet weapons—were

TABLE 2.1
Historical Cases and Key Lessons Learned

Case	Key Lesson Learned
Warsaw Pact	• Russia is the senior partner. • Russia's strategic interests (rather than those of the other states comprising the Pact) have primacy.
USSR and Egypt	• Russia is the senior partner. • Russia's strategic interests have primacy. • Russia is concerned about limiting the scope of its involvement to avoid escalation.
Korea	• Russia and China held distinct views on issues involving ideology, national interest, and warfare that complicated cooperation. • There was reluctance to expose cooperation if it could lead to escalation. • China is senior partner.
Vietnam	• Russia and China held distinct views on issues involving ideology, national interest, and warfare that complicated cooperation. • Russia took senior partner status, relegating China to a more junior role, which was broadly unacceptable to China. • There were concerns about limiting the scope of involvement to avoid escalation.

tied to underlying ideological beliefs that created further barriers to Sino-Soviet cooperation against a common enemy in Vietnam.

Conclusion: Themes in Russian and Chinese Alliance Behavior

The historical examples outlined in this chapter reveal a series of recurring themes in the approach that the Soviet Union (and later Russia) and China have taken in their alliances and partnerships since the beginning of the Cold War. Table 2.1 summarizes these cases and the main lessons learned.

The specific historical circumstances and personalities differed in each of the examples examined. Each of the examples also differs from the partnerships that Russia and China have in place as of the time of writing, particularly the Cold War dynamics. Despite these contextual differences, a series of core themes emerge from our examination that should be considered in assessments about possible Russian-Chinese military cooperation in future conflict scenarios.

One of the most important themes from these examples involves the ability and willingness of China and the Soviet Union to work together—a factor that proved challenging in their experiences in North Korea and Vietnam. A major backdrop in three of the four examples was a fluctuation between cooperation and competition. While the Korean War did mark a more cooperative example, Soviet reluctance to provide additional support for China or consult with China in the early stages of strategy formulation forced the PRC to abandon key national objectives (e.g., the invasion of Taiwan); furthermore, after Kim Il-sung presented a series of highly questionable assumptions about the prospects for victory to the Soviet Union, China bore the most-significant costs of war. Later, the ideological dimensions of the Sino-Soviet relationship played a role in such countries as Albania and Yugoslavia either leaving or refusing to join the Warsaw Pact.

The examples of Korea and Vietnam also highlighted the Soviet Union's and China's distinct views on a variety of issues involving ideology, national interest, and warfare, which greatly complicated cooperation in cases in which their primary ally was involved in an armed conflict with the United States. Although the Soviet Union and China were generally aligned during the Korean War, the Soviets were reluctant to support both China and North Korea in ways that might expose their involvement and lead to escalation. As a result, the Soviet Union's focus on protecting its own interests by limiting exposure placed the burden for action squarely on China as the United States advanced north in late 1950. By the early 1960s, the Sino-Soviet split was well underway, and both countries took on a more competitive perspective than had been the case in the Korean War. Disagreements over war strategy were particularly important factors that inhibited cooperation between the two major powers in their support for Vietnam.

Additionally, both countries have a prolonged history of being the senior partner in their most important relationships, particularly those in their immediate periphery, and this has

been a prominent feature of military command and strategic policy. Soviet leaders formed no alliance, political structure, chain of command, or command institutions within the Warsaw Pact. All decisionmaking power on political issues ran through the Soviet Union's political leadership and on military issues through the Soviet General Staff. From a military perspective, Soviet advisors played a central role in military planning for both the Egyptian and Vietnamese militaries in times of war. For China, its historically dominant position with North Korea and Vietnam led it to establish overall authority for decisions on the conduct of the war in Korea. Its inability to have the same influence and authority in Vietnam also contributed to Beijing's decisions to limit or hinder support as the Soviet Union took a more prominent role as North Vietnam's primary security partner.

These examples also demonstrate the influence that relative power has on the type of cooperation and support that either side is willing to offer the other. When one of these two powers has been in a stronger position—nearly exclusively the Soviet Union in the examples listed above—they have attempted to exploit their advantages in ways that have been unhelpful to the overall relationship. The Soviet Union limited the types of technology and support it was willing to provide to its allies on multiple occasions when it felt that such provisions might erode its advantages (e.g., nuclear power for China) or when it thought that its national interests might be jeopardized. This perception of national power also played a role in how such allies as China and Egypt viewed their Soviet counterparts—often as arrogant, untrustworthy, and self-interested. As a result, the Soviet Union's alliances suffered and ultimately proved unsustainable. Of note, in cases in which China could exploit its own advantages, it did. The most prominent example of this is that China denied the use of its airspace for the shipment of military support to North Vietnam.

Finally, in the situations outlined, both China and the Soviet Union wanted to avoid escalation with the United States. In this sense, they either limited the scope of their involvement or placed the burden of involvement on the other party. In the relevant cases outlined here, acting together did not embolden the Soviets and the Chinese to challenge the United States: It limited many aspects of their cooperation. In the example involving Egypt, the Soviets actively avoided direct military support for fear of escalation. Ultimately, this fear of escalation greatly curtailed cooperation between the two powers and, at times, challenged their ability to trust one another.

Characterizing A Friendship with No Limits: A Tool Within a Larger Vision

Russia, thank god, has not entered any alliances. In this also lies, to a significant degree, the key to our sovereignty. Any country that enters an alliance, immediately gives up a part of its sovereignty.

Vladimir Putin, July 2014¹

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia looked west, seeking ideas, capital investment, and partnership. Since the turn of the century, however, a gradual—and then increasingly sharp—pivot away from the West and NATO has been central to Russia’s foreign policy. Though no corner of the globe has been disregarded, Russia’s diplomatic efforts prioritized cultivating bilateral relationships in its near abroad, with the dominant focus of Russia’s pivot east being normalized relations with China. The attention of political and military leaders in the United States, Europe, and Asia-Pacific became particularly fixed on the growing cooperation between the two states when China participated in the 2018 Vostok military exercise. The key question occupying governments, scholars, and newspaper headlines was whether a Russia-China alliance was forming.

This chapter assesses the factors that have given rise to this “friendship with no limits,”² describing the initial normalization of relations and cataloguing the traditional drivers that have enabled the rapid development of this partnership over the past decade. However, as we will discuss, although the balance of power politics invigorates cooperation where enmity has historically dominated, systemic sources of tension lurk. Access to the Arctic, friction over ancestral lands, divergent perceptions of standing within the hierarchy of international powers, and now the bloody, protracted Russian invasion of Ukraine all stand poised to enervate incentives for engagement. After considering these sources of tension, this chapter con-

¹ Vladimir Putin, “Zasedaniye Sovyeta Bezopasnosti” [“Security Council Meeting”], Office of the President of Russia, July 22, 2014.

² “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” 2022.

cludes with an assessment of the prospects for cooperation between these two states with shared interests yet somewhat divergent objectives.

Good Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation

Since normalizing relations in 1989, Russian and Chinese leaders have eschewed the notion of official military alliances, often criticizing the United States for increasing global tensions through its own alliance systems.³ However, in more-recent interactions, senior Russian and Chinese officials have formalized military cooperation and publicly emphasized the closeness of the Russia-China relationships in the military sphere.⁴ Official statements and agreements also recognize cooperative activities within areas that were previously viewed as too sensitive and thus off-limits.⁵ Amid these declarations from the senior-most levels of government in Russia and China, the substance of the cooperation often falls short of the rhetoric. In general, it appears that signaling to the West that these two governments are united in their quest to challenge the distribution of power within the global order is of primary importance, as opposed to solidifying bilateral security guarantees and or technical interoperability.

The substance of the 2001 Treaty on Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation provides one of the leading indicators supporting the assessment that the relationship primarily serves a rhetorical purpose.⁶ This regulatory framework defined Russian-Chinese bilateral relations, including military relations, for 20 years with automatic five-year extensions—barring objections from either party.⁷ Key articles of the treaty are contained in Table 3.1.

The treaty is significant for what it both does and does not contain. Notably, this agreement does not include a mutual defense clause. If one country perceives a threat of aggression or a challenge to its security interests, the treaty stipulates that the two will immediately begin consultations with the intent of eliminating those threats. On the one hand, while Russian and Chinese experts point to this treaty as the legal basis for extensive security cooperation between the two countries, the treaty does not explicitly require the use of military force

³ Vassily Kashin, “Tacit Alliance: Russia and China Take Military Partnership to New Level,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 18, 2019c.

⁴ “Almost Allies. How Russia and China Strengthen Military Cooperation,” New Izvestia [Новые Известия], October 21, 2019.

⁵ Vassily Kashin, “Russia and China: Union or Strategic Uncertainty?” *Russian International Affairs Council*, September 2, 2019b.

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2001.

⁷ “Military and Military-Technical Cooperation Between Russia and China,” [“Voennoe i voennotechnicheskoe sotrudnichestvo Rossii i Kitaya”], RIA Novosti [Россия сегодня], May 20, 2014.

TABLE 3.1

Key Articles of Treaty on Good Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation

Article	Provision
2	This is a mutual nonaggression clause in which Russia and China commit to never employ or threaten the use of military force against each other. The article also includes the mutual adoption of a “no first use” nuclear weapon posture toward each other.
3–5	These articles affirm that each party will not challenge the others’ political-economic orientation or territorial integrity, which, in Moscow’s case, includes reaffirming recognition of Beijing’s sovereignty over Taiwan.
7	This article commits Russia and China to supporting arms reduction and confidence-building measures along their joint border.
8	This is a nonaggression clause that stipulates that neither country shall enter an alliance or be party to any bloc with a third country, nor allow its territory to be used by a third country, which compromises the sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity of the other contracting party. This prohibition is extended to ban “the setting up of organizations or gangs” on one country’s territory whose activities challenge “the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of the other contracting party.”
9	This article states that the two countries will hold immediate, mutual consultations in situations in which one of the contracting parties deems that peace is being threatened and undermined, its security interests are involved, or when it is confronted with the threat of aggression.
10	This article states that regular meetings “at all levels” will be held for exchanging views and coordinating positions on bilateral ties and important and urgent international issues of common concern.

SOURCE: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2001.

on behalf of the other country.⁸ On the other hand, the treaty does explicitly emphasize the importance of not presenting threats toward one another: The treaty’s five core principles clearly call for mutual respect of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual nonaggression, mutual noninterference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.

The strategic context within which this treaty was signed carries little resemblance to the current environment. At the time, both states were in relatively weak economic standing, and neither represented strong revisionist powers in direct conflict with the West and the U.S.-led liberal world order.⁹ Moreover, Russia and China were more clearly friends of convenience when military or economic interests aligned rather than being ideologically aligned. For example, Russian-Chinese security cooperation had largely been characterized by arms transfers and some military-to-military engagements. After 2005, even these forms of coop-

⁸ Kashin, 2019b. Despite NATO’s mutual defense clause, some Russian observers have suggested that the Russian-Chinese 2001 treaty’s absence of a “strict obligation to provide military assistance” is similar to NATO’s charter and other international treaties that also do not include definitive security guarantees. See “Almost Allies. How Russia and China Strengthen Military Cooperation,” 2019; Richard Weitz, “Russian Military Power and Policy in the Far East,” in Stephen J. Blank, ed., *The Russian Military in Contemporary Perspective*, U.S. Army War College Press, September 2019, pp. 935–936.

⁹ Kashin, 2019b.

eration began to decline as Moscow and Beijing diverged on various issues, with the Chinese reverse-engineering of Russian technologies being one key source of friction.¹⁰ However, the partnership changed after 2014 when relations rebounded, military cooperation expanded, and declarations of further cooperation returned to the fore.

Putin and Xi have met dozens of times since Xi took power in 2013, often referring to each other as best friends.¹¹ Guided by this top-down direction, both countries made public their intentions to further strengthen military-to-military relations in 2015. China's 2015 defense white paper promised to promote military relations with Russia "in more fields and at more levels," and Russia's 2015 NSS identified China as a "key factor of the maintenance of global and regional stability."¹² Speaking in Beijing in September 2015, Russian Minister of Defense General Sergei Shoigu claimed that their combined military exercises represented the "the most significant aspect" of Russian-Chinese defense cooperation, preparing both to respond to modern challenges and threats. The following year, Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov advocated greater mutual defense cooperation with China at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. This, he said, should be done both within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) framework and through greater bilateral anti-terror and maritime drills.¹³

A 2017 agreement sought to establish a three-year road map and legal framework for even closer military cooperation. However, Russian senior officials remained deliberate in referring to the deepening security relationship as a strategic partnership or strategic alliance—not a military alliance. Neither country needed nor sought formal security guarantees or extended nuclear deterrence from the other.¹⁴ Furthermore, both countries were implementing years-long military reforms and modernization programs and had begun employing their armed forces toward respective political ends without relying on the other—Russia in Ukraine and Syria and China in the East and South China Seas.¹⁵

Moscow was eager to expand military cooperation with China more aggressively following its 2014 Ukraine invasion and was the initiator of the 2017 roadmap for bilateral military cooperation. Despite this increased partnership, Beijing's enthusiasm likely matched that of Moscow when the Trump administration began its so-called "trade war" with China

¹⁰ Paul N. Schwartz, "The Military Dimension in Sino-Russian Relations," in Jo Bekkevold and Bobo Lo, eds., *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 88.

¹¹ Michael Kofman, "The Emperors League: Understanding Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation," *War on the Rocks*, August 6, 2020a.

¹² Radin et al., 2021, p. 125; Vladimir Putin, "Russian National Security Strategy, December 2015," December 31, 2015; Information Office of the State Council, the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*, last updated May 27, 2015.

¹³ Weitz, 2019, p. 939.

¹⁴ Dmitry Gorenburg, "An Emerging Strategic Partnership: Trends in Russia-China Military Cooperation," *Security Insights*, No. 54, April 2020.

¹⁵ Radin et al., 2021, p. 123.

and Sino-American relations were significantly degraded.¹⁶ Both countries' relations with the United States were deteriorating, which likely contributed to Putin's and Xi's decision to expand their military-technical cooperation, including into more strategic areas. Other aspects of bilateral security cooperation that were said to be expanding at this time included joint military planning and what was claimed to be greater interoperability among Russian and Chinese troops.¹⁷

Senior Russian officials were still careful to not declare the relationship a military alliance, although references were made to the two countries being allies. For example, as China prepared to participate in Russia's Vostok-2018 strategic command post exercise, President Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, declared, "This speaks about the expansion of interaction of the two allies in all the spheres."¹⁸ Still, the public-facing emphasis from Russian leaders seemed to center on Russia's and China's mutual contempt for the United States instead of definitive security guarantees or practical military burden-sharing in future conflicts.¹⁹ Defense Minister Shoigu did argue for advancing the more "practical content" of the strategic partnership through their "ever expanding" military-technical cooperation. He also claimed that Russian-Chinese security cooperation was mutually beneficial for the two parties but was in no way "directed against any third party."²⁰ At the end of 2018, President Putin confirmed Beijing's ranking status in a speech in which he named China as one of five priority countries for Russian military-technical cooperation, the other four being India, Egypt, Algeria, and Vietnam.²¹

When asked whether it was possible to conceive of a military alliance between Russia and China in 2020, Putin answered, "It is possible to imagine anything. We have always believed that our relations have reached such a level of cooperation and trust that it is not necessary, but it is certainly imaginable, in theory."²² Putin declined to speak further about "sensitive issues" in which the two countries were actively collaborating but clarified that he believed in "boosting the defence potential of the Chinese People's Army, which is in the interests of Russia as well as China."²³ When asked a similar question in 2021, Putin partially walked back his assertion from the previous year while trying to make a distinction from the NATO

¹⁶ Kashin, 2019c.

¹⁷ "Almost Allies. How Russia and China Strengthen Military Cooperation," 2019.

¹⁸ "Kremlin Underlines Need for Military Drills amid Tense International Situation," TASS, August 28, 2018.

¹⁹ Kashin, 2019b.

²⁰ Victor Gavrilov, "Patriarch of Russian Military Sinology," *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, No. 5, 2018.

²¹ "Shield of Russia," ["Shchit Rossii"], *Tikhookeanskaia Vakhta*, No. 49, 2018.

²² Sarah Kirchberger, "Russian-Chinese Military-Technical Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor," in Sarah Kirchberger, Svenja Sinjen, and Nils Wörmer, eds., *Russia-China Relations: Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?* Springer, 2022, p. 93.

²³ Kirchberger, 2022, p. 93.

alliance. With respect to whether Russia should unite with China and consider common threats, Putin declared, “we are not creating a closed military bloc. There is no Russia-China military bloc and we will not create one now. So, there is no reason to talk about this.”²⁴

Traditional Drivers of Partnership

In both the economic and military spheres, Russia and China have fundamentally compatible interests. China’s voracious appetite for natural resources—in particular oil, gas, coal, and lumber—finds a proximate source of supply in Russia. Oil pipelines connecting Russian oil and natural gas fields in the Far East to China contain sufficient capacity to allow Russia to become China’s largest single supplier of crude oil and liquified natural gas.²⁵ Comparatively, though, the economic connections between the two states heavily favor China. While a trade imbalance favored Russia as recently as July 2022, with Russia exporting more than \$3 billion in goods relative to its imports, the comparative share of the China’s trade illustrates the stark imbalance.²⁶ Whereas China consumes almost 20 percent of Russia’s exports, China’s massive appetite for goods means that Russia services roughly 2 percent of China’s overall demand.²⁷

China has demonstrated a willingness to leverage Russia’s struggles for its own benefit. For example, trade with China provided Russia with an economic lifeline in the wake of the sanctions imposed on Russia following its 2014 invasion of Ukraine that led to the annexation of Crimea.²⁸ However, when global demand for oil collapsed following the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic in 2020, sending the price of oil into a freefall, China let its strategic partner dangle. China capitalized on the opportunity to cheaply build its oil reserves by more than a billion barrels before curtailing its purchase of Middle Eastern oil in favor of Russian oil.²⁹ China thus maneuvered into a dominant position over Russia, cutting out other buyers while amassing strategic levels of reserves.

²⁴ Kirchberger, 2022, p. 93.

²⁵ Erica Downs, “China-Russia Energy Relations: Why the Power of Siberia Pipeline Matters to China,” Center for Naval Analysis blog, December 19, 2019.

²⁶ Observatory of Economic Complexity, “China / Russia Trade,” webpage, undated.

²⁷ Karen M. Sutter and Michael D. Sutherland, “China’s Economic and Trade Ties with Russia,” Congressional Research Service, IF 12120, May 24, 2022.

²⁸ Samuel Charap, John Drennan, and Pierre Noël, “Russia and China: A New Model of Great-Power Relations,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 59, No. 1, February–March 2017, p. 28.

²⁹ Yaroslav Trofimov and Thomas Grove, “Weary Russia Tries to Avoid Entanglement in U.S.-China Spat,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 22, 2020.

For its part, Russia plausibly expected that China might leverage this buyer's market opportunity to impose more-beneficial terms, but the experience likely stung.³⁰ Moreover, the episode likely recalled the ignominious lesson from the 1990s when the United States wielded Russia's debt to force the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the Baltics.³¹ Russia's extensive experience pursuing diverse markets to ensure its *sovereignty*—the strength to independently assert its interests—also plausibly enabled Russia to manage this injury. Russia's ability to adapt in this way is exemplified by Russian oil exports to India, which hit a record high in July 2022.³²

In the military domain, China and Russia found additional incentives for cooperation. Most crucially, the two states share a 4,200-kilometer border that must be militarized if each considers the other a threat. Positioning soldiers and materiel on each side of the border drew significant resources from strategic directions of greater national interest: NATO, the Caucasus, and Central Asia for Russia; Taiwan, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea for China. Thus, avoiding the opportunity cost of such a posture provided a central rationale for normalizing relations.³³ To reinforce this strategic détente, Russia invited China to engage in joint exercises, including land, naval, anti-missile, and internal security exercises.³⁴ A qualitative upgrade in Russian-Chinese military cooperation occurred in 2018, with China's participation in Vostok 2018.³⁵ China's involvement represented the first time that a non-CSTO state participated in one of Russia's four strategic command-staff capstone exercises.³⁶ China also participated in the Vostok 2022 exercise.³⁷ These activities demonstrate multidimensional military cooperation but not interoperability between their forces—i.e., these exer-

³⁰ Alexander Gabuev, "Neighbors, Partners, Competitors: Driving Forces and Constraints in Russian-Chinese Relations," webpage, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 31, 2021.

³¹ Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, Brookings Institution Press, 2015, p. 317.

³² "IEA Raises Russia's 2022 Oil Output Forecast by 300,000 bpd, 2023 by 800,000 bpd, Sees New Export Records to Asia," webpage, Interfax, August 11, 2022.

³³ Gabuev, 2021.

³⁴ Marcin Kaczmarski, Mark N. Katz, and Teija Helena Tiilikainen, *The Sino-Russian and US-Russian Relationships: Current Developments and Future Trends*, No. 57, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, December 2018, pp. 37–38.

³⁵ Dave Johnson, "VOSTOK 2018: Ten Years of Russian Strategic Exercises and Warfare Preparation," webpage, *NATO Review*, December 20, 2018.

³⁶ Angela Stent, *Russia and China: Axis of Revisionists?* Brookings Institution, February 2020. The CSTO is an alliance that includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.

³⁷ Chinese Ministry of Defense, "Chinese Troops to Take Part in Vostok-2022 Strategic Drills in Russia," August 17, 2022.

cises are not truly joint.³⁸ This contrasts with the exercises that Russia conducts with CSTO member states, which have been specifically focused on improving interoperability.³⁹

Arms sales represent the third leg in the military contribution to cooperation. China's military modernization strategy has flowed largely through Moscow since the 1990s.⁴⁰ Russia has sold China numerous major weapon platforms over the past 25 years, including variants of the Su-27 and Su-30 fighter jets, *Sovremenny*-class destroyers armed with *Sunburn*-missiles, *Kilo*-class submarines, high-performance engines, helicopters, and S-300 type air defense batteries. China was Russia's largest client between 1999 and 2006, accounting for between 34 percent and 60 percent of the volume of Russia's exports of major weapons. Arms sales dropped off considerably between 2006 and 2014, largely over issues of Chinese intellectual property theft of Russian military technologies.⁴¹

Significant cooperation and sales resumed in 2014, with the Kremlin intervening to overrule a reluctant Russian arms industry.⁴² Moscow supplied more than 70 percent of China's arms imports between 2014 and 2018.⁴³ Russian experts claim that Russia resumed arms sales in the wake of the "systemic crisis with the West," that reinforced solidarity with Beijing.⁴⁴ Beijing and Moscow have also announced joint initiatives to develop a conventionally powered submarine, a helicopter, drones, missile defense, navigation satellites, and ballistic missile early warning systems.⁴⁵

Notably, however, Chinese efforts to copy, reverse engineer, and reexport Russian weapons remain a persistent Russian complaint; as late as 2019, the chief of intellectual property at one major Russian defense conglomerate noted that "there have been 500 such cases [of Chinese intellectual property theft] over the past 17 years."⁴⁶ Russia has also assiduously bal-

³⁸ U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2019 Annual Report Congress*, 2019, p. 343.

³⁹ Cortez A. Cooper III, Scott Boston, Brian Nichiporuk, Marta Kepe, Ryan Bauer, Mark Stalczynski, Kotryna Juknevičiute, Yuliya Shokh, Natasha Lander, and Katherine Pfrommer, *Russian Military Training and Exercises: Drivers, Objectives, Activities, and Trends*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1233-9, 2022, pp. 23–25.

⁴⁰ Christina Yeung and Nebojsa Bjelakovic, "The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership: Views from Beijing and Moscow," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2010, p. 257.

⁴¹ Siemon T. Wezeman, "China, Russia, and the Shifting Landscape of Arms Sales," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, July 5, 2017.

⁴² Kirchberger, 2022, pp. 80–81, 88–89.

⁴³ Keegan Elmer and Liu Zhen, "What Russian Weapons Are Being Bought by China?" *South China Morning Post*, September 21, 2018; Pieter D. Wezeman, Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Nan Tian, and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018," fact sheet, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), March 2019.

⁴⁴ Alexander Gabuev and Vassily Kashin, "Friendship in Arms: How Russia and China Trade in Weapons" ["Vooruzhennaya družhba—kak Rossiya i Kitay torguyut oruzhiem"], Moscow Carnegie Center, November 2, 2017.

⁴⁵ Kirchberger, 2022, pp. 90–91.

⁴⁶ Dimitri Simes, "Russia Up in Arms over Chinese Theft of Military Technology," *Nikkei Asia*, December 20, 2019.

anced this opening with China with major arms sales to perennial Chinese foes India and Vietnam. For example, in the wake of the most-recent high-profile case of suspected Chinese espionage, Russia continued to deliver S-400s SAM systems to India while halting delivery of the same system to China.⁴⁷ Thus, although Russia has exported some of its most advanced systems since 2015, such transfers may mark the strength of Chinese-Russian relations or, alternatively, simply a sort of fire sale before an increasingly sophisticated Chinese defense industrial sector surpasses its Russian counterpart.⁴⁸

In addition to arms sales, Russian-Chinese military contacts since 2005 have also centered on joint exercises with a sharp uptick after 2014. The two sides have held more than ten large-scale naval exercises since 2012—in locations that include the Yellow Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Sea of Japan, the East China Sea, the South China Sea, the Sea of Okhotsk, and the Baltic Sea—and have arranged more than 60 military exercises overall.⁴⁹ Apart from at-sea exercises, Chinese forces have also participated in large-scale Russian ground force exercises. In 2019, Russia and China conducted their first joint air patrol in the Asia-Pacific region, violating South Korea's airspace and prompting the ROK Air Force to fire hundreds of warning shots; the partners also conducted another such patrol over the East China Sea barely three months after Russia invaded Ukraine.⁵⁰

For both countries, the exercises also have a signaling aspect that appears to be at least as important as their operational dimensions. For example, Beijing organized a naval exercise in the South China Sea in 2016, which was timed to begin immediately after a UN Convention on the Law of the Sea ruling invalidated China's nine-dash line claims. China's participation in a naval exercise in the Baltic and joint air patrols in the Asia-Pacific are "an explicit demonstration of the possibilities of joint action in the event of a conflict with the United States."⁵¹

At the same time, there is evidence that China's commitment to the exercises is relatively low: The PLA sent around 3,200 soldiers to Russia's 300,000-strong Vostok 2018 exercise and just 1,600 to Russia's Tsentr-2019 exercise (in which the Russian side fielded almost 130,000

⁴⁷ "Russia Delivers S-400 Air Defense Systems to India Pursuant to Schedule — Official Says," TASS, August 16, 2022; "In Another Setback to China, Russia Suspends Deliveries of S-400 Missiles," *Business Standard*, July 27, 2020.

⁴⁸ Wezeman, 2017.

⁴⁹ Michael Paul, "Partnership on the High Seas: China and Russia's Joint Naval Manoeuvres," *SWP Comment*, No. 26, June 2019; Brian Hart and Bonny Lin, "Chinese Strategic Views on Joint Military Exercises with Russia: Drivers, Trends, and Implications," in Max Bergmann and Andrew Lohsen, eds., *Understanding the Broader Transatlantic Security Implications of Greater Sino-Russian Military Alignment*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, December 2022.

⁵⁰ Hart and Lin, 2022; Andrew Osborn and Joyce Lee, "First Russian-Chinese Air Patrol in Asia-Pacific Draws Shots from South Korea," Reuters, July 23, 2019.

⁵¹ Vassily Kashin, "Russia and China Take Military Partnership to New Level," *Moscow Times*, October 23, 2019d.

soldiers).⁵² It appears that the PLA is more interested in learning from Russia than in sharing insights into its own military capabilities or training as equal partners, whereas, for Russia, the goal is to present an image of joint cooperation with China to the West to counter an impression that Moscow is isolated and vulnerable.

Tensions That Lurk

A continued, deepened Russian-Chinese relationship faces significant potential hurdles.⁵³ In one way or another, these latent friction points stem from a balance of power between the two that distinctly favors China in the post–Cold War era. China’s gross domestic product was roughly nine times the size of Russia’s in 2021.⁵⁴ Russia’s belief in its own exceptionalism may lead it to eventually lash back at China for its economic subjugation.⁵⁵ Thus far, China has deftly managed this sensitivity. However, there are many issues that could unsettle this balance. Competition for influence within the states of Central Asia, the growing economic asymmetry and Russian dependency on China, Russia’s role in China’s century of humiliation, Chinese encroachment in the Arctic, and Russian arms sales to potential Chinese adversaries create conditions for renewed hostility.

Central to Russian foreign policy and national security is dominance within its perceived sphere of influence in Central Asia. However, because of the enormous capital it brings to bear on a region badly in need of it, China’s influence in the region has expanded considerably. This expansion has come at Russia’s expense,⁵⁶ as Beijing has usurped Russia as the region’s largest lender, trading partner, and investor.⁵⁷ Beijing’s concerted effort to treat Russia as an equal power by informally ceding the security realm and influence over political issues to Russia has mitigated the expected Russian backlash.⁵⁸ However, dimming Russian economic prospects—the result of endemic corruption and its aggression in Ukraine—may

⁵² Brian G. Carlson, “Vostok-2018: Another Sign of Strengthening Russia-China Ties: Not an Alliance, but Defense Cooperation Is Growing,” *SWP Comment*, No. 47, November 2018; “China to Send 1,600 Troops, About 30 Aircraft to Russia’s Strategic Military Drills: The Tsentr-2019 Drills Will Run in the Orenburg Region in Russia on September 16–21,” TASS, August 29, 2019.

⁵³ This section of the chapter draws on previous work for the Russia Strategic Initiative, specifically, Clint Reach, Alexis A. Blanc, and Edward Geist, *Russian Military Strategy: Organizing Operations for the Initial Period of War*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1233-1, 2022.

⁵⁴ World Bank, “World Bank National Accounts Data, and OECD National Accounts Data Files,” webpage, undated.

⁵⁵ Sergey Karaganov, “Vpered k Velikomu Okeanu,” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, No. 6464, August 25, 2014.

⁵⁶ Kaczmarek, Katz, and Tiilikainen, 2018, pp. 40–41.

⁵⁷ Kaczmarek, Katz, and Tiilikainen, 2018, p. 40.

⁵⁸ Dimitri Trenin, *True Partners? How Russia and China See Each Other*, Moscow: Centre for European Reform, 2012, pp. 16, 31; Andrew Radin, Lynn E. Davis, Edward Geist, Eugeniu Han, Dara Massicot, Matthew Povlock, Clint Reach, Scott Boston, Samuel Charap, William Mackenzie, Katya Migacheva, Trevor

further unsettle this balance. China might find that relying on such a partner to protect its investments is untenable.⁵⁹ A deteriorating Russian economy or a protracted war in Ukraine could constrain Russia's ability to provide or underwrite the security of these regional partners. Either path could create the conditions for further Chinese encroachment in the region.

Territorial Tensions

Russia's role in China's century of humiliation combined with Russian concerns about the vulnerability of its far-east territory provide another source of friction. During the Second Opium Wars, Russia threatened to open a second front against the Chinese military unless China ceded a vast tract of land, which expanded Russia's border to the Pacific. Already losing on this initial front, the Chinese agreed to the Treaty of Aigun in 1858. The treaty conveyed more than 230,000 square miles of Chinese Manchuria to Russia and provided Russia with seaports and favored trading status. Russia again forced China's hand in 1945 by leveraging China's desperation for Soviet forces to stem the Japanese tide. In exchange, China acquiesced to Stalin's demand that Outer Mongolia become an independent state.⁶⁰ While the narratives championed by the CCP emphasized Japan, Britain, France, Portugal, the United States, and the Netherlands as the culprits who imposed "unequal treaties" on the Chinese during their century of humiliation, Russia certainly participated in the carving of the melon. Segments of the Chinese population have not forgotten Russia's role; rising Chinese nationalism could create conditions in which the CCP finds it difficult to dismiss such a sensitive domestic issue.⁶¹

Because Moscow observed its far east to be a massive expanse of sparsely populated land with immense economic potential, Moscow has often feared immigrant flows from North-east China into the region. The area is so sparsely populated that such flows could conceivably result in a Chinese majority population. Russia also feared that China might justify intervention in the region or annexation of territory, leveraging Russia's own tactic by claiming the

Johnston, and Austin Long, *The Future of the Russian Military: Russia's Ground Combat Capabilities and Implications for U.S.-Russia Competition*, RAND Corporation, RR-3099-A, 2019, p. 10.

⁵⁹ Jeronim Perović and Benno Zogg, "Russia and China: The Potential of Their Partnership," *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich, No. 250, October 2019, p. 3. In 2017, for example, China constructed a military base in Tajikistan, purportedly for logistics and training purposes. China, though, consulted closely with Russia on the construction of the base in Tajikistan, even asking whether it might be more palatable for Russia if the base were staffed by mercenaries rather than uniformed soldiers. See Stephen Blank, "China's Military Base in Tajikistan: What Does It Mean?" blog post, Central Asia-Caucas Analyst, April 18, 2019.

⁶⁰ Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*, Columbia University Press, 2012.

⁶¹ Xuetong Yan, "China's Ukraine Conundrum: Why the War Necessitates a Balancing Act," *Foreign Affairs*, May 2, 2022; Gabuev, 2021.

right to intervene on behalf of ethnic Chinese abroad.⁶² Given the anemic growth in Russia's Far East, however, this immigration wave has not occurred; better economic opportunities favor remaining in China.⁶³ Moreover, Chinese capital flows into the region have fallen far short of lofty Russian goals. The Russian Minister for the Development of the Far East and the Arctic recently lamented, "the public part of our relations with China, for example, was ahead of their practical implementation. If you count those projects in Russia where large Chinese investors really participated, then the fingers of one hand will suffice."⁶⁴ The Minister's remarks called for increased Chinese investment but also explicitly emphasized developing *domestic* competencies, rather than simply needing to "replace Europeans or Americans with Chinese" as the solution to successfully developing the Far East.⁶⁵ With the flight of capital from the West, though, Russia might find itself with limited alternative sources of investment; a position that China might leverage to impose preferential terms. It is also not implausible that China could be tempted to use this imbalance to achieve the access it has long sought to the Arctic, a sphere of influence Russia views as sacrosanct.⁶⁶

On the other side of the ledger, Russian attempts to offer a counterweight to China in East Asia have largely failed. Russia lacks the political will to settle its territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands with Japan, lacks the leverage to ingratiate itself with North Korea (and thus has limited utility for South Korea), and is a significantly junior economic partner relative to China. Paradoxically, Moscow's attempt to challenge Beijing's primacy in the region created no change in their relationship, largely because of Russia's failure to compete.⁶⁷ In the Indo-Pacific, however, Russian diplomacy has been more fruitful, continuing long-standing strategic partnerships with India and Vietnam. India is now Russia's largest arms importer, and there are some indications that Russian overtures on India's behalf might have facilitated China's de-escalation of the renewed border conflict in 2020.⁶⁸ However, there are limits to

⁶² Yeung and Bjelakovic, 2010, p. 270. The demographic disparity in the region has remained roughly the same since 2014; there are 200 million inhabitants on the Chinese side of the border and only 8 million on the Russian side.

⁶³ Gabuev, 2021.

⁶⁴ Tatyana Edovina, "The Main Challenge is to Find Internal Resources," *Kommersant*, July 13, 2022. Author's translation.

⁶⁵ Edovina, 2022. Author's translation.

⁶⁶ At the Far Eastern Forum held in Vladivostok in September 2021, in response to a question regarding the absence of Chinese investment in Russian ports or roads, the Minister of Development of the Far East and the Arctic responded: "To attract Chinese money, do you think Russia should allow China [to] gain ownership of infrastructure facilities, similar to how Greece sold its main port, Piraeus, to China?" See Frank Jüris, "Sino-Russian Scientific Cooperation in the Arctic: From Deep Sea to Deep Space," in Sarah Kirchberger, Svenja Sinjen, and Nils Wörmer, eds., *Russia-China Relations: Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?* Springer, 2022, p. 188.

⁶⁷ Kaczmarek, Katz, and Tiilikainen, 2018, p. 48.

⁶⁸ Felix K. Chang, "India's Neutrality and Strategic Relations with China, Russia, and the West," Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 25, 2022.

Russian influence: Russian state oil firm Rosneft was directed to end oil projects with the Philippines and Vietnam when China objected to foreign oil companies operating in disputed areas of the South China Sea.⁶⁹ No doubt, Russia will continue to look for mechanisms to improve its influence, as noted Russia experts Fiona Hill and Bobo Lo conclude, “Ultimately, Russia has no more liking for a hegemonic China than it has for a unilateralist United States, or for any other alignment that could marginalize it.”⁷⁰

Economic Tensions

Russia’s and China’s geopolitical aspirations diverge in meaningful ways. China seeks an open global economy (albeit open *to* China, if not necessarily the other way around). Lacking a competitive edge, Russia generally rejects globalization. Focused on domestic development and economic growth, China leveraged its massive reservoir of cheap labor to build a modernized industrial economy and seeks to modernize further into a services-based economy. China thus benefits from the global economy, even as it seeks to reshape the international order. In contrast, Russian corruption, protectionism, and poor industrial modernization have led Russia to accrue significantly fewer benefits from globalization. Russia has much more to gain from undermining the global economy, whereas China is interested in its stability.⁷¹

Military and Technological Tensions

Finally, with respect to the third pillar—military collaboration and arms sales—as the PLA advances in terms of capabilities and power projection and the Chinese defense industrial sector becomes more sophisticated, the military and technological value of cooperating with Russia might begin to fade for China.⁷² Beijing’s assessment of Russia’s poor performance in its operations in Ukraine might likewise give Beijing reasons to doubt the value of joint exercises and training, other than in the signaling opportunities afforded by such activity.

Some military modernization efforts by each side could also be a prelude to a greater focus on deterring the other if the relationship sours.⁷³ Despite increasing naval and ground service contacts, the two sides lack the formal alliance ties that would provide deep military operational experience and trust. China’s unfolding military reforms position it to conduct more-integrated, joint operations in information-contested environments farther from Chi-

⁶⁹ Helen Clark, “Oil and Gas Fueling South China Sea Tensions,” *Asia Times*, July 22, 2020.

⁷⁰ Fiona Hill and Bobo Lo, “Putin’s Pivot: Why Russia Is Looking East,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 31, 2013.

⁷¹ Kaczmarek, Katz, and Tiilikainen, 2018, pp. 50–59.

⁷² Alexander Gabuev, “Why China and Russia Are Strengthening Security Ties: Is the U.S. Driving Them Closer Together?” *Foreign Affairs*, September 24, 2018.

⁷³ Eugene K. Chow, “Nuclear Showdown: Could Russia and China Go to War?” *National Interest*, July 25, 2018.

na's shores, giving Beijing more options to threaten Russia directly if relations were to take a turn for the worse. In addition to having a less fully controlled society than China and fewer available state resources, Russia is potentially more open to Chinese cyber and interference operations and more vulnerable to corruption and espionage. With a larger defense budget, cheaper per-unit prices, and greater nonmilitary resources to devote to expanding its defense exports, China may increasingly compete with Russia in international arms markets in the years ahead.

Russia and China have also both sought to develop influence, including through military contacts and defense or dual-use technology transfers in Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, and other countries. These efforts have largely been synergistic insofar as they have primarily focused on supporting these regimes against the United States.⁷⁴ However, developments could arise that would put the two sides into more-direct competition. Since 2018, Moscow has written off \$11 billion in past DPRK debt, dramatically expanded its food and fuel assistance to the DPRK, and even helped stand up additional internet connections—moves that are widely interpreted as Moscow attempting to win back some of the influence with Pyongyang that it ceded to Beijing when the Soviet Union terminated its security commitment to the DPRK in 1990.⁷⁵ Similar examples exist in other countries where the two sides engage in quiet competition, even as their efforts primarily focus on frustrating any U.S. effort to compel behavioral changes in authoritarian, anti-American regimes.

The Ukraine-Sized Elephant in the Room

When Russian forces advanced into Ukraine along three axes on February 24, 2022, Western eyes looked East, debating how China would respond in terms of diplomacy, trade, and military assistance. Would China abide by the array of sanctions imposed by the United States and Europe? Would China lend its diplomatic backing to Russia? Would China send military aid to Russia? None of these options is constrained to a binary, yes-or-no outcome. As of the time of writing, China's response has in fact been calibrated and nuanced. This section describes China's response thus far to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, offers informed—albeit speculative—judgments about whether gaps exist between what Russia plausibly expected from its “friendship with no limits” and what it received, and considers how this conflict has influenced each state's perspective of the other.

⁷⁴ Artyom Lukin, “Russia's Policy Toward North Korea: Following China's Lead,” *38 North*, December 23, 2019.

⁷⁵ Joby Warrick, “How Russia Quietly Undercuts Sanctions Intended to Stop North Korea's Nuclear Program,” *Washington Post*, September 11, 2017; Hannah Thoburn, “Why Russia Won't Help More on North Korea,” *The Atlantic*, September 12, 2017; “Report: Russia-Donated Grain Arrives in Food-Short North Korea,” Yonhap News Agency, August 1, 2017; Cristina Maza, “Russia Is Aiding North Korea with Oil Imports, Ignoring U.S. Efforts to Isolate Kim Jong Un: Report,” *Newsweek*, December 5, 2017; “Russian Firm Provides New Internet Connection to North Korea,” Reuters, October 2, 2017.

Support from China has mostly consisted of rhetoric: China's propaganda machine has echoed key Russian disinformation threads and legitimized the Russian invasion. The Chinese government adopted Russian rhetoric that its forces were engaged in a "special military operation" (as opposed to an invasion), and that the United States was responsible for the war because of the expansion of NATO, which disregarded Russia's "legitimate security concerns."⁷⁶ Chinese Ministry of Defense spokesperson Wu Qian also lent support to Russian conspiracy theories that accused the United States of conducting biological weapon research in Ukraine.⁷⁷ However, when the UN General Assembly voted to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China abstained rather than voting "no."⁷⁸ In late April 2022, the Xinhua News Agency (the official state news agency of the PRC) published its interview with Ukraine's Foreign Minister, a pivot from what appeared to be the government's previous policy of censoring unfavorable narratives about Russian actions in Ukraine.⁷⁹ Moreover, Beijing has not recognized Crimea as belonging to Russia, which is a precedent that makes it seem improbable that China will officially recognize these changed borders in the event that Moscow holds a referendum annexing additional Ukrainian regions.⁸⁰ For its part, Russia recently reiterated its support for the One China principle but does not support Chinese claims to the entire expanse of the South China Sea.⁸¹ The conflict in Ukraine has thus surfaced the diplomatic limits of this friendship.

Given the West's preference of using sanctions and not soldiers to affect the outcome on the front lines in Ukraine, China's response to these sanctions has been of particular interest. China has repeatedly criticized Western sanctions and declared the official position that

⁷⁶ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on February 24, 2022," webpage, February 24, 2022. See also, "Chinese, Russian FM's Hold Phone Conversation," Xinhua, February 24, 2022; and Zhang Hao, "Ukraine's Crisis Instigator: US-Led NATO Reneges on 'Not One Inch Eastward' Promise to Compress Russia's Space to the Extreme," *Global Times*, March 23, 2022.

⁷⁷ Li Qingtong, "Defense Ministry Spokesperson Wu Qian Answers Questions On the Situation in Ukraine," Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, March 24, 2022. The *PLA Daily* also began publishing a series of commentaries accusing the United States of being a bully with evil intentions of world domination that is encouraging the conflict for profit. For example, see Jun Sheng, "The U.S.'s Despicable Role on the International Stage from the Ukrainian Crisis: The Hypocritical 'Double Standard', the Maker of the Humanitarian Crisis," *People's Liberation Army Daily*, March, 25, 2022.

⁷⁸ Jacob Fromer, "UN Votes to Condemn Russian Invasion of Ukraine, but China Again Stays Silent," *South China Morning Post*, March 3, 2022.

⁷⁹ "Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmitry Kuleba Gives Interview with Xinhua News Agency," Xinhua, April 30, 2022; Vasily Mikheev and Sergey A. Lukonin, "China on the Eve of the 20th CPC Congress," *World Economy and International Relations*, Vol. 66, No. 6, 2022, p. 14.

⁸⁰ Gabuev, 2021.

⁸¹ "Russia Understands China's Concerns over Pelosi's Potential Visit to Taiwan—Kremlin," TASS, August 2, 2022.

China will continue to conduct “normal economic and trade cooperation.”⁸² Trade has continued, with China surpassing Germany as Russia’s largest importer of oil—albeit purchased at a discount—with overall Chinese exports to Russia (as of July 2022) reaching a comparable level to what they were prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁸³

Russian authors have noted the paradox of businesses complying with sanctions even though the government rejects them because they fear “loss of markets, secondary sanctions, fines and criminal cases.”⁸⁴ With the exodus of Western companies and expertise, it is also striking that China’s exports to Russia have not further increased to fill this void. However, the internal structures of the Russian and Chinese economies create barriers to economic integration. Both have rejected privatized, free market economies. China restricts foreign access to its markets unless companies have a unique technical competency. Chinese markets are also prized by foreign companies, which drives up the cost of entry. Russian companies thus face prohibitively steep competition in such a context. For its part, even though Russia has created 20 special economic zones in its far east—i.e., areas that are less constrained by Russian protectionism to attract investment—endemic corruption, a labyrinthine bureaucracy, and a lack of cultural understanding have resulted in a paucity of projects.⁸⁵ Deals between the two states appear to largely require direction from the highest levels of government to gain traction.⁸⁶ Russian leaders, though, appear cognizant and wary of the growing power asymmetry between the two countries: If it can find other options, Moscow appears to favor diversification of partnerships within Asia over Chinese investment in the Russian economy.⁸⁷

Finally, on the question of Chinese military assistance to Russia, China’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian repeatedly has denied (unconfirmed) reports that Russia has requested military exports from China.⁸⁸ Reports in the *Wall Street Journal* and a study by nonprofit C4ADS in 2022 contend that China is in fact shipping military equipment and

⁸² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on March 22, 2022,” March 22, 2022a.

⁸³ “China Exports to Russia Boom in Return to Near Pre-War Highs,” Bloomberg News, August 8, 2022.

⁸⁴ Ivan Timofeev, “Doubtful Efficiency? Sanctions Against Russia Before and After February,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Vol. 20, No. 4, July–August 2022b.

⁸⁵ Ivan Timofeev, “Russian-Chinese Economic Cooperation: Opportunities and Obstacles in the New Conditions,” Russian International Affairs Council, June 22, 2022; Jo Inge Bekkevold, “Imperialist Master, Comrade in Arms, Foe, Partner, and Now Ally? China’s Changing Views of Russia,” in Sarah Kirchberger, Svenja Sinjen, and Nils Wörmer, eds., *Russia-China Relations: Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?* Springer, 2022, p. 51.

⁸⁶ Gabuev, 2021; Kirchberger, 2022.

⁸⁷ Gabuev, 2021; Lukin, 2019; Dmitry Trenin, “Who We Are, Where We Are, What We Are For—and Why,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2022a.

⁸⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on June 29, 2022,” June 29, 2022b.

subcomponents to Russia, noting that shipments of chips have more than doubled and the pervasive use of data censorship and opaque corporate networks allow Chinese companies to thwart sanctions.⁸⁹ Reports by Reuters and the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies have examined captured Russian military equipment and discovered “at least 450 different kinds of unique foreign-made components across these 27 systems, the majority of which were manufactured by US companies.”⁹⁰ The reports contend that Cold War–vintage, clandestine networks of third-country transshipment hubs in China—but also Israel, Malaysia, and Switzerland—and front companies with fraudulent end-user licenses enabled these sales.⁹¹ In contrast, declassified U.S. intelligence reporting recently flagged Russia’s purchase of “millions of artillery shells and rockets” from North Korea. U.S. officials contended that this deal demonstrates the effectiveness of U.S. sanctions, which have forced Russia to “turn to pariah states for military supplies.”⁹²

Russia’s war in Ukraine appears to be far from over. New developments may create the conditions for different behaviors from Moscow or Beijing. That said, as of this writing, Russia does not appear to have endeared itself to Beijing with its invasion of Ukraine. China has certainly paid costs; as Ryan Hass of Brookings argues, “[a]s the world’s leading importer of oil and a leading purchaser of food and commodities, China is also being disproportionately harmed economically by volatility in global markets for such goods.”⁹³ The protracted, bloody war of attrition this conflict has devolved into has also shown that the Russian military is less of a modern, effective fighting force than analysts had assessed based on Russia’s earlier actions in Crimea and Syria. Plausibly, this performance will lead the PLA to reassess the capabilities of its counterpart.⁹⁴ The domestic debate over how China should respond to the war has created an increasingly polarized and potentially precarious internal dynamic. One segment of Chinese society cheers Russia’s challenge to the West and the latter’s inability to stop the Russian invasion. Another segment recalls Russia’s role in China’s

⁸⁹ Brian Spegele, “Chinese Firms Are Selling Russia Goods Its Military Needs to Keep Fighting in Ukraine,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2022; Naomi Garcia, *Trade Secrets: Exposing China-Russia Defense Trade in Global Supply Chains*, C4ADS, July 15, 2022.

⁹⁰ Hans Petter Midttun, “Russo-Ukrainian War, Day 167: US Announces \$1 bn in Additional Security Assistance for Ukraine,” *Euromaidan Press*, September 8, 2022.

⁹¹ David Gauthier-Villars, Steve Stecklow, Maurice Tamman, Stephen Grey, and Andrew Macaskill, “As Russian Missiles Struck Ukraine, Western Tech Still Flowed,” Reuters, August 8, 2022; James Byrne, Gary Somerville, Joe Byrne, Jack Watling, Nick Reynolds, and Jane Baker, *Silicon Lifeline: Western Electronics at the Heart of Russia’s War Machine*, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, August 8, 2022, pp. 5, 44.

⁹² Julian E. Barnes, “Russia Is Buying North Korean Artillery, According to U.S. Intelligence,” *New York Times*, September 5, 2022.

⁹³ Reid Standish, “How Has the Ukraine War Changed the Chinese-Russian Partnership?” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 24, 2022.

⁹⁴ Zhu Ying, “Chinese Academic: Ukraine War Shows a Corrupt Russia Inside and Out,” *ThinkChina*, May 23, 2022.

century of humiliation and questions China's support for a state that continues to disrespect the sovereignty of other states and whose actions are inconsistent with China's values and moral code.⁹⁵

Overall, the war probably has had a limited effect on the Russia-China relationship for three reasons. First, in such personalist, authoritarian regimes, state policy is disproportionately determined by the individuals at the top of the apex. Presidents Putin and Xi will ultimately decide the future of the relationship.⁹⁶ Second, it is not clear that Russia expected a materially different degree of support from China. There is no doubt that Russia would accept more assistance from China, particularly as its manpower and materiel challenges multiply. However, Putin has emphasized that Russia must be “accountable and answerable to no one.”⁹⁷ For Russia, the limits of China's support thus plausibly reinforced the *existing* Russian perspective that two qualities are essential for maintaining its sovereignty: diversification and self-reliance.⁹⁸ For China, Russia's apparent lapse in strategic judgement—miscalculating both the effectiveness of its own military and the ineffectiveness of its adversary—plausibly reinforced existing perceptions that moving toward an alliance would carry prohibitively high costs relative to the potential returns.⁹⁹ Paradoxically, China's relatively minimal support thus far may minimize the damage Russia's war might have done to its partnership with China. After all, limited involvement has meant relatively limited costs for China. Finally, condemning Russia's invasion would almost certainly antagonize Russia and thus entail negative strategic effects. However, it is not clear that there would be a valuable return to offset this cost—i.e., it seems unlikely that detaching itself from its partnership with Russia would lead to the outcome China most desires: a United States that is less committed to containing China's rise.¹⁰⁰

Prospects for Further Alignment—Alliance to What End?

Three weeks after President Xi met with his Russian counterpart in Beijing in 2020 and declared a partnership with “no limits” or “forbidden areas of cooperation,”¹⁰¹ Russia invaded

⁹⁵ Lew Mon-hung, “China's Response to Ukraine Calls Its Values into Question,” *ThinkChina*, May 26, 2022; Yan, 2022; Han Yong Hong, “Did China Miscalculate the Ukraine War?” *ThinkChina*, March 4, 2022.

⁹⁶ Standish, 2022.

⁹⁷ Hill and Gaddy, 2015, p. 68.

⁹⁸ Trenin, 2022a; Hill and Gaddy, 2015, pp. 319–324; Sergei Shakhrai, “I Don't Think Russia in Principle Should Rely on Someone,” *Interfax*, July 13, 2022; Edovina, 2022.

⁹⁹ Dong Wang and Weizhan Meng, “China Debating the Regional Order,” *Pacific Review*, Vol. 33, No. 3–4, 2020, p. 499.

¹⁰⁰ Yan, 2022.

¹⁰¹ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” Office of the President of Russia, Feb-

Ukraine. Although China defends Russia's aggression with justifications that mirror Putin's narrative about the threat of NATO expansion, Moscow's aggression creates difficulty for Beijing's foreign and economic policies. China's already tortuous navigation of the economic and political difficulties of a fractious relationship with the United States have only worsened as Beijing seeks to defend its strategic partner in Moscow.¹⁰²

Despite Russia's recent actions, the underpinnings of the Sino-Russian partnership have not come unmoored. Following the imposition of Western sanctions on Russia after its Crimea annexation, China's strategic embrace of Russia intensified in 2014 and was further strengthened when, in late 2017 and early 2018, the U.S. NSS and National Defense Strategy (NDS) identified both countries as revisionist powers in strategic competition with the United States and its allies.¹⁰³ Those documents marked both a more assertive U.S. posture toward China and Russia and a decision to identify them as a joint security challenge.¹⁰⁴ Washington's concurrent competition against Beijing and Moscow remains the key driver of a strengthening partnership, although fissures remain in the relationship and have been heightened from China's perspective by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.¹⁰⁵

Weighing far more decisively in Beijing's decision calculus is the perception that the United States is a hegemonic power in decline that hopes to use preponderant military power to block the development of a more multipolar world order. Xi sees in Putin a fellow traveler on the road to building a global balance of power more suited to Beijing's long-term objectives and shares with him a perception that the United States and its allies are a threat to this task.¹⁰⁶ Beijing also sees and is realizing economic benefit from the relationship despite having to navigate the challenges posed by the threat of secondary sanctions related to Moscow's attack on Ukraine.

Since the end of the Cold War, the center of global political and economic power has been shifting toward Asia, with China's economic and military power increasing relative to the United States and enabling a China-Russia partnership to better balance against U.S. power. A multipolar order—as opposed to one in which the United States “decide[s] every question

ruary 4, 2022.

¹⁰² See Cheng Li, “Evolving China-Russia Relations: A Major Challenge for Xi's Third Term,” *China-US Focus*, October 3, 2022.

¹⁰³ See, for example, Zhou Bo, “As China and Russia Draw Closer, It Would Be a Fool's Errand for Trump to Try to Separate Them,” *South China Morning Post*, August 23, 2019; Dmitri Trenin, “US Obsession with Containment Driving China and Russia Closer,” *Global Times*, July 31, 2019; Walter Russell Mead, “Why Russia and China Are Joining Forces,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 29, 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Jim Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, U.S. Department of Defense, 2018, p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, Zhou, 2019; Trenin, 2019; and Mead, 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Alexander Lukin, *China and Russia: The New Rapprochement*, Polity Press, 2018, p. 175.

at its sole discretion”¹⁰⁷—is at the core of Beijing’s vision of the future.¹⁰⁸ Xi sees Western efforts to foster democracy and human rights abroad as threats to China’s political system that carry the explicit goal of regime change. Accordingly, Beijing deeply resents Western criticisms of Chinese governance.¹⁰⁹ The United States’ willingness to militarily intervene in Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, as well as the deployment of ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems on the periphery of both China and Russia, have contributed to Russian and Chinese perceptions that the United States is a growing threat to their sovereignty and regime survival.

Nevertheless, Beijing has been careful to manage its relationships with both Russia generally and Putin specifically, and there is little evidence that it has any interest in extending something akin to security guarantees to Moscow. Cooperation is also limited by differing objectives in Eastern and Central Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East.¹¹⁰ China’s growing power in Central Asia potentially undercuts traditional Russian influence in that area.¹¹¹ China is also interested in the Arctic, an area that Russia regards as strategically sensitive and where it is reluctant to see China expand its presence.

At the same time, Russia’s and China’s mutual threat perceptions of one another have declined as relations warm, notably as border disputes are resolved and Russian fears of a Chinese takeover of its underpopulated East dissipate. Russia’s dramatic break with the West over Ukraine in 2014 served as a powerful catalyst for this relationship.¹¹² Beijing realized several advantages from the post-Crimea environment, including Moscow’s lifting of a ban on selling China advanced weaponry, the agreement on formal cooperation between China’s Belt and Road Initiative through the European Union, the dropping of informal barriers to

¹⁰⁷ Lukin, 2018, p. 175.

¹⁰⁸ For example, in 2012, Vladimir Putin declared that “Beijing shares our vision of the emerging equitable world order.” See “Russia and the Changing World,” RT, February 27, 2012.

¹⁰⁹ Trenin pointed that out that “[i]n 2011–2012, Vladimir Putin blamed street protests in Moscow on U.S. support for Russian civil society” and “[i]n 2014, Beijing saw a foreign hand behind the protest movement in Hong Kong.” See Dimitri Trenin, *From Greater Europe to Greater Asia*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2015, p. 9.

¹¹⁰ See, for example, Michael S. Chase, Evan S. Medeiros, J. Stapleton Roy, Eugene B. Rumer, Robert Sutter, and Richard Weitz, *Russia-China Relations: Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines*, National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report No. 66, July 2017, p. 45; Oki Nagai, “China and Russia Battle for North Pole Supremacy,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, April 10, 2018; Paul Goble, “Moscow Worried About Chinese Dominance of Northern Sea Route,” *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 16, No. 117, September 3, 2019.

¹¹¹ See, for example, M. Steven Fish, Melissa Samarin, and Lucan Ahmad Way, “Russia and the CIS in 2016: Pursuing Great Power Status,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 57, No. 1, January/February 2017.

¹¹² One expert observes that “[r]ight up to 2014, however, Russia was simultaneously seeking to carve out a place for itself in the Western system through membership in such institutions as the G8 [Group of Eight] . . . and strategic partnerships with the United States, the EU [European Union], and . . . NATO,” and 2014 was a turning point (Trenin, 2015, p. 9).

Chinese entry into large natural-resource and infrastructure projects, and the conclusion of the Power of Siberia deal.¹¹³

Russia's economic needs have also changed and shaped economic cooperation in ways that are conducive to China's interests. China is a market for Russian natural resources and arms and a source of financing and labor that Russia needs. The sanctions regime imposed over Ukraine sharpens Russia's economic need for China as an energy market, which, by and large, cannot be met by others because the most-significant economies have joined the sanctions regime. Beijing's discomfort with Russian aggression in Europe has been somewhat ameliorated by the opportunities that have been afforded to China as a major market for ample—and affordable—Russian resources.

Despite the growth in diplomatic cooperation and military contact between Beijing and Moscow, strategic mistrust over a range of factors constrains a more fulsome partnership, from China's concerns about blowback from Russian aggression to competition for influence in third countries and in international arms markets. Despite the growth in military contacts and cooperation between Russia and China over the past five years, as of the time of writing, several limiting factors constrain the development of the two sides' ties or may do so in the future.

Moreover, in each of the three cases in which China allied itself with Russia—a mutual defense treaty in 1896 to counter growing Japanese power, a treaty in 1937 to roll back the Japanese invasion of mainland China, and with the formation of a communist bulwark against capitalism in 1949—China paid a very steep price. China lost control of strategic ports and railways, was abandoned by Stalin and left to the mercy of Japan's brutal legions, and later was forced to cede independence to Mongolia.¹¹⁴ While the shifting balance of power created the conditions for China to revise its assessment of Russia as a rival and Europe's rejection of Russia (and vice versa) has energized its pivot eastward, the potential costs each side likely perceives from entering into a formal alliance are likely prohibitively high. A continued strategy of “not always together but never against each other,” which balances costs and returns, seems more probable and sustainable.¹¹⁵

It is important to be mindful that this is not a binary question of allies versus enemies; the relationship could—and no doubt will—take a form along this spectrum. A form that looks more like an alliance could uniquely stress the security environment of the United States and

¹¹³ Alexander Gabuev, “Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese Relations After the Ukraine Crisis,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 29, 2016, 2016, pp. 4, 26.

¹¹⁴ Zhao Huasheng, “Why China-Russia Alliance Lacks Feasibility: Historical Relations and Empirical Considerations” [“Zhong'e jiemeng weihe quefa xianshi kexingxing: Jiyu liangguo guanxi lishi he xianshi de kaoliang”], *People's Tribune: Frontiers* [*Renmin Luntan: Xueshu Qianyan*], Vol. 10, 2013; Bekkevold, 2022, pp. 43–44; Wang, 2012.

¹¹⁵ Gabuev, 2021; Wang and Meng, 2020, p. 499; Fu Ying, “How China Sees Russia: Beijing and Moscow Are Close, but Not Allies,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 1, January–February 2016, p. 100; Benyamin Poghosyan, “Opinion: Containing China Is No Longer Possible Despite the Fact That Many Want To,” commonspace.eu, June 28, 2021.

its allies. We thus conclude by considering whether avenues exist for Chinese and Russian partnership beyond those previously described; i.e., when might there be meaningful costs entailed in a continued partnership? As of this writing, China's approach to Russia's war with Ukraine clearly demonstrates, unsurprisingly, that China prioritizes its own economic interests over Russia's. Two conditions appear to be essential to a future in which either side is willing to bear meaningful costs on behalf of the other: (1) internal development and reform in Russia (or the reversal of China's economic fortunes) that allows Moscow to arrest the growing power asymmetry and (2) an even more hostile turn in the United States' relationship with *both* countries. After all, Russia sees its destiny and rightful place as a world civilization as that of a great power; its interests override the interests of states within its sphere of influence.¹¹⁶ Soft subjugation by an increasingly confident, nationalistic China would be equally as unacceptable as being contained by the West.¹¹⁷ At the same time, the geopolitical climate sets high stakes for both sides and conditions how essential each views the other for regime survival, protecting national interests, and achieving broader strategic goals.¹¹⁸

Perhaps most importantly, the rapprochement between Russian and China reinforces confidence that the long border they share does not need to be militarized. Avoiding this allows both countries to continue to maximize their force postures in directions that are much more politically important.¹¹⁹ Even if the partnership never results in more than a *de facto* military alliance, this cost avoidance is highly beneficial. The potential for Chinese-Russian cooperation in a conflict can usefully be manipulated to create a more threatening posture to deter the United States and its allies, but it would also compel China and Russia to account for such a possibility in their military planning and force posture.

Additionally, the legitimacy that each provides the other in international fora—in which their external aggression, human rights violations, or suppression of challenges to their regimes are decried—is highly valuable.¹²⁰ This diplomatic and rhetorical collaboration provides a potentially significant avenue for closer cooperation, one that has already been exercised with Ukraine and has the potential to pay significant dividends for a relatively low cost. Avoiding international isolation; reaching billions of individuals through their complementary influence in Africa, South America, and the Middle East; and amplifying one another's desired narrative are promising mechanisms for altering the balance of power that favors the United States.

¹¹⁶ Hill and Gaddy, 2015, p. 393.

¹¹⁷ Karaganov, 2014; Trenin, 2022; Gabuev, 2021.

¹¹⁸ Kirchberger, 2022, pp. 5–6.

¹¹⁹ Gabuev, 2021.

¹²⁰ Hannes Adomeit, "Russia's Strategic Outlook and Policies: What Role for China?" in Sarah Kirchberger, Svenja Sinjen, and Nils Wörmer, eds., *Russia-China Relations: Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?* Springer, 2022, p. 30; Mikheev and Lukonin, 2022, p. 30.

Defense Relations and Military-to-Military Engagement

The evolution of the Russia-China strategic partnership has also involved an expansion in the number and quality of military-to-military engagements between the two. The scope of these engagements has ranged widely from senior-level defense-policy discussions to technical training on new weapon systems and platforms. In recent years, the increase in major bilateral and multilateral exercises has demonstrated the priority that both countries place on the partnership and has amplified the strategic message that cooperation between the Russian Armed Forces and the PLA is a core pillar of the relationship. Both countries have argued that the United States' web of alliances around the world undermines global stability. For this reason, Moscow and Beijing believe that these exercises—including trilateral and multilateral events with regional partners—develop security relationships that signal Russia's and China's determination to challenge U.S. claims to primacy in key regions, such as Central Asia, East Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean.

In this chapter, we examine several elements of military-to-military engagement and cooperation between the two countries to understand the extent of their cooperation, the nature of these interactions, and the type of value that these engagements deliver to China and Russia, at the time of writing. In particular, we explore the extent to which these engagements might aid or hinder military cooperation in a future conflict with the United States. In many cases, these interactions have shown limited but growing substantive value for improving either military capabilities or interoperability; however, the diplomatic, informational, and, to some degree, economic value of these interactions indicate a variety of other benefits for Moscow and Beijing.

Along with military-to-military engagements, there are several components of the Russia-China defense relationship that must be examined in any discussion of the possibilities of future cooperation in a conflict scenario. Russia's war in Ukraine as well as military reform efforts in both countries since 2008 highlight several factors that might complicate military cooperation, including differing views of military strategy, concepts of operation, and the role of nuclear weapons.

National and Defense Policy

Despite their declared opposition to formal military alliances, both Russia and the PRC have considerably strengthened their bilateral relations over the past 30 years. The leaders of both nations now refer to their alignment as one “without limits,” which is a leap beyond the benign “constructive partnership” tacitly forged by Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Chinese President Jiang Zemin in the 1990s.¹ From a strategic perspective, this convergence stems from a mutual opposition to the U.S.-dominated world order: Both authoritarian states have used each other to balance against Washington and evade or mitigate the effects of damaging Western sanctions. Although they have reversed roles in this relationship since the end of the Cold War, Russia and China remain steadfast and engaged partners, particularly in the military realm.

The long-term prospects for future military cooperation between Russia and China are also bound by several variables that have fostered cooperation but may just as easily create divisions between the two powers. Russia’s war in Ukraine has highlighted several potential fissures that may either enhance or hinder the prospects for future military cooperation in a range of scenarios. The relationship between Putin and Xi has been the primary driver behind the increasing closeness in the partnership since 2013: The leaders have developed a personal rapport, and both understand that their individual visions for a new global order require the other’s support. That relationship has been challenged on many levels, and Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine has exposed potential cracks in the partnership that may deepen as Putin becomes more desperate to secure victory.² Xi’s warnings to Putin regarding the use of nuclear threats in September 2022 highlight one contentious area that could negatively affect the extent to which both leaders are willing to cooperate in the future.³

Personal Ties Between Heads of State

Because of the highly personalistic nature of their regimes, the relationship between the leaders of Russia and China also reflects the health of their strategic partnership. Throughout the 1990s, Yeltsin cultivated an amicable relationship with Jiang. The two held several summits to announce major policy declarations and also met informally to resolve potential flash-

¹ Gregory Shtraks, “Sino-Russian Relations and the Lessons of 1996,” *The Diplomat*, April 13, 2015; Edward Wong, “Russia and China Held Military Exercise in East Asia as Biden Visited” *New York Times*, May 24, 2022.

² Specifically, the PRC has apparently ignored Russian requests to supply military equipment to Moscow. See Paul D. Shinkman, “China Indicates to Biden It Won’t Send Weapons to Russia,” *U.S. News & World Report*, March 18, 2022.

³ Seddon et al., 2023.

points between Moscow and Beijing.⁴ Yeltsin even publicly referred to Jiang as his “friend” amid a series of successful meetings to resolve long-standing border disputes.⁵

At the time of writing, Russian President Putin and Chinese President Xi’s relationship bears a striking resemblance to that of their predecessors. The Russian and Chinese leaders have conspicuously leveraged their friendship to set state policy. For example, they single-handedly restored the arms trade as a centerpiece of bilateral relations after a period of stagnation in the mid-2000s.⁶ Putin also personally visited Xi prior to the start of the February 2022 Beijing Olympics. Releasing a joint statement, the two leaders defiantly described their nations’ bond as one “without limits.” Reports also suggest that Putin and Xi discussed Russia’s imminent invasion of Ukraine during this meeting. During the exchange, Xi allegedly asked Putin to delay the Russian attack until after the Beijing games had ended as a sign of respect for the PRC’s time in the international spotlight.⁷ However, the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs later denied this claim.⁸ Despite Beijing’s attempts to distance itself and discredit reports that the conversation took place, Xi has ensured that China has not abandoned its most important partner.

Considering the state of the Putin-Xi relationship and the general convergence of their political goals, Russia and China are likely to maintain or expand high-level interactions among their senior defense leaders in the coming years in spite of complications that will undoubtedly arise. The two nations’ recent affirmation of a “roadmap” for closer military cooperation essentially guarantees consistent interaction, although specific details on the agreement are sparse.⁹ Nevertheless, it seems likely that Moscow and Beijing will continue to cite U.S. military activities within their perceived spheres of influence as drivers of their strategic alignment. Sweden and Finland’s entry into NATO and the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral meeting at Camp David in August 2023—which involved discussions over extended deterrence—will be used by Russia and China as a further justification for bolstering defense collaboration at the highest levels.

Nuclear Issues

One area that may complicate or limit the extent to which Moscow and Beijing would consider military cooperation in future conflict scenarios involves the role of nuclear weapons.

⁴ Lukin, 2018, pp.101–102.

⁵ Seth Faison, “In Beijing, Yeltsin Finds Jiang Speaks His Language,” *New York Times*, November 11, 1997.

⁶ Paul N. Schwartz, *The Changing Nature and Implications of Russian Military Transfers to China*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2021, p. 2.

⁷ Wong and Barnes, 2022; “China Denies Asking Russia Not to Invade Until Post-Olympics,” Associated Press, March 3, 2022.

⁸ Catherine Wong, 2022.

⁹ Vladimir Isachenkov, “Russia, China Sign Roadmap for Closer Military Cooperation,” *Military Times*, November 24, 2021.

First and foremost, both countries view their respective nuclear capabilities and the role of nuclear weapons in their national military strategies differently, which is a factor that has roots in the Cold War. Historically, the Soviets viewed nuclear weapons as the most significant tool in their arsenal to deter NATO.¹⁰ Prior to the late 1970s, Soviet military thinkers also devoted significant attention to understanding how to fight and win a nuclear conflict.¹¹ Although Soviet political and military leaders abandoned the notion that winning a nuclear conflict was possible, concern over a surprise nuclear attack was a prominent feature of Soviet military thinking. Perhaps the best-known example of this is Operation RYAN, which was a massive intelligence-gathering effort that collected information on specific indicators of a NATO surprise attack against the Soviet Union and predicted the likelihood of occurrence.¹² Following the Cold War, nuclear weapons continued to figure prominently in Russia's military strategy and considerations about national security. In fact, the emphasis placed on nuclear weapons grew as Russia's conventional capabilities deteriorated. Immediately after Operation Allied Force—the NATO air campaign against Serbia in 1999—Russian leaders, who were concerned about Western advanced capabilities, conducted nuclear exercises to signal to the United States and its NATO allies that, despite Russia's lack of advanced conventional capabilities, it still possessed a formidable nuclear arsenal that it was willing to use to deter what the Kremlin perceived as Western coercion and aggression.¹³ While assigned in Dresden during his time in the KGB, Putin would play a role in collecting and analyzing intelligence as part of this program.¹⁴ Since the end of the Cold War, nuclear forces have continued to be a centerpiece in Russia's military strategy.¹⁵

Since the PRC deployed its first nuclear weapons in the early 1970s, Beijing's view on the role of nuclear weapons has differed considerably from the Kremlin's. Two primary factors shaped Chinese leaders' early views of nuclear weapons. The first was that they wanted to avoid a costly arms race that would divert resources from other critical modernization efforts underway in China.¹⁶ Chinese leaders also recognized that they did not have the financial, technological, or industrial base necessary to enter into an arms race with either the Soviet Union or the United States. Second, Chinese leaders were skeptical about the effectiveness of nuclear weapons as an instrument of state power. Many leaders in Beijing believed that

¹⁰ President of the Russian Federation, *On the Principles of Russian State Policy on Nuclear Deterrence*, June 2, 2020.

¹¹ Clint Reach, Vikram Kilambi, and Mark Cozad, *Russian Assessments and Applications of the Correlation of Forces and Means*, RAND Corporation, RR-4235-OSD, 2020, p. 109–110.

¹² President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, *The Soviet "War Scare,"* February 15, 1990.

¹³ Michael R. Gordon, "Maneuvers Show Russian Reliance on Nuclear Arms," *New York Times*, July 10, 1999.

¹⁴ Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin*, Knopf Doubleday, 2016, p. 28.

¹⁵ Vladimir Putin, *Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, December 2014; Reach, Kilambi, and Cozad, 2020, p. 125.

¹⁶ Lewis, 2007.

nuclear weapons were not effective tools for threatening, coercing, or compelling behavior.¹⁷ Similarly, Chinese leaders viewed nuclear weapons as an unrealistic solution to many war-time problems and believed that leaders would be reluctant to wield them even in the most dangerous scenarios.¹⁸ The PRC thought of nuclear weapons as a limited retaliatory strike capability that could deter powers, such as the Soviet Union and the United States, from using—or threatening the use of—nuclear weapons to coerce China. In contrast to their U.S. and Soviet counterparts, Chinese leaders did not view nuclear weapons as the primary means of deterrence against conventional wars. Ultimately, China’s long-standing “no first use policy” was developed in light of these perceptions. As China rapidly expands its nuclear arsenal, there are few indications that Beijing intends to alter the “no first use” policy or that it has changed its views on the value of nuclear weapons as a coercive tool. Xi’s responses to Putin’s nuclear threats against NATO demonstrate China’s continued discomfort with nuclear signaling and coercion.

Perhaps the most noticeable divide between Putin and Xi after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 resulted from the Kremlin’s nuclear threats against NATO. On multiple occasions, Xi, his foreign minister, and PRC state media have warned against the dangers of nuclear weapon use and have actively discouraged the Kremlin from using this type of inflammatory rhetoric.¹⁹ According to both Western and Chinese officials, Xi personally warned Putin against using nuclear weapons, noting that such an event would do significant harm to the relationship between Russia and China.²⁰ These warnings appear to have been the result of Beijing’s concerns over the overall instability generated by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as well as part of a broader effort to repair its ties with Europe, which were damaged by China’s support for Russia since the outset of the war.

The lopsided balance in capabilities between the two powers—i.e., Russia’s conventional weakness and nuclear strength compared with China’s conventional strength and smaller nuclear arsenal—could present a situation in which a conventionally weak Russia makes nuclear threats that lead to escalation. In turn, this situation would threaten China’s and Russia’s ability to control the conflict and manage escalation. As the war in Ukraine has demonstrated, Putin’s willingness to take major risks is significantly greater than Xi’s. In scenarios in which this risk taking leads to nuclear threats, coercion, or potential use, Beijing could find itself in a position that it has wanted to avoid for more than 50 years since it developed its nuclear arsenal.

¹⁷ Lewis, 2007, p. 15.

¹⁸ Lewis, 2007, p. 79.

¹⁹ Nana Shibata and Ken Moriyasu, “Xi Told Biden That China Rejects Nuclear War in Ukraine,” *Nikkei Asia*, November 15, 2022; Wang Yi, “The Path of Peaceful Development Has Worked and Worked Well,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, February 18, 2023.

²⁰ Seddon et al., 2023.

War Strategy and the Conduct of War

The historical examples in Chapter 2 (most notably the case involving Soviet and Chinese support to Vietnam) and in the previous section on nuclear weapons highlight two key points of friction between the two powers that could affect their ability to cooperate in the future: disagreements on war strategy and an overall approach to the conduct of war. Over the past three decades, one of the most notable developments in the Sino-Russian defense relationship has been the development of ties between the two militaries in such areas as professional military education (PME), training, and combined exercises. These ties have had a profound influence on the PLA, particularly in terms of military science and how it is applied to understanding the international security environment, military strategy, and concept development. However, expectations regarding the impact of these cooperative activities should be managed. For example, combined operations have not necessarily resulted in operational improvements for either military. Moreover, this influence should also not be viewed as the PLA's wholesale adoption of Russian methods. On the contrary, the PLA has consciously attempted to blend a series of operational approaches into a hybrid model that incorporates Chinese understanding of Western and Russian concepts and tailors them to the PLA's specific needs.²¹ In the future, these common approaches and ideas could serve as a mechanism that allows for closer cooperation, but they could also serve as points of departure and disagreement based on both nations' decisions on how to build their respective militaries to meet the demands of future warfare.

Perhaps the most important factor shaping both militaries' thinking about modern warfare has been their observation of U.S. and NATO operations against Serbia (Operation Allied Force) in 1999. Although both countries had individual takeaways tailored to their own specific needs, they shared common observations about the new Western way of war and the capabilities necessary to counter it. Whereas the Chinese learned the importance of national defense mobilization, civil defense, and the need to counter military buildups around a nation's periphery early and with significant force,²² key observations centered on NATO's ability to assemble massive amounts of airpower capable of sustained operations.²³ Similarly, the disparity between Russia's and NATO's conventional military strength reinforced in the minds of Russia's leaders that nuclear weapons would continue to play a preeminent role in Russia's ability to deter and respond to aggression.²⁴

²¹ Cozad, Gierlack, et al., 2023.

²² Huang Bin, *Research into the Kosovo War*, Liberation Army Publishing House, 2000, pp. 137–144.

²³ Reach, Blanc, and Geist, 2022, pp. 33–43.

²⁴ President of the Russian Federation, *Russian Federation Military Doctrine*, April 22, 2000. This strategy was released less than a year after Operation Allied Force stated, "The Russian Federation reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and (or) its allies, as well as in response to large-scale aggression utilizing conventional weapons in situations critical to the national security of the Russian Federation."

Although Russia and China did take away many different lessons from Operation Allied Force, both identified the development of *noncontact warfare* as a key feature in future wars. From a technical standpoint, noncontact warfare relied on the development of long-range precision strike capabilities, advanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms, and a highly networked C2 infrastructure to ensure that individual units had the most-updated information possible and that their actions were synchronized.²⁵ Strategically, noncontact warfare completely altered earlier Russian and Chinese perceptions about why and how wars would be fought in the future. Traditionally, both militaries thought of military operations in linear terms, consisting of mobilization, deployment, assembly, and engagement. The intent behind this linear process was to attrit the enemy's forces and ultimately take away its ability to continue fighting. Beyond the contact war this linear process suggests, there was also a sequential approach to achieving strategic effects. In order to attack an enemy's most vital targets, a military would first have to fight through frontline forces to enable it to capture or destroy critical infrastructure and leadership functions. At least from a Soviet perspective, the development of nuclear weapons provided a means of bypassing this linear sequence; however, the cost of employing nuclear weapons was recognized as being too high. The development of noncontact warfare provided Western military with a conventional means of achieving these strategic effects without having to engage in direct contact with enemy ground forces. One prominent Russian strategist categorized the development of noncontact warfare as representing a "sixth generation" of warfare that not only changed the calculus of stability and deterrence but added a new layer of complexity based on the role that conventional, long-range precision strike weapons could play in the earliest stages of conflict.²⁶ The emergence of noncontact warfare now permitted militaries with these capabilities to bypass the costly attrition-based early phases of operations and immediately threaten a nation's critical infrastructure, strategic military facilities and assets, and national leadership.

Prior to the war in Ukraine, there appeared to be considerable convergence in how the Russian and Chinese militaries thought about the conduct of war. The new Western way of war, which was characterized by precision weapons, joint operations, informatization, and systems warfare, led both militaries to invest in each of these areas despite differences in their funding abilities over the long term as well as differences in their primary domains of concern. Military exercises suggested that both Russia and China desired to learn from each other's experiences and to develop forces that would be compatible—if not interoperable—for use in a future conflict. It is uncertain how Russia's war in Ukraine might modify this consideration for both militaries. Russia's inability to conduct advanced, multidomain, and joint operations has been exposed, and, as a result, the Russian armed forces have deemphasized

²⁵ State Council of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*, May 2015; Valerii V. Gerasimov, "Vectors of the Development of Military Strategy," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, March 4, 2019.

²⁶ Vladimir Ivanovich Slipchenko, *Noncontact Wars*, 2000; Vladimir Ivanovich Slipchenko, "Voyna budushchego," *Nauchnye doklady*, No. 88, Moskovskiy Obshchesvennyi Nauchnyy Fund, 1999.

air and maritime power and reverted to attrition-based warfare in what has become a protracted conflict.

Conversely, the PLA has devoted considerable resources to building its maritime, air, and missile forces. Its leaders have overseen the development of operational concepts designed to avoid linear, attrition-based employment of Chinese forces. Prior to its invasion of Ukraine, Russia's military already had considerably more experience than the PLA, and it still fell short of its operational and tactical aspirations in a large-scale operation. It is uncertain that the PLA would fare better in its own endeavors, but PLA leaders would most likely be concerned about the possibility of being dragged into a costly, protracted conflict with a partner with a demonstrated inability to conduct nonlinear, noncontact operations.

Military Reform and Institutions

A final area of national and defense policy that needs to be factored into an examination of future Russian and Chinese cooperation in an operational scenario is the state of military reform. As we highlighted in the previous section, both militaries have been shaped heavily by the revolution in military affairs and, in particular, advances in U.S. military operations and technology. Recognizing the need for change, both Russia and China underwent periods of reform following the Cold War, with the most-recent reforms being in 2008 (Russia's New Look) and 2016 (China's major restructuring). In many cases, these reforms, along with earlier iterations, addressed similar problems in terms of technology, organization, and concepts of operation. Other areas of concern— planning, political work, and organizational culture— were targeted as well. For the PLA, these issues constituted key elements of Xi's reforms. For the Russian Armed Forces, this was much less the case.

Planning

One of the most significant problem areas that has arisen in Ukraine for the Russian Armed Forces has been in the area of war planning. Prior to the conflict, Russian leaders highly centralized the process, made several incorrect assumptions, failed to address critical issues such as logistics, and did not communicate the necessary details of Russia's war plans to subordinate commanders and their units. At its core, the Russian planning system remained highly centralized—almost surely led by Putin and his inner circle—and did not factor in the military advice or analytics that have been central to Soviet and Russian military doctrine on planning.²⁷ One key element of Xi's 2016 PLA reorganization was the creation of five theater commands, each of which is responsible for a geographic area or direction and tasked with planning for their respective areas. A core rationale behind these changes was that PLA planning had traditionally been concentrated in the General Staff Department, which limited the

²⁷ Michael Schwartz, Anton Troianovski, Yousur Al-Hlou, Masha Froliak, Adam Entous, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Putin's War: The Inside Story of a Catastrophe," *New York Times*, December 17, 2022; Paul Sonne, Ellen Nakashima, Shane Harris, and John Hudson, "Hubris and Isolation Led Vladimir Putin to Misjudge Ukraine," *Washington Post*, April 12, 2022.

initiative of lower-level commands and slowed down the operational decisionmaking process. Following these reforms, Xi directed the creation of training and education programs to develop the skills necessary for commanders and their staffs to plan effectively. Similar considerations have been factored into the PLA's most-recent operational concepts, all of which attempt to delegate decisionmaking authority down to the lowest levels possible.²⁸

As it relates to planning, Russia's performance in Ukraine has been poor for two key reasons: competence and trust. From a competence standpoint, Russia's planning system appeared to miss a number of critical factors that led to a poorly conceived operation based on faulty assumptions—most significantly regarding Ukraine's willingness and ability to fight—and a poor understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the Russian Armed Forces.²⁹ While the PLA has not had an opportunity to demonstrate its planning capability in a combat situation, PRC leaders—most notably Xi—have expressed concerns about the ability of PLA officers to effectively plan and command in wartime.³⁰ For both Russia and China, it is unclear how both sides would coordinate and reconcile their own planning efforts in a future military operation. A significant question that remains in this area is whether either of the two militaries would have confidence in the other's ability to plan and coordinate effectively.

A common feature to both Russian and Chinese planning that would have implications for any future potential combined operation is the lack of trust—both internally and externally—in their military systems. A lack of trust was clearly a key factor in the Kremlin's late disclosure of its plans to units deployed to the Ukrainian border. Likewise, issues of trust in subordinates' capabilities have also been a key factor in a relatively large number of senior officer deaths early in the war. Similarly, Russian commanders and their Soviet forbears have exhibited limited trust with foreign counterpart militaries, ranging from members of the Warsaw Pact to military partners in the Middle East, including Egypt, Iraq, and Syria.³¹ Notably, since Russia's involvement in Syria in 2015, Russia's interaction with its Syrian counterparts—particularly in the realm of planning—has also demonstrated an overall lack of trust.³²

In China, the PLA faces a similar reality. One of the primary reasons for centralized planning in the PLA has been a desire on the part of PRC political leaders to ensure that China's military does not deviate from the CCP's strategic wartime objectives. Since 2017, a key criticism in the PRC has centered on whether the Party can rely on its military to follow party

²⁸ Burke et al., 2020, pp. 10–11.

²⁹ Schwirtz et al., 2022; Sonne et al., 2022.

³⁰ Cozad, Engstrom, et al. 2023, p. 93.

³¹ See discussion in Chapter 2.

³² Michael Kofman, "Syrian and the Russian Armed Forces: An Evaluation of Moscow's Military Strategy and Operational Performance," Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 25, 2020b, p. 9.

directives, particularly its senior commanders.³³ Recent directives within the PLA emanating from the Central Military Commission (CMC) (namely Xi) have attempted to clarify both the PLA's subordinate role to the CCP as well as Xi's role as the PRC's core leader.³⁴ Externally, the PLA has had less experience than the Russian military in the area of combined planning with foreign militaries, but, in those historical cases in which the PLA has worked with an ally, it has either taken the central responsibility for planning and sidelined its ally (North Korea) or openly disagreed with it (Vietnam). Ultimately, issues surrounding war planning will be critical to any future operational collaboration between the Russian armed forces and the PLA.

Political Work and Reliability

The problem of trust in planning is a symptom of a larger problem for leaders in the Russian Armed Forces and the PLA, which is reliability. Reliability in the Russian Armed Forces has been a central issue since the invasion of Ukraine. Conscripts have frequently been poorly trained and shirked their duties, units have exhibited poor discipline, and, most recently, Wagner mercenaries mutinied.³⁵ During Russia's military reform efforts over the past 15 years, the Kremlin sought to improve the professionalism and competence of the Russian army by expanding the total number of contract soldiers and decreasing reliance on conscripts in high-readiness units. It also sought to improve national defense education among the population and improve reliability by using Orthodox chaplains in many of the same roles in which political commissars had been used in previous decades.³⁶ However, there was no dedicated effort to reestablish the type of political work organizations that had existed in the Soviet military.

Largely because of Xi's concerns with the PLA's drift away from Marxism–Leninism and a perception that the PLA was becoming less of a party army, one of Xi's most significant moves in the 2016 reforms was to reinvigorate the role of political work in the PLA. The PLA's renewed focus on political work has multiple facets. First, political work in the PLA is an attempt to reassert the CCP's primacy in both authority and thought within the military. One concern that PLA military science and teaching publications have highlighted in recent years is that commanders must be capable of carrying out orders in accordance with the CCP's primary objectives.³⁷ Central to this idea is that commanders, their staffs, and the rank and file must understand CCP priorities. Second, PLA political work spends considerable effort ensuring that messages regarding who leads the party and the PLA are well understood. Not

³³ Cozad, Engstrom, et al., 2023, p. 94–99.

³⁴ Cozad, Engstrom, et al., 2023, p. 96–97.

³⁵ Mark Galeotti, "Echoes of Afghanistan in Russian Soldiers' Poor Discipline in Ukraine," *Moscow Times*, April 1, 2022; Neil MacFarquhar, "They Refused to Fight for Russia. The Law Did Not Treat Them Kindly," *New York Times*, April 30, 2023.

³⁶ Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, "Russian Orthodox Church and Nuclear Command and Control: A Hypothesis," *Security Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 5, October 20, 2019, p. 1016.

³⁷ Cozad, Engstrom, et al., 2023, pp. 103–104.

only do PLA political organizations attempt to explain and popularize Xi's latest thoughts, they have also taken on the role of ensuring that, at all levels, the PLA knows that Xi is CCP's core leader.³⁸ Finally, PLA leaders, Xi foremost among them, have expressed concerns about the PLA's "fighting spirit" and the peacetime habits that have accumulated in the nearly 45 years since the PLA was last in major combat.³⁹ Because of these concerns, PLA reforms have led to additional political education, inspections for compliance with CCP directives, and the establishment of guidelines to address these issues in training events and exercises.

In relation to potential future operational cooperation, the issue of political work and reliability could serve as a major factor in whether Russian and Chinese leaders are willing to commit their militaries to a combined operation.⁴⁰ From an internally focused perspective, the PLA's reliability issues have caused Xi considerable concern; he might hesitate to use the PLA in some scenarios because of concerns about an ineffective military performance having broader strategic ramifications. From an external perspective, Xi's concerns would likely be amplified in any consideration of a potential operational collaboration with Russia based on the Russian military's poor reliability in Ukraine. In either case, for leaders facing concerns over their own military's reliability, agreeing to a combined operation with another military whose reliability problems might make matters worse will force them to assume a great deal of risk.

Organizational Culture

A final factor related to military reforms and institutions that might affect a decision to work together and the manner in which that work could be done is organizational culture. In many respects, several issues of organizational culture can be tied to reliability, but such issues as corruption, poor work styles, bureaucratism, a general unwillingness to defer decisions, and organizational incentives to not report negative news to higher levels of leadership are all present in both militaries and create potential obstacles to operational cooperation in the future.⁴¹

³⁸ Cozad, Engstrom, et al., 2023, pp. 96–97.

³⁹ Cozad, Engstrom, et al., 2023, p. 105.

⁴⁰ The term *combined* is used to refer to a military operation involving the militaries of more than one nation. This contrasts with a *joint* operation, which refers to a military force involving two or more services of a single nation.

⁴¹ See, for example, Michael S. Chase, Jeffrey Engstrom, Tai Ming Cheung, Kristen Gunness, Scott W. Harold, Susan Puska, and Samuel K. Berkowitz, *China's Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)*, RAND Corporation, RR-893-USCC, 2015; and Kimberly Jackson, Andrew Scobell, Stephen Webber, and Logan Ma, *Command and Control in U.S. Naval Competition with China*, RAND Corporation, RR-A127-1, 2020.

Military and Defense Exchanges

Military exchanges between Russia and the PRC have steadily intensified over the past 30 years. The two nations now collaborate across the areas of PME, combined technical projects, and training exercises. Yet a key difference between the past and the present lies in the nature of these interactions. While the partnership disproportionately benefited the PRC throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, this has shifted since 2014. Beijing continues to rely on Moscow in the military education sphere, especially given Russia's much more-recent war-fighting experiences in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine. Regarding technical exchanges, however, the Russo-Chinese partnership has effectively equalized. No longer does the PRC import whole weapon systems from Russia. In fact, Chinese UAS and shipbuilding capabilities now exceed those of Russia—much to the Kremlin's envy.⁴² As this section will explain, Russia and the PRC have pursued a more egalitarian approach to technical development while subtly beginning to compete in the PME realm.

Senior Level Meetings of Defense Officials

The Xi-Putin relationship sets the tone for high-level interactions between the PLA and Russian military. In June 2023, Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov met via videoconference with his PLA counterpart, Liu Zhenli, the Chief of the Joint Staff Department.⁴³ This meeting followed an April meeting in Moscow in which Defense Minister Shoigu met with his Chinese counterpart Li Shangfu.⁴⁴ These two meetings served as a reaffirmation of the close ties between Russia and China and included discussions of future information exchanges and military-technical cooperation.

High-level meetings between Russian and Chinese senior military officials have been a key component for signaling the strength of ties between Beijing and Moscow. Frequently, these meetings have taken place on the sidelines of regional security forums and multilateral exercises, but they have also involved a relatively large number of bilateral meetings on a variety of topics. Ultimately, these contacts serve both political and practical purposes. Politically, they signal a commitment to the partnership and showcase regular interactions at the senior levels. When conducted in multilateral forums, such as the SCO, they demonstrate China's and Russia's leadership among their partner nations as well as Moscow's and Beijing's commitment to supporting regional security initiatives. From a practical standpoint, the meetings permit senior military members to engage with their counterparts to discuss policy issues and identify opportunities for engagement on sensitive or operationally important matters. For example, in 2014, the PLAAF Commander, Ma Xiaotian, met with his counterparts in Russia's airborne forces to identify opportunities for training and operational

⁴² Weitz, 2021, p. 4; Korolev, 2019, p. 242.

⁴³ "Russia Says Military Ties with China Provide Global 'Stability,'" *Moscow Times*, June 10, 2023.

⁴⁴ "China Minister Hails 'Strong' Russia Ties in Putin Meeting," *Moscow Times*, April 17, 2023.

exchanges.⁴⁵ Similarly, in 2014, Gerasimov met with Fan Changlong, then Vice Chairman of the CMC, to discuss military reforms in both countries, among a host of other issues.⁴⁶

Professional Military Education Exchanges

Regular PME exchanges between Russia and the PRC began in 1996 when Beijing's CMC signed the *Notice on Sending Military Students to Russia and Other Countries*. As a result of this policy, the PLA deployed officers to Russia for training in the advanced weapon systems it had begun to purchase from Moscow—namely the S-300 SAM system, Sukhoi fighter jets, and Kilo-class submarines.⁴⁷ Today, Chinese PME in Russia extends beyond functional training. Roughly 80–120 senior PLA leaders are educated in Russia's military academies each year. These programs are mostly one-sided and allow China to study military theory and strategy and absorb the unique traditions and culture of the Russian Armed Forces.⁴⁸ This common intellectual foundation likely promotes collaboration and some degree of interoperability between the Russian and Chinese militaries.

As the PLA continues to modernize, however, Russia and the PRC may find themselves at odds over PME. Historically, Russia has served as the preeminent destination for the training of senior Central Asian military leaders; it has solidified pro-Russian influence throughout the region by leveraging its Soviet heritage to educate neighboring militaries' top officers.⁴⁹ More recently, Beijing has cultivated its own robust foundation of military knowledge. Building on the concept of “civil-military fusion,” many Chinese defense institutions have established partnerships with private industry. Since Russia lacks this type of coordination between its defense and business sectors, Central Asian students can learn these groundbreaking lessons only from Chinese institutions.⁵⁰ Put differently, the PRC may expand its comparative advantage in this specific type of PME to present Central Asian officers with an alternative to Russian programs. Given the PRC's financial advantages over Russia and its continuing military modernization, it remains unclear how Russo-Chinese relations may be affected once Beijing eventually establishes itself as alternative to *all* fields of Russian PME.

⁴⁵ “Ma Xiaotian Meets with Russian Guests,” *Jiefangjun Bao*, May 28, 2014.

⁴⁶ “China, Russia Vow to Enhance Military Ties,” *Xinhua*, August 28, 2014.

⁴⁷ Korolev, 2019, p. 243.

⁴⁸ Korolev, 2019, p. 243.

⁴⁹ Erica Marat, “China's Expanding Military Education Diplomacy in Central Asia,” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 697, April 2021, pp. 1–2.

⁵⁰ Marat, 2021, p. 2.

Combined Exercises

Combined exercises complement long-standing and well-developed programs in the areas of PME and training and have become a centerpiece of the Russia-China military-to-military relationship. Beginning in 2005, the number of exercises between the two militaries has grown considerably. Likewise, they also have increased in complexity, covered a wide variety of operational scenarios, and included partners such as Iran, South Africa, India, and several Central Asian militaries. Both countries judge the value of these exercises from a range of different perspectives. They provide much-needed operational experience to the units involved. They signal the high level of commitment that both countries place on the relationship. They also provide significant strategic, nonmilitary value to both Moscow and Beijing. Whether these exercises help either military achieve its operational development objectives is uncertain; however, they are designed, in part, to be a potent signal to the United States and its allies.

Since the initial Peace Mission exercise in 2005, China and Russia have held roughly 25 additional exercises that have either been bilateral or multilateral events (See Table 4.1).⁵¹ The initial scenarios did not involve the United States and its allies as an adversary. They were focused on countering terrorism or Islamist insurgents, a common security problem for both countries and a major priority for both at the time. The early exercises were also primarily centered on ground force maneuvers. Beginning in 2010, the exercises began to involve cooperation in other areas, particularly in the maritime domain with the advent of the Joint Sea/Naval Interaction exercise series. Finally, beginning in 2018, the PLA began its annual participation in Russia's major strategic exercises (Vostok, Tsentr, Kavkaz, and Zapad). During this time frame, Russia and China also conducted exercises with key regional partners, including Iran and South Africa, which involved scenarios in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman. Although Russia and China had previously conducted multilateral exercises with SCO partners in the past, their efforts to incorporate South Africa and Iran involved demonstrating Russian and Chinese cooperation in such areas as the Indian Ocean as well as the ability to counter U.S. and Western intervention (in scenarios involving Iran).

In their recent iterations, one of the primary objectives for Russia-China exercises has been to increase interoperability between the Russian Armed Forces and the PLA. As early as Peace Mission 2013, exercise objectives sought to promote cooperation between Russian and PLA command staffs in both planning and execution. Later exercises, such as Vostok 2018, involved greater efforts to integrate Russian and Chinese C2, which was an ambitious goal for the deployed PLA units participating in the exercise. Later strategic exercises, such as Kavkaz 2020, continued with this trend by attempting to test automated C2 processes as well as the ability of Russian and PLA ISR and C2 systems to interface. From a tactical perspective, both militaries touted the exercises as strengthening and improving interoperability in a

⁵¹ For an excellent analysis of Russian and Chinese exercises, see Weitz, 2021. This section relies heavily on this work.

TABLE 4.1

Significant Russia-China Combined Exercises

Year	Exercise	Location	Scenario, Content, or Domain
2005	Peace Mission	Shandong Peninsula	First Russia-China bilateral exercise; focused on neutralizing anti-aircraft defenses, enforcing maritime blockades, and amphibious assault missions
2007	Peace Mission	Chelyabinsk Region, Russia	Involved SCO members in scenario suppressing an Islamist insurgency or a popular rebellion, or both
2009	Peace Mission		Theater-level combined anti-terrorist campaign; SCO members attended as observers
2010	Peace Mission		Three-phase counterterrorism (CT) exercise
2012	Joint Sea	Yellow Sea	Practiced rescuing hijacked ships, joint air defense, maritime search and rescue, and anti-submarine warfare (ASW)
2012	Peace Mission	Tajikistan	Included SCO members and focused on CT, counterinsurgency, air and ground strikes, encirclement and suppression, and pursuit and vertical interception
2013	Joint Sea	Sea of Japan	Air defense, anti-submarine, anti-ship scenarios
2013	Peace Mission	Chebarkul Military Range, Russia	Bilateral exercise focused on campaign-level CT operations; primary goal was cooperation of the military command bodies in planning, preparation, and conduct of combat operations supporting an antiterrorist operation
2014	Joint Sea	East China Sea	Russia sent Slava-class guided missile cruiser, ships, and two fighter planes; China sent destroyers, frigates, attack submarines, and warplanes
2014	Peace Mission	Zhurihe Training Base, China	Scenario involved heavily armed separatist group taking over a notional city in a Eurasian country; city became center of political instability and terrorism; national government called on the SCO to intervene; focused on combating separatism, liberating occupied zones, and CT; exercise included troop deployment, battle planning, and simulated combat
2015	Joint Sea	Mediterranean Sea (Phase I)	Designed to improve proficiency in areas that include air defense, antisubmarine defense and anti-ship defense
2015	Joint Sea	Sea of Japan (Phase II)	Live-fire exercises, at-sea replenishment, cargo transfer, escorting missions, joint anti-sabotage, anti-submarine, anti-vessel, anti-aircraft defense, as well as gunnery drills with various surface and underwater targets; exercise concluded with amphibious and airborne landing of Russian and Chinese troops
2016	Joint Sea	South China Sea	Simulated beachhead battles, maritime search and rescue, ASW, combined air defense, and seizing and protecting islands; practiced joint missile and artillery strikes at maritime targets and performed joint sea and landing operations on a small island.
2016	Peace Mission	Western Kyrgyzstan	Focused on mountain warfare and repelling an external invasion

Table 4.1—Continued

Year	Exercise	Location	Scenario, Content, or Domain
2017	Joint Sea	Baltic Sea (Phase I)	ASW and air and anti-ship defense in the Baltic Sea, ship rescue, a search-and-rescue mission to assist a vessel in distress, and a live-firing against surface and aerial targets
2017	Joint Sea	Sea of Japan (Phase II)	Russian and Chinese vessels worked in mixed tactical groups with alternating command responsibilities taken between Russian and Chinese ships; also conducted submarine rescue drills
2018	Vostok-2018	Tsugol Range, Russia	Russian and PRC command worked together in the context of a large military conflict with a third state; exercise involved the integration of Russian and Chinese C2 systems
2018	Peace Mission	Russia–Kazakhstan Border	India and Pakistan joined the Peace Mission exercises for the first time; scenario involved recapturing a village taken over by militants in a Central Asian country; main operations included reconnaissance, blockade and control, a paradrop landing, resistance, suppression, and pursuit and attack
2019	Tsentr-2019	Donguz Training Ground, Russia	Focused on improving strategic C2 of combined arms operations and numerous tactical skills, scenario involved a terrorist threat emanating from Central Asia; exercise had two stages: (1) CT, air strikes, reconnaissance and defensive operations and (2) an offensive to defeat a simulated enemy
2019	Operation Mosi	Cape Town, South Africa	Trilateral exercise involving South Africa; practiced protecting navigation and security of maritime economic activities, surface gunnery exercises, and helicopter cross-deck landings; demonstrated the potential for Russian-Chinese cooperation in the Indian Ocean.
2019	Operation Marine Security Belt	Gulf of Oman and Indian Ocean	Trilateral exercise involving Iran; focused on CT, counterpiracy, and maritime rescue; also focused on joint maneuvering and C2; goal to strengthen Russian and Chinese capability to block a potential Western intervention against Iran in the future
2020	Kavkaz-2020	Donguz Training Ground, Russia	Focused on use of high-precision weapons, reconnaissance and electronic warfare systems, automated C2 processes of the troops and weaponry, the interface between reconnaissance and information C2 systems
2021	Joint Sea	Sea of Japan	Focused on countermine, naval artillery fire, simulated anti-ship fires, and naval air-defense; exercise followed immediately by first Sino-Russian joint naval patrol in the western Pacific consisting of ten Chinese and Russian warships, as well as six carrier-based helicopters, and featured joint maneuvers and live-fire drills
2021	Peace Mission	Russia–Kazakhstan Border	Participating nations included SCO members (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, India, and Pakistan); Iran present as an observer because it only recently joined the SCO; focused on counter-UAS operations, information security, and prevention of terrorist attacks with chemical and biological weapons

Table 4.1—Continued

Year	Exercise	Location	Scenario, Content, or Domain
2021	Zapad/ Interaction 2021	Multiple sites	Focused on joint reconnaissance, early warning, and electronic information attack and joint attack and elimination; exercise objective was to consolidate and develop the China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership and deepen military cooperation and interoperability
2022	Operation Marine Security Belt	Northern Indian Ocean	Two phase trilateral exercise involving Iran; designed to strengthen cooperation between the three participants that included maritime rescue, releasing a hijacked vessel, and live anti-surface and anti-air fires; during the first phase, vessels from the three countries fired at preplanned targets with 20mm caliber weapons; second phase included an offensive arrangement of participating units against existing regional threats
2022	Vostok 2022	Multiple sites in Russian Far East, Sea of Okhotsk, and Sea of Japan	Conducted in three phases focused on: (1) fighting from entrenched positions to ensure follow-on units are brought into fight; (2) attached C2 systems with long-range strike and air forces; and (3) transition to offensive operations and attacks against enemy frontline forces

SOURCES: Weitz, 2021; Vladimir Mukhin, "China and Russia Will Conduct Exercises in the Mediterranean Sea," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, May 13, 2015; Vladimir Mukhin, "Threats of Washington Do Not Hinder the Military Alliance of Moscow and Beijing," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, September 7, 2016; Vladimir Mukhin, "Russia and China Will Conduct Exercises in the Baltic Sea for the First Time," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, July 12, 2017; Andrew Higgins, "China and Russia Hold First Joint Naval Drill in the Baltic Sea," *New York Times*, July 25, 2017; Ankit Panda, "Chinese, Russian Navies Hold Exercises in Sea of Japan, Okhotsk Sea," *The Diplomat*, September 21, 2017; "Russia, China, Iran Start Joint Naval Drills in Indian Ocean," Reuters, December 27, 2019; Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix, "Russia-China Naval Partnership and Its Significance," in Sarah Kirchberger, Svenja Sinjen, and Nils Wörmer, eds., *Russia-China Relations: Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?* Springer, 2022; "Russia and China Hold Joint Naval Drills in Sea of Japan," Reuters, October 15, 2021; Dzirhan Mahadzir, "Russia, China Wrap Up Drills Off Japan, Pledge More Joint Exercises," USNI News, October 25, 2021; "Marine Security Belt 2022 Exercise Kicks Off in Indian Ocean," Islamic Republic News Agency, January 21, 2022; Leng Shumei, "China, Russia, Iran Complete Joint Drill Amid 'Restrictions on Sea Routes from Some Major Powers,'" *Global Times*, January 21, 2022; Richard Weitz, "Analyzing Peace Mission 2014: China and Russia Exercise with the Central Asian States," *Second Line of Defense*, October 8, 2014.

number of functional areas, including joint fires; anti-surface, anti-air, and ASW; joint ISR; amphibious operations; and airborne operations; among many others.

While the prospect of improving interoperability and warfighting capability was the widely touted and most obvious rationale for holding these combined training events, the actual military benefits of Russo-Chinese drills are less clear. Namely, the Peace Mission and Joint Sea exercises are short, and their scenarios are overly simplistic.⁵² They have also been described as more "parallel" than "joint," meaning that Russia's military and the PLA are given set tasks and timelines, perform them in synchronized yet independent fashion, and overall have limited interaction in such areas as planning and C2.⁵³ For this reason,

⁵² Alec Blivas, "Sino-Russian Military Exercises Signal a Growing Alliance," *Proceedings of the U.S. Naval Institute*, Vol. 147, No. 6, June 2021.

⁵³ Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky, *Chinese-Russian Defense Cooperation Is More Flash Than Bang*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 17, 2021.

these exercises have in reality done relatively little to promote interoperability at either the operational or the tactical level.⁵⁴ Although the very first Peace Mission exercise introduced command codes to enable communication between Russian and Chinese pilots, and Russian troops even fell under Chinese command at Cooperation 2021, large-scale integration remains incomplete.⁵⁵

Overall, combined Russo-Chinese maneuvers may appear impressive within the context of the Peace Mission and Joint Sea exercises, but outside these highly controlled environments, true synergy between the two militaries does not likely exist. It is for this reason that multiple researchers infer that true integration between the Russian and Chinese militaries will run no deeper than strategic deconfliction in a potential warfighting scenario: The two forces may jointly coordinate front-level groupings within a single theater, but their ability to coordinate below the operational level will be severely limited.⁵⁶

Nonmilitary Value of Russia's and China's Combined Exercises

Although both Beijing and the Kremlin publicly describe the military intent behind these exercises as enhancing interoperability and warfighting capability, these events have also served important diplomatic, informational, and economic purposes for the Kremlin and Beijing. Both nations have used combined exercises—bilateral and multilateral—to strategically message third parties, assess each other's capabilities, and even promote arms sales.

Diplomatic Value

Reluctant to sign a formal military alliance, Russia and the PRC employ combined military exercises as an alternative means for signaling their strategic alignment. Through the ground-centric Peace Mission and naval-based Joint Sea exercises, Moscow and Beijing have demonstrated growing trust between their militaries and a mutual willingness to challenge the international status quo. The nature, location, and timing of these events provide particular insight into their unspoken purpose. For example, Russia and the PRC have traditionally billed the Peace Mission exercises as multilateral CT training events conducted under

⁵⁴ Rumer and Sokolsky, 2021.

⁵⁵ Kyle Mizokami, "Russia and China Cozy Up in Joint Military Exercises," *Popular Mechanics*, August 18, 2021; Stephen Blank, "The Un-Holy Russo-Chinese Alliance," *Defense & Security Analysis*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2020, p. 257; Korolev, 2019, p. 246.

⁵⁶ Michael Kofman, "The Emperor's League: Understanding Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation," *War on the Rocks*, August 6, 2020; Richard Weitz writes, "The [post-Peace Mission 2005] exercise rounds have demonstrated greater integration, though it is still dubious if both militaries could conduct a joint battle, with integrated tactical operations, rather than a joint campaign in which they operated independently parallel sectors (e.g., with Russian troops moving into Kyrgyzstan from the north while Chinese forces enter from the east)." See Richard Weitz, *Parsing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises*, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2015, p. 36.

the auspices of the SCO.⁵⁷ Despite its CT facade, the first iteration of Peace Mission in 2005 involved nearly 10,000 Russian and Chinese soldiers as well as bombers and naval vessels—an oversized and overpowered force for a typical CT operation.⁵⁸ Similarly, the execution of major combined-arms maneuvers and use of airpower in Peace Mission 2012 plainly conflicted with the event’s declared objective: the liberation of a fictional town from a group of insurgents.⁵⁹ As a result of this mismatch between stated purpose and practice, one may deduce that these large-scale exercises are likely intended to deter conventional challengers more than local terrorist cells.⁶⁰

Russia and China also send diplomatic messages through their combined exercises by holding them in politically sensitive locations at delicate geopolitical times. The Joint Sea naval drills are particularly effective signaling tools. One year after Russia’s first invasion of Ukraine, Russian and Chinese warships boldly exercised in the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Military analyst Alexander Korolev refers to this exhibition as a “geopolitical game-changer” because it occurred in waters firmly within NATO’s sphere of influence.⁶¹ Furthermore, the Russian and Chinese navies conducted Joint Sea 2016 in the South China Sea just two months after an international court ruled against the PRC’s claims to contested islands in the area. The two navies menacingly practiced amphibious assaults to seize small islands in what can be interpreted only as their dissatisfaction with the ruling.⁶²

In 2018, Moscow made the unprecedented decision to invite the PLA to join its annual strategic command exercise. Held in the Eastern Military District—the command traditionally tasked with defending Russia’s border with the PRC—Vostok 2018 revealed a new level of trust between the Russian and Chinese militaries.⁶³ Like Peace Mission, the exercise focused on large-scale combat operations, although both capitals referred to it as another CT drill.⁶⁴ The PRC would return the favor in 2021, inviting Russian troops to Chinese soil for the first time for Cooperation 2021. One analyst posits that Beijing delayed its invitation to Moscow for three years so that it could verify the full implementation of the PLA’s 2016 reforms.⁶⁵

⁵⁷ Weitz, 2021, pp. 1–2.

⁵⁸ Korolev, 2019, p. 244.

⁵⁹ Vadim Zaytsev, “Russian Participation in International Military Drills, 2012–2014,” *Moscow Defense Brief*, No. 3, 2018, p. 23.

⁶⁰ Alexander Korolev, “How Closely Aligned Are China and Russia? Measuring Strategic Cooperation in IR,” *International Politics*, No. 57, 2020, p. 18.

⁶¹ Korolev, 2020, p. 779.

⁶² Korolev, 2020, p. 779; 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, p. 7.

⁶³ Grzegorz Kuczyński, “Russia–China: A Limited Liability Military Alliance,” *Warsaw Institute Review*, May 18, 2020.

⁶⁴ Blank, 2020, pp. 257–258.

⁶⁵ Rod Lee, “Russian Participation in PRC Strategic Exercise Emblematic of Improving Military Cooperation,” webpage, Air University (AU), August 2, 2021.

Regardless of the rationale, the PRC's exercise occurred one month after the publication of Putin's dehumanizing essay on Ukraine and just months before Russia's 2022 reinvasion of its western neighbor. Beijing's overture thus conveys a subtle unity with Moscow despite Russia's ongoing international vilification; it also exemplifies how the two nations diplomatically signal through military drills.

Informational Value

Combined exercises also strengthen ties between Russia and the PRC by facilitating the flow of information between their defense establishments. Overtly, both nations cultivate trust and reassure each other by unveiling sensitive weapons and concepts of operations during training events. For example, the PLA demonstrated its UAS capabilities in the Peace Mission 2015 exercise. Likely encouraged by this transparent behavior, the Russian Federal Aerospace Forces incorporated its own UAS operations into Peace Mission 2016 just one year later.⁶⁶ Moreover, combined exercises create a venue through which the two can share operational experience. The PRC particularly benefits in this respect given its lack of modern warfighting experience—and Russia's recent ventures in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine.⁶⁷ Without expending blood or treasure, the PLA has likely learned valuable lessons from the Russians in areas such as long-distance deployment, interservice coordination, and even operational-level C2. It has also likely studied Russia's shortcomings in these recent engagements and has adjusted its own units accordingly.

Covertly, combined exercises provide each side with a lucrative venue for intelligence collection. While reports do indicate that each side may “pad” combined training exercises to avoid humiliation, some warfighting capabilities cannot be feigned.⁶⁸ For example, live-fire exercises will reveal whether and how effectively specific weapon systems function. Each side will also gain a view into the morale of the other's troops and the efficiency of its C2 network by cooperating under stressing conditions. In short, the regular interaction borne from combined exercises eases communication between Moscow and Beijing, in turn reassuring the other and mitigating the prospect of an arms race or security dilemma-like scenario.

Economic Value

Since they began in 2003, combined exercises have served both Russia and the PRC as a means for showcasing their military technology and strengthening their defense industrial bases. After the conclusion of Peace Mission 2005, Russia intentionally left tanker and strategic lift aircraft in the PRC to allow PLA officials to investigate them.⁶⁹ Within one month, Beijing

⁶⁶ Meick, 2017, p. 10.

⁶⁷ Kuczyński, 2020.

⁶⁸ Daniel Urchick, “What We Learned from Peace Mission 2018,” *Small Wars Journal*, October 3, 2018.

⁶⁹ Meick, 2017, pp. 7–8.

purchased more than \$1 billion in new aircraft from Russian suppliers.⁷⁰ With the steady evolution of the PRC's domestic manufacturing capabilities, some analysts argue that China may now use the combined exercises to advertise its technology for Moscow.⁷¹ For example, the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War has highlighted a deficiency in UASs among the Russian Armed Forces, while the PRC produces and operates a variety of advanced unmanned systems. Consequently, Chinese supply could logically satisfy Russian demand. Russia's attacks on Ukraine—a former arms trade partner—have also denied it access to critical components, such as gas turbine engines for naval vessels. As with UASs, Beijing wields a notable comparative advantage in shipbuilding and even produces the exact turbines Russia once imported from Ukraine.⁷² It is therefore plausible that Russia and the PRC will continue to exploit training exercises as a conduit for technical and, transitively, economic exchanges through the near term.

With the 2022 Russo-Ukraine War, the flow of trade between Russia and China has also started to evolve. The war is straining the Russian defense production industry's ability to meet the needs of Russian forces, which then strains Russia's ability to export arms.⁷³ Open-source reporting suggests that this strain has reached a level at which Russia has undertaken an effort to buy back military parts exported to Myanmar and India.⁷⁴ Moreover, the intense demand for basic materiel is manifesting in a somewhat reverse flow of trade; a recent news report cites customs records that show the extent of China's nonlethal support, noting that "Russian buyers have declared orders for hundreds of thousands of bulletproof vests and helmets made by Shanghai H Win[, a Chinese company,]" as well as imported drones and thermal optical sights from other Chinese companies.⁷⁵

Functional Cooperation and Training

The Russian and Chinese militaries, which already collaborate in the ground, maritime, and air domains, will likely expand their combined drills to other domains in the near future. For example, Russia maintains a robust electronic warfare capability that has been successfully

⁷⁰ Korolev, 2019, p. 244; Meick, 2017, pp. 7–8.

⁷¹ Weitz, 2021, p. 4; Blank, 2020, p. 258.

⁷² Kirchberger, 2022, p. 94.

⁷³ Weilong Kong, "Russia's War Could Reshape the Global Arms Market in Favor of China," *Defense News*, July 10, 2023.

⁷⁴ Yuko Seki and Shota Fujii, "Russia 'Buying Back' Arms Parts Exported to Myanmar and India," *Nikkei Asia*, June 5, 2023.

⁷⁵ Sarah Anne Aarup, Sergey Panov, and Douglas Busvine, "China Secretly Sends Enough Gear to Russia to Equip an Army," *Politico*, July 24, 2023.

employed in Ukraine.⁷⁶ The Chinese military, whose electronic warfare capabilities remain untested, would surely benefit from learning Russian tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) to counter Ukrainian drones and disrupt tactical communications. Moreover, Russia remains more experienced in space operations than the PRC, given its inheritance of the Soviet space program. Perhaps Moscow will share some of this knowledge with Beijing to maintain strategic relevance, especially as its military and economy suffer the consequences of Putin's "special military operation" in Ukraine.

Russo-Chinese training exercises may also extend to more-sensitive strategic weapon systems as the two nations expand joint production programs. As early as 2016—three years before Putin disclosed Moscow and Beijing's combined BMD initiative—the two autocracies practiced integrated BMD.⁷⁷ Given this development, one can logically deduce that Russia and the PRC may soon cooperate to test hypersonic or even nuclear weapons. Jointly demonstrating these strategic systems, Moscow and Beijing could drastically amplify the messaging value of their combined exercises. While these developments may bring unease to the West, Washington and its allies must recognize them for their rhetorical purpose. If trends—as of this writing—hold, nationalism and autarkic tendencies will likely remain an inhibitor to improved capabilities (let alone interoperability) between Russia and the PRC—especially in the realm of strategic technologies.

Long-Range Air Patrols

The Russian Federal Aerospace Forces and the PLA have conducted numerous combined bomber patrols, including at least two that penetrated the ROK's and Japan's air defense identification zones (ADIZs).⁷⁸ Beginning in 2015, China began long-range patrols off its coast as a part of its effort to strengthen its coastal defenses beyond the first island chain and improve its long-range strike capabilities.⁷⁹ In 2019, Russia has joined these patrols. Joint air exercises began in 2019 when two Russian bombers were joined by two Chinese bombers for a patrol through the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan.⁸⁰ The flight transited the Miyako

⁷⁶ Alia Shoaib, "Ukraine's Drones Are Becoming Increasingly Ineffective as Russia Ramps Up Its Electronic Warfare and Air Defenses," *Business Insider*, July 3, 2022; Jake Thomas, "'They're Jamming Everything': Putin's Electronic Warfare Turns Tide of War," *Newsweek*, June 3, 2022.

⁷⁷ Meick, 2017, pp. 11–23; Weitz, 2021, p. 2.

⁷⁸ In July 2019, two Chinese H-6K and two Russian Tu-95 bombers violated the ROK's and Japan's ADIZ. Another flight of H-6Ks and Tu-95s passed through the same ADIZs in May 2022. See Weitz, 2021, pp. 2–3; and Edward Wong, 2022.

⁷⁹ Mark Cozad and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *People's Liberation Army Air Force Operations over Water: Maintaining Relevance in China's Changing Security Environment*, RAND Corporation, RR-2057-AF, 2017, pp. 21–22.

⁸⁰ Vassily Kashin, "Joint Russian-Chinese Air Patrol Signifies New Level of Cooperation," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 30, 2019a. There is also a joint flight reported to have occurred on May 11, 2018, in which Russian fighters escorted a Chinese H-6 bomber.

strait between Okinawa and Miyakojima.⁸¹ The H-6 bombers provide China the capability of launching long-range conventional munitions reaching as far as Guam.⁸² The flights were a continuation of long-range flights through the strait by the PLA Air Force, which began in 2015.⁸³ The Tu-95 is also able to carry air-launched cruise missiles, such as the Kh-55, Kh-101, and Kh-102. During the inaugural joint patrol, a Russian A-50 Beriev early warning and control aircraft was intercepted by South Korean fighters that eventually fired flares and cannon rounds after the A-50 reportedly did not heed warnings that it was intruding on Korean airspace over the Dokdo islets.⁸⁴

Subsequent joint air patrols occurred in December 2020 and in November 2021 with a typical mix of Tu-95 and H-6 bombers and periodic escorts by fighter aircraft.⁸⁵ The most recent aerial patrol occurred on May 24, 2022, two Russian Tu-95 bombers joined with two Chinese Xian H-6 bombers for a flight within the South Korean Air Defense Identification Zone and subsequently near Japan during a Quad meeting between the leaders of Australia, India, the United States, and Japan.⁸⁶ The aircraft were escorted on part of their journey by Russian Su-30SM fighters.⁸⁷ The aircraft flew over the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan. Those same Russian bombers were later joined by another pair of H-6 bombers and proceeded to fly in between the islands of Okinawa and Miyakojima toward the Pacific Ocean. A Russian Il-20 electronic intelligence aircraft was also reported off the western coast of Japan that same day. These joint flights in the Pacific suggest several motives. The first is strategic messaging to countries, such as the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, that China's long-range strike assets can be augmented by similar Russian capabilities. Second, it allows the air forces of both states to coordinate operations of their long-range aircraft, including the exercise of C2, the conduct of fighter escort, and aerial refueling.

Ballistic Missile Defense

Another area of emphasis between China and Russia is in the field of BMD.⁸⁸ Exercises were held after the United States and South Korea discussed an anti-missile defense system for the South to counter threats from North Korea, a concern to Russia and China and a potential

⁸¹ Franz-Stefan Gady, "China, Russia Conduct First Ever Joint Strategic Bomber Patrol Flights in Indo-Pacific Region," *The Diplomat*, July 23, 2019.

⁸² Kashin, 2019a.

⁸³ See Cozad and Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2017.

⁸⁴ The Dokdo (Korean) or Takeshima (Japanese) islets are claimed by both South Korea and Japan.

⁸⁵ John Grevatt, "China, Russia Conduct Joint Air Patrol over Sea of Japan," *Janes*, November 21, 2021.

⁸⁶ Kosuke Takahashi, "China, Russia Fly 6 Bombers Near Japan Amid Quad Summit," *The Diplomat*, May 25, 2022.

⁸⁷ "Russian, Chinese Strategic Bombers Conduct Joint Air Patrol in Asia-Pacific," TASS, May 24, 2022.

⁸⁸ Vassily Kashin, "Chinese–Russian Ballistic Missile Cooperation Signals Deepening Trust," East Asia Forum, February 20, 2021.

point of escalation.⁸⁹ Both countries raised concerns about the deployment of U.S. Theater High-Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) missile defense systems in Japan and South Korea and responded with their own joint exercises. In 2016 and 2017, the two conducted command post exercises named Aerospace Security using computer simulations.⁹⁰ Aerospace Security is a five-day exercise focused on anti-BMD from a third country.⁹¹ The first Aerospace Security 2016 joint computer-assisted command and staff exercise in May 2016 was held to practice missile defense, and the “exercise aimed to practice combined operations of Russian and Chinese air and missile defense task forces to provide protection from accidental and provocative attacks of ballistic and cruise missiles.”⁹² Officially code-named Aerospace Security 2016, the tasks drilled included the “coordination of the approaches to interaction in resolving missile defense tasks; determination of the principles of the use of joint air defense and missile defense groups; [and the] setting of the direction of further cooperation in the area of missile defense.”⁹³

The second joint computer-assisted missile defense drill took place in Beijing in December 2017, and the goal was to “practice joint planning of combat actions on air defense and missile defense, control and fire coordination, and also responding to accidental and provocative strikes of ballistic and cruise missiles on the territory of two countries.”⁹⁴ According to China’s Defense Ministry, the goal was to strengthen Sino-Russian mutual strategic trust, improve anti-missile cooperation between the two militaries, and learn to jointly deal with regional ballistic and cruise missile threats.⁹⁵ Similarly to the May 2016 exercise, the 2017 iteration of the exercise was intended to condemn the deployment of THAAD in South Korea. This is officially referred to as the 2nd Aerospace Security 2017 Russian-Chinese Anti-Ballistic Missile defense computer command post exercise .

The timing of both exercises suggest they were partly in response to agreements made between South Korea and the United States on its THAAD deployment. However, it may also signal a joint focus on nuclear and nonnuclear deterrence against ballistic missiles. Joint BMD has several advantages for the two countries. From Russia’s perspective, it is another area in which it leads China and can be used for military sales and building greater trust and reliance from China. China has the financial resources to support such a project and pro-

⁸⁹ “China and Russia to Hold Anti-Missile Drill After U.S., S.Korea Talk Defense,” Reuters, May 5, 2016.

⁹⁰ Zhang Yunbi, “China, Russia, to Hold Second Anti-Missile Drill,” *China Daily*, October 11, 2016.

⁹¹ Catherine Wong, “China, Russia to Hold Missile Defence Drills, amid Opposition to US Plans to Deploy Missile Shield in South Korea,” *South China Morning Post*, May 4, 2016.

⁹² Franz-Stefan Gady, “China and Russia to Hold First Computer-Enabled Missile Defense Exercise in May,” *The Diplomat*, May 2, 2016.

⁹³ “Russian, Chinese Military Hold Drills on Defense from Missile Strikes,” *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, May 28, 2016.

⁹⁴ “Russia, China to Hold Joint Computer-Assisted Missile Defense Drill,” TASS, November 17, 2017.

⁹⁵ Zhang Zhihao, “Beijing, Moscow Drill for Potential Missile Warfare,” *China Daily*, December 12, 2017.

vides an additional opportunity for cooperation with China. On the part of China, it does have some air defense capability, however, this capability has been limited to long-range air defense using S-400 SAMs.

Historically, only the United States and Russia possess an advanced early warning system for the threat of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). Potential ICBMs launched from the United States toward China would travel over the north pole, making Russia-based sensors highly useful in detecting an incoming missile. The early warning system would have to be paired with a set of interceptors to take out identified targets. China would also have to rely on Russia for such a system; however, the new S-500 could be used as a prototype for a future BMD system. It is still unclear whether the ultimate goal of the BMD cooperation is to produce an integrated BMD system or simply a coordinated one.⁹⁶ There are still a number of political and technical hurdles to be addressed, but it appears this is one area that Russia and China have a demonstrated interest in addressing together. Still, in October 2019, President Putin announced that Russia would assist China in developing a missile defense system.⁹⁷

Space

In addition to their cooperation on BMD, Russia and China are also working together in space. While cooperation has existed since the 1990s, like other areas of security cooperation, the collaboration between the two countries has significantly increased since 2014. Right before the invasion of Crimea, the two countries established a Russia-China Project Committee on Important Strategic Cooperation in Satellite Navigation. Areas of cooperation include the monitoring of space debris and satellite navigation, both of which have military applications. In February 2022, Russia's space agency signed a five-year agreement on space cooperation continuing its previous agreement for 2018–2022.⁹⁸ One of the items of the new agreement with China is to ensure compatibility between its BeiDou navigation satellite system and Russia's global navigation satellite system GLONASS. The terms call for new ground infrastructure on each other's territory for the global navigation systems. Russia and China are also working together on the production of rocket engines. Russia is developing its heavy-lift Yenisei rocket and China its Long March-9. To assist the development of the engines, Roscosmos has been authorized to exchange rocket data with China.⁹⁹ Like in other areas of aerospace cooperation, an agreement was signed in 2016 between the two countries on the protection of intellectual property for space technology. It is not known

⁹⁶ "Will Russia and China Build an SCO-Based Joint Missile Defense System?" Sputnik International, July 20, 2016.

⁹⁷ Kashin, 2021.

⁹⁸ Deng Xiaoci and Fan Anqi, "China, Russia to Sign New 5-Year Space Cooperation Program, Build Intl Lunar Station by 2035: Roscosmos," *Global Times*, December 29, 2021.

⁹⁹ Qisong He, "China-Russia Technology Cooperation in Space: Mutually Needed or Mutually Exclusive?" *Pacific Review*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2023, p. 7.

whether cooperation between China and Russia in space includes additional areas with military applications. Russia has been reluctant to share its counterspace technology with other countries; however, should it feel that greater cooperation is necessary to maintain a competitive position relative to the United States, further collaboration in more-sensitive areas of space could occur.

Nuclear Forces

Despite the broadening collaboration in combined exercises between the two militaries, scenarios involving nuclear forces have not factored into either exercise planning or training content. Along these lines, China has not taken part in any of Russia's annual strategic nuclear exercises—nor has Russia participated in any of the PRC's major exercises involving scenarios in which nuclear weapon use is involved.

The lack of participation in these types of consultations and exercises suggests that neither Moscow and Beijing have excluded nuclear policy questions from consideration in senior-level engagements and consultations. This lack of engagement stands in significant contrast with the United States and many of its allies who hold periodic nuclear planning or consultation meetings. In the cases in which planning discussions do not occur, the guarantees of extended deterrence offer a marked contrast with the Russia-China relationship in an area that Ukraine has exposed as a potential major policy fissure between the two governments.

Military Competitions

Military competitions have been a final component involved in the Russia-China military-to-military relationship. Conducted on an annual basis, they complement the active training and exercise schedules of both countries. The main military competitions are typically multilateral affairs and offer exposure to other typical former Soviet militaries. These events have traditionally been highly valued by the PLA as a tool for gaining exposure to other militaries as well as for assessing PLA progress in key areas of proficiency in the competition areas, which include special operation; air-to-ground operations; and army competitions involving armor, logistics, and soldier-skills competitions.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Minnie Chan, "Elite Chinese Troops Meet Fighters from India, Russia and Others in Spirit of Competition, Not War," *South China Morning Post*, August 28, 2021; Michael S. Chase, Kenneth W. Allen, and Benjamin Purser, *Overview of People's Liberation Army Air Force "Elite Pilots,"* RAND Corporation, RR-1416-AF, 2016, p. 17–18; "Chinese Defense Minister Meets with Russian Navy Chief," *Deutsche Welle*, July 3, 2023.

Future of Combined Exercises and Training

In the coming years, combined training between the Russian and Chinese militaries will likely progress according to the comparative advantages and weaknesses of each. For example, Russia's decades of experience operating attack, guided-missile, and ballistic missile submarines will likely pique the interest of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)—particularly as it seeks to counter U.S. influence in the South Pacific. Chinese expertise in UAS operations may similarly attract Russian attention, given the deficiencies that have been exposed by Moscow's war on Ukraine in Russian UAS operations.

Russia and the PRC may also train in what they perceive to be mutual areas of weakness or concern. Across multiple Joint Sea exercises, Russian and Chinese naval units have extensively practiced ASW operations.¹⁰¹ As subsurface warfare has long been a strength of the United States, this emphasis might reveal a particularly critical eastern priority. Additionally, the Russian and Chinese navies conducted a joint cruise missile defense for the first time at Joint Sea 2019.¹⁰² One may logically surmise that the West's frequent use of precision-guided munitions in such theaters as Syria and Iraq influenced the decision to practice this particular type of air defense. In summary, Russia and the PRC likely use training exercises to collaboratively develop concepts of operation and countermeasures to offset specific U.S. and Western military advantages.

As Russia continues its war of attrition in Ukraine, it will gain clearer insight into its own military strengths and weaknesses. Problems with logistical coordination and force protection appear to be especially pronounced within the modern Russian Armed Forces. On the one hand, Moscow may opt to share its lessons learned with Beijing in exchange for diplomatic, economic, or even technical support. The PLA, on the other hand, will surely value Moscow's perspective on 21st century warfare considering its relative dormancy since 1979. Where, when, and how the Russian and Chinese militaries train in future exercises will subsequently clarify their strategic advantages—as well as their recognized weaknesses.

Interoperability or Cooperation?

One study on multinational operations identified five desired interoperability outcomes: (1) communications and information systems interoperability, (2) individual interoperability, (3) command interoperability, (4) procedural interoperability, and (5) equipment interoperability.¹⁰³ For nations that routinely plan to fight as coalitions, these five outcomes

¹⁰¹Meick, 2017; Zaytsev, 2018; Blivas, 2021.

¹⁰²Blivas, 2021.

¹⁰³Christopher G. Pernin, Jakub P. Hlavka, Matthew E. Boyer, John Gordon IV, Michael Lerario, Jan Osburg, Michael Shurkin, and Daniel C. Gibson, *Targeted Interoperability: A New Imperative for Multinational Operations*, RAND Corporation, RR-2075-A, 2019, pp. 44–48.

have a direct impact on training, systems development, procurement, and PME. Typically, these nations—for example, NATO members, South Korea, Australia, and Japan—are members of alliances with combined organizations responsible for command and planning as well as other functions. Specifications for weapons and command and information systems promote interoperability by ensuring that data can be shared between coalition members. Interoperability through training is promoted through dedicated training programs that expose personnel to TTP and common practices and that allow students to gain experience operating with their coalition or alliance counterparts. Exercises provide a means to test interoperability on a variety of levels that include planning, C2, and operations. Finally, education programs enable personnel to be exposed to general practices related to the art of war, which, in essence, allow them to develop a common frame of reference with allies and coalition partners.

From an operational standpoint, one issue related to the multiple aspects of the Russian-Chinese military-to-military engagement that should be considered is related to the ultimate goal of these engagements. Many observers have argued that the PLA's recent involvement in Russia's strategic exercises suggests a desire to promote interoperability; however, the degree to which Russian and Chinese forces are able to operate together in these exercises suggests that interoperability will be difficult to achieve. Similarly, training and technical exchanges, military competitions, and defense industrial production also likely place limited real emphasis on interoperability. PLA personnel who train in Russia are likely acquainted with general characteristics of their individual weapon systems, but there has been no indication that these personnel received advanced tactical training. Military competitions offer some degree of advanced training by putting select teams in both countries through demanding tactical scenarios; however, the teams operate as national teams, thus limiting their ability to foster interoperability between the participants from each country. These competitions may expose members of national teams to new TTP, but there is no indication that these events promote any type of procedural interoperability that would be required in a combined operation.

A final way in which the Russian and Chinese relationship has not promoted interoperability is in the realm of technical interoperability. Although China has been the recipient of large quantities of Russian arms, over time, the PLA has adapted and modified these systems with Chinese components. These modifications are most noticeable in the area of C2 systems, such as the Integrated Command Platform, and other automated command systems that support targeting, decision support tools, and a variety of C2 functions. Although Chinese and, increasingly, Russian systems use components made by their counterparts in other countries, the general development of systems has taken an independent path with interoperability not being a primary concern in the initial design planning. Moreover, China has increasingly demonstrated its ability to produce military capabilities domestically (and this will only increase in the future), plausibly leading to less emphasis on the procurement of Russian systems.

Despite the progress Russia and China have made in their military-to-military relationship, the two militaries are not on a path toward interoperability. That may be based on

design or a manifestation of the difficulties of overcoming their reticence in dealing with outside powers. Similarly, neither Russia nor China has a history or strategic culture in which alliances or coalition warfare has factored in any significant way. Accordingly, caution is merited before judging the relationship based on a criterion—interoperability—that neither Moscow nor Beijing may have ever envisioned or decided to pursue.

For this reason, another alternative that needs to be considered, and may indeed be more likely, is for some level of cooperation and deconflicted operations in a future conflict scenario. For this report, and based on elements of the exercises outlined earlier in this chapter, we examine scenarios involving cooperation between Russia and China. We define *deconflicted operations* as actions that involve (1) geographically distinct actions, (2) limited combined planning, (3) limited coordination of operational and tactical activity due to independent actions that are geographically separated, and (4) strategic coordination involving broad agreement on timing but no effort to synchronize operational and tactical actions and effects. It is conceivable that Moscow and Beijing could pursue deconflicted operations in a future conflict scenario, particularly one in which leaders in both nations see independent, simultaneous actions as a means for exploiting a situation in which the United States and its allies are overextended. However, the scenarios discussed in the next chapter will use a framework for understanding operational cooperation and how both militaries might contribute based on Russia and China's attempts to promote cooperation, if not interoperability.

Conclusion

Both Putin and Xi have made the development of the Russia-China defense relationship a top priority within their respective countries. The results of this decision and both leaders' commitment to ensuring progress in this area are borne out by the numerous high-level contacts, military engagements, and combined exercises that have taken place since the 1990s. The relationship has expanded to sensitive areas that include BMD, space, and shows of force that include joint maritime and air patrols. Putin and Xi have also made clear that these engagements should be a signal to the United States and its allies that Russia, China, and their partners are intent on building relationships to counter Western reach and influence. The push to develop interoperability between the Russian Armed Forces and the PLA is an ambitious—yet central—goal of this cooperation. Despite these lofty goals, there remain several areas in the relationship that could hinder operational cooperation in the future, many of which have emerged as key concerns following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The most notable of these concerns is the role of nuclear weapons in both countries' military strategy, the divergent paths on which both militaries find themselves, and sensitivities and differences over distinctions in how both countries define their specific national interests.

These potential challenges should not suggest that the relationship is fragile or not a top priority for either Putin or Xi. On the contrary, the strategic imperative for both countries to build and sustain the relationship has likely only grown since the beginning of Russia's

invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. However, despite the importance that both countries attach to the overall relationship, this chapter has identified several possible complications that could arise from a national policy perspective. These complications, coupled with practical challenges, such as a lack of interoperability and an absence of combined planning mechanisms, will likely shape the types of cooperation that are possible in future conflict scenarios with the United States and its allies. In the following chapter, we examine possibilities for cooperation in three such scenarios.

Military Cooperation in Future Conflict Scenarios

An ideal approach to identifying future conflict scenarios in which the Russian Armed Forces and the PLA might cooperate would rely on an understanding of both militaries' analysis of future conflict scenarios coupled with an application of exercise scenarios. Along these lines, scenario details—such as the specific adversary (or adversaries), the key objectives outlined for the combined Russian and PLA force, the composition of the combined force, and the tasks assigned to participating units—are critical pieces of information. Unfortunately, this ideal approach is complicated on several fronts by the information available in both Chinese and Russian sources on each of these issues. Based on our research, both countries conduct regular analysis on specific areas of interest that may require military solutions, but neither has produced analysis that examines specific issues related to a combined military operation involving the other. A second challenge for accomplishing this ideal approach is the lack of detail involving specific exercise scenarios. While official accounts of the exercises provide a limited amount of detail on the forces involved, there is little information on which tasks are assigned to which forces. Similarly, C2 issues are not discussed in significant detail.

Another factor complicating our task of identifying potential scenarios and Russian and Chinese roles in those scenarios is the effect of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, in terms of the bilateral relationship and the forces that Russia would have at its disposal for scenarios other than Ukraine. With well over 90 percent of its ground forces supporting operations in Ukraine and significant attrition of key Russian equipment and forces, Russia has only a limited capacity to support most combined scenarios.¹ Although Russia's navy and air force remain largely intact and its forces have participated in combined exercises and maritime and air patrols, as a force, Russia's primary focus at this point is deterring NATO. It is highly unlikely that a significant diversion of already scarce air and maritime platforms would be a realistic option for Russia's political and military leaders.

Finally, the war in Ukraine continues to dominate the Kremlin's attention and likely will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Conflict termination is unlikely to free Moscow's hand to support a wide variety of scenarios, mainly because of concerns over NATO's

¹ Isabel Coles and David Luhnow, "Russia Has Deployed 97% of Army in Ukraine but Is Struggling to Advance, U.K. Says," *Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2023.

next moves in Ukraine that will involve reconstruction and future security arrangements—possibly including Ukraine’s NATO membership. The Russian Armed Forces will also be faced with the lengthy and costly task of rebuilding—a problem that goes beyond the scope of this report and that our research did not address. Accordingly, the scenarios that we selected for closer examination in this study help to explain aspects of many of these problems.

Scenarios for Military Cooperation

After a wide consideration of potential scenarios, we identified three specific near-term scenarios that present a reasonable possibility for cooperation between Russia and China. In considering which scenarios would be most compelling and useful for examining future cooperation, we considered multiple factors, which include (1) the degree to which Russian and Chinese interests converge, (2) historical interest and claims, (3) recent and relevant participation in exercises or patrols involving a similar regional scenario or being conducted in proximity to the specific country, and (4) domain considerations that would be suitable for both militaries’ force structure and deployability. We selected scenarios based on Russian combat losses and the current availability of ground forces that relied heavily on air and maritime components from both militaries. Additionally, cooperation in the air and maritime domains is often associated with greater degrees of technical and procedural interoperability than ground forces in which geographic deconfliction may be more likely. Finally, we selected the three scenarios based on the possibility of the U.S. involvement. For this reason, subsequent sections will describe three scenarios involving (1) Japan, (2) North Korea, and (3) Iran. Each scenario is set in the 2025–2027 time frame, with military capabilities and force development trends commensurate with assessments for that period; and each assumes that no major wars (other than the ongoing conflict in Ukraine) have embroiled the main actors.

The following caveats should be applied to our treatment and use of these scenarios. First, they are not meant to be predictive. As discussed in the preceding chapter, there are numerous issues that may limit Russian and Chinese policymakers’ willingness to consider involvement in a combined operation. Second, our choice of scenarios should not be viewed as a statement of likelihood over other scenarios. Future decisions that might involve either Russia or China asking for support will be predicated on a variety of contemporary factors that will inform Russian and Chinese policy decisions. Ultimately, the choice by either party to join in a coalition operation can change quickly based on Moscow’s and Beijing’s perceptions of United States intent and the immediacy of any perceived threat.

Three Notional Scenarios: Japan, Korea, and Iran

These three general scenarios lend themselves to analysis of a wide variety of factors involved in Chinese and Russian decisionmaking and action. For the Japan scenario, we pose a China-Japan crisis in the East China Sea that escalates into a full-scale conflict pitting the U.S.-Japan alliance against China, with Russia intervening on China’s behalf primarily to prevent

China's defeat and a subsequent strengthening of U.S. and allied geostrategic posture. For the Korean Peninsula, we consider a scenario in which North Korea experiences a severe nuclear accident and internal political turmoil.² The interests of the United States, China, and Russia (and other regional actors) are not inimical in this case; but strategic mistrust and differences in long-term goals lead to an escalating crisis that threatens to erupt into large-scale armed conflict. In the Iran scenario, we explore a situation in which China and Russia seek to undermine U.S. interests short of direct confrontation, supporting Iranian economic and security interests and working through proxies to frustrate U.S. and Israeli objectives.

The scenarios described below are not meant to be comprehensive, and the road to war for each provides a credible but notional strawman for considering potential Chinese and Russian cooperative actions. Each of these scenarios has been the subject of previous wargaming or other analysis by RAND and other research organizations, but we do not pose any of the scenarios or conflict paths as more or less likely in the geostrategic environment as of this writing. Our primary purpose in examining these scenarios is to explore a variety of decision factors at different levels of crisis and conflict, which in turn provide a foundation for considering how such factors might play out in a wider array of scenarios across the globe. Finally, the assumptions supporting these scenarios are addressed in the report's introduction.

Cooperation Framework

Our examination of the roles that Russia and China could potentially play in each scenario is structured using a cooperation framework developed for this report. The cooperation framework considers two broad dimensions affecting the decisionmaking in Moscow and Beijing: drivers of cooperation and risk assessment (described below). Senior leaders in both capitals are presumed to consider these factors when determining the appropriate intensity and scale with which to provide military assistance. The framework then considers what plausible contributions each might be willing and able to provide within each warfighting domain (air, land, sea, space, and cyber).

Political Drivers

The political drivers we consider in the framework fall into two categories. The first involves the degree to which Russian and Chinese leaders assess an action as having international legitimacy and the messaging that would be required to convey the reasons for combined military action. The second political driver centers on the extent to which, and manner that, combined operations considered for each scenario would demonstrate commitment and solidarity.

² For a discussion of whether China's policy toward North Korea is evolving, see Andrew Scobell and Mark Cozad, "China's North Korea Policy: Rethink or Recharge?" *Parameters*, Vol. 44, No. 1, Spring 2014.

Operational Drivers

The operational drivers outlined in the framework fall into four categories. First, the framework considers the types of transnational security threats involved and why those threats would require a bilateral solution. Second, the framework considers how an operation might facilitate burden sharing, reduce individual costs for Russia and China, or augment existing capabilities for one or both of the partners. The third driver considered in the framework addresses how a combined operation might bridge specific gaps for one or both partners. Finally, the framework considers contributions for both partners in terms of geographic access that might include bases, prepositioning, or supply lines.

Risk Assessment

The risk assessment factor considers how each respective capital might evaluate the likelihood and severity of threats associated with contributing military assistance and conducting combined operations in each scenario. Perceptions of military strength and comprehensive national power relative to Washington and its allies are likely to influence this assessment, which can change throughout the course of a scenario. It is presumed that if Moscow or Beijing assess significant threats to regime survival from anticipated U.S. counteractions, then cooperation decisions might be blunt and potentially limited to nonkinetic support or less-attributable gray zone activities, whereas more-aggressive and kinetic contributions are more likely in situations that pose little threat to the regime.

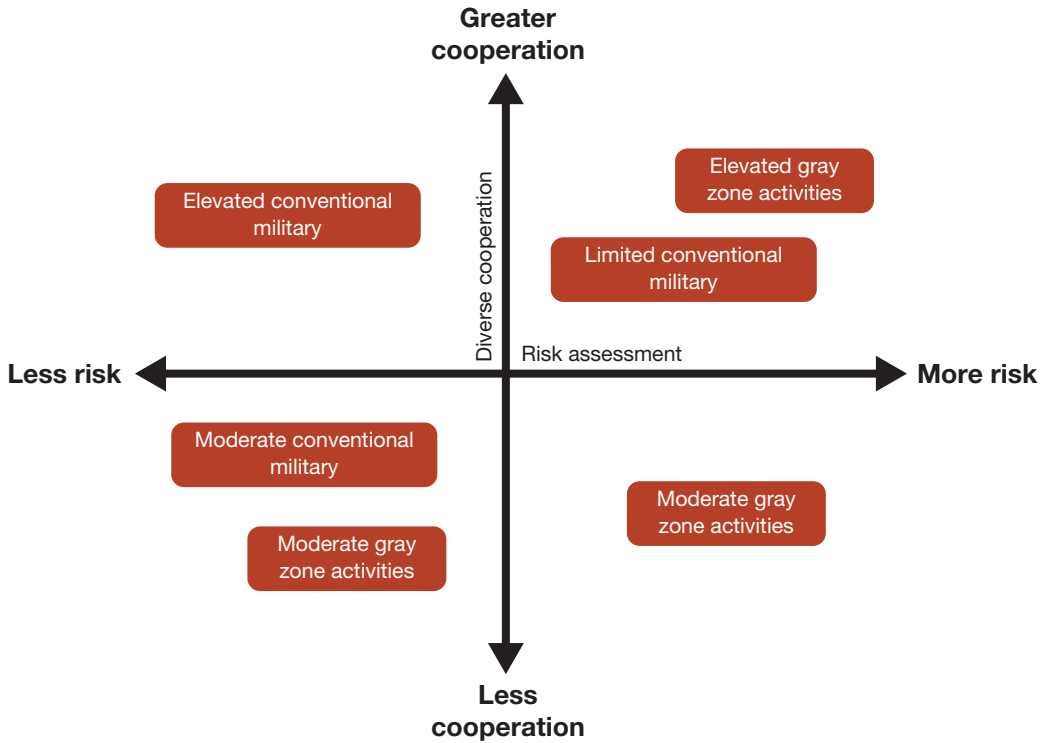
Framework

The drivers of cooperation and respective risk perspectives are intended to provide a broad rationale for decisions to approve the use of force, enter into a combined military operation, and identify overarching capabilities and potential areas of contribution. Russian and Chinese perceptions of cooperation's benefits and costs are likely to change as conditions shift throughout each scenario, so any detailed mapping of their position within the framework is avoided. Rather, the framework serves to circumscribe the level of intensity and scale of reasonable contributions from both countries (depicted in Figure 5.1).

Building on an examination of each of these factors, we outline an array of domain-specific functions that both Russia and China could perform as well as capabilities and systems they might be willing to contribute. In considering domain-specific functions, this report will not provide an exhaustive list. This is primarily because of the level of detail provided in the three scenarios. The domain-specific functions outlined in the framework do provide a structured approach that allowed us to take specific tasks performed in combined Russia-China exercises and apply them in a more well-defined context.

The final element in the framework is nonmilitary support. This portion of the framework addresses what each country might be able to provide outside military cooperation to support a combined effort. This is designed to address diplomatic, informational, and economic support that might be necessary to gain international political support, gain accep-

FIGURE 5.1
Cooperation Framework



tance or prevent condemnation in international bodies, or provide necessary materiel support because of limitations in access or sanctions.

Japan: The Alliance Goes to War

In this scenario, Beijing assesses that the U.S.-Japan alliance increasingly aims to block core Chinese regional objectives, including extending alliance activities to the Taiwan Strait.³ China also assesses that Japanese willingness to support U.S.-led “containment” efforts will increase unless China reverses the trend through a display of force. Xi and his CMC determine that wresting administrative control of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands from Tokyo would

³ This scenario draws heavily on an East China Sea conflict scenario developed more fully in Miranda Priebe, Bryan Frederick, Anika Binnendijk, Alexandra T. Evans, Karl P. Mueller, Cortez A. Cooper III, James Benkowski, Asha Clark, and Stephanie Anne Pillion, *Alternative Futures Following a Great Power War: Vol. 1, Scenarios, Findings, and Recommendations*, RAND Corporation, RR-A591-1, 2023. This RAND study assessed that this scenario could drive Russia and China into a more formal military alliance arrangement in a situation in which the U.S.-Japan alliance prevails in preventing China from realizing its proximate objectives in the East China Sea.

undermine alliance confidence in its ability to challenge Chinese objectives while managing escalation risks. China counts on U.S. domestic frictions and the continuing costs to Washington of countering Russian war efforts in Ukraine to constrain U.S. and allied responses to a “minor” regional dispute. However, Chinese operations are met with immediate and concerted U.S.-Japan alliance resistance. The United States intervenes—both to defend Japanese territory and to diminish China’s future ability to militarily coerce its neighbors. Over the initial weeks and months of fighting, the allies inflict heavy losses on the PLA. Russia enters the fray, assessing that China’s defeat would threaten its own interests. Moscow is also encouraged by promises of Chinese economic reward and the possibility of a postwar relationship that places Russia in a more powerful position. Following several weeks of conventional combat, the belligerents are faced with either negotiating a termination of combat operations or risk nuclear escalation.

In this scenario, Sino-Russian cooperation possibly deepens into a formal defense pact, despite the prewar obstacles and constraints described earlier in this study. Chinese losses could give Moscow leverage to determine the shape of such an alliance. Russia could also gain international stature by portraying itself as the peacemaker during a conflict that is on the brink of catastrophic escalation.

China Attempts to Gain Administrative Control and Allied Response

As U.S.-China competition intensifies, the United States takes steps to “de-risk” its economy by disentangling it from China’s and drafts strategy documents that would lead to an even more significant shift of U.S. national security resources toward the Indo-Pacific. In the same period, China assesses that U.S. domestic political turmoil and the economic costs of the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic indicate that the United States would employ bellicose rhetoric but turn inward and avoid escalation in an actual conflict over disputed islands in the East or South China Seas.⁴ China anticipates that in the absence of full U.S. support, Japan would cede control of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands rather than risk conflict

⁴ For the purposes of this scenario, we explore the possibility that China underestimates U.S. commitments to its allies. Little is known about how Chinese leaders assess the credibility of U.S. security commitments, so it is unclear whether China would interpret the consequences of economic trends in this way. For arguments suggesting China may interpret current trends this way, see, Joel Wuthnow, “US ‘Minilateralism’ in Asia and China’s Responses: A New Security Dilemma?” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 28, No. 115, 2019; Sun Xiaokun, “A Chinese Perspective on US Alliances,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 61, No. 6, 2019; Camille Boullenois, Jiakun Jack Zhang, Melanie Hart, Blaine Johnson, and Earl Wang, *The Trump Opportunity: Chinese Perceptions of the US Administration*, European Council on Foreign Affairs, June 20, 2018; Adam P. Liff, “China and the US Alliance System,” *China Quarterly*, Vol. 233, 2018. More generally, Chinese leaders could assess that the United States is unwilling to risk a great-power war that might culminate in a strategic nuclear exchange over a small number of uninhabited Pacific islands, toward whose sovereignty the United States has not adopted a formal position. For an outline of this logic, see Michael E. O’Hanlon, *The Senkaku Paradox: Risking Great Power War over Small Stakes*, Brookings Institution, 2019.

with China.⁵ Chinese leaders calculate that they could both control the disputed islands and surrounding waters, weakening the U.S.-Japan alliance without triggering a wider conflict.

China's military strategy involves using militia and Coast Guard forces to establish a maritime zone that Japan and the United States would not breach and an extended defensive perimeter defined by China's claimed East China Sea ADIZ.

China sends hundreds of fishing boats and maritime militia vessels, backed by Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) ships, to the area around the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Japan responds by sending its own coast guard ships to the area, and Tokyo requests U.S. intelligence and surveillance support. A confrontation between Chinese and Japanese coast guard ships ensues, and China dispatches PLAN surface combatants and PLAN and PLAAF air patrols. China declares an air and maritime exclusion zone around the islands to gain de facto control over the islands. Beijing calls on Tokyo to acknowledge PRC administrative control.⁶

Japan deploys Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) and Japan Maritime Self Defense Force to prevent China from landing troops on the islands and combat ensues. U.S. air and naval forces based in Japan join the conflict, and the United States deploys additional forces to the region to target specific Chinese operations and degrade PRC capabilities to the point the PRC abandons its attempt to establish control of the area. The allies conduct operations to destroy the PLA naval and air forces involved in East China Sea operations. Then U.S. forces target core aspects of Chinese air and naval power to hamper reinforcement of the East China Sea campaign and to compel China to abandon its occupation of the islands while degrading its military power for follow-on operations. The United States also engages in diplomatic efforts to stop the flow of strategic resources into China.⁷

China responds by expanding its war objectives from achieving a quick victory over Japan to seeking a victory over the U.S.-Japan alliance to undermine U.S. leadership and presence in the region. China conducts multi-vector, conventional missile strikes against U.S. bases in Guam and Japan. The United States responds with air and cruise missile attacks against military targets on the east coast of China.

China's air and missile strikes are accompanied by attempts to dominate the information domain, including cyber operations and anti-satellite attacks against U.S. Army command, control, communication, computers, cyber, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems. The United States reciprocates with strikes against Chinese space-based and

⁵ For a discussion of how states seek to drive wedges between allies, see Andrew D Taffer, "Threat and Opportunity: Chinese Wedging in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Dispute," *Asian Security*, 2019; Timothy W. Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2011.

⁶ This is a long-standing goal of Chinese policy. See Michael Swaine, "Chinese Views Regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute," *China Leadership Monitor*, Vol. 41, Spring 2013.

⁷ Priebe et. al., 2023.

terrestrial ISR systems. The United States also conducts offensive cyber operations against military targets in China to disrupt air and missile operations.⁸

U.S. forces attack a range of military targets across PLA theater commands, including suppressing China's integrated air defense system to enable strikes against PLA C2, naval assets, counter-space systems, and logistics infrastructure.⁹ The United States avoids strategic targets to decrease the risk of nuclear escalation—but some strikes affect China's strategic C2 system cyber operations, and the critical infrastructure in both the United States and China is affected.

Russia Enters the Conflict

From the outset of conflict, Russia monitors operations closely, provides China with intelligence support, and guarantees uninterrupted energy supplies. As the conflict escalates, Russia becomes increasingly concerned that allied victory over China is likely and the aftermath of conflict would see the United States emboldened to further counter Russian interests. Russia begins covert discussions with China about support and warns Washington and Tokyo that it considered continued allied operations as damaging to regional stability and Russia's interests.

Washington considered Russian involvement in combat operations in support of China unlikely, but did not anticipate how rapidly the U.S. involvement and early successes might change Russian calculations. Japan heeds Russian threats and pressures the United States to seek de-escalation options.

Moscow gains guarantees from Beijing that Russian military assistance will lead to enhanced postwar PRC-Russia economic and defense relations. Russia conducts cyber operations, electronic warfare, and counter-space actions to disrupt U.S. operations and enable follow-on conventional strikes. Russia claims its actions are warranted to prevent the United States and Japan from using a local dispute as pretext for a war aimed at Chinese regime change.¹⁰

Russian bombers, ground-based systems, and submarines conduct limited conventional cruise missile strikes against U.S. and JASDF bases in northern Japan and Alaska, damag-

⁸ For an open-source analysis of the U.S.-Chinese military balance in cyberspace, see Eric Heginbotham, Michael Nixon, Forrest E. Morgan, Jacob L. Heim, Jeff Hagen, Sheng Tao Li, Jeffrey Engstrom, Martin C. Libicki, Paul DeLuca, David A. Shlapak, David R. Frelinger, Burgess Laird, Kyle Brady, and Lyle J. Morris, *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017*, RAND Corporation, RR-392-AF, 2015, Chapter 9.

⁹ Priebe et al., 2023.

¹⁰ For the factors that inform Russian decisions regarding whether to intervene in foreign conflicts, see Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*, RAND Corporation, RR-3180-AF, 2019. An overview of Russia's security policies and threat perceptions is provided in Radin et al., 2019. More generally, the drivers of Russo-Chinese relations (including their mutual security interests) are discussed in Robert Sutter, *China-Russia Relations: Strategic Implications and U.S. Policy Options*, The National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report No. 73, September 13, 2018.

ing fuel storage infrastructure and parked aircraft. Russian cyber operations against both regional military targets and critical infrastructure targets in the United States cause additional damage following the earlier Chinese cyberattacks. Some Japanese politicians advocate strikes against the Russian-held Kuril Islands, but the preponderance of Japanese leaders decide instead to approach the United States to seek ceasefire options.

U.S. forces attack Russian surface ships and military targets in the Russian Far East and conduct offensive cyber operations against logistics nodes and port infrastructure. Russia places its nuclear forces on alert.¹¹ U.S. leaders assess that the alliance achieved its objectives to deny China control of the Senkakus and significantly degrade PLA combat power, and they call for ceasefire negotiations with China and Russia.

This scenario envisages a low-probability, high-risk scenario wherein China, Japan, and the United States all suffer heavy losses in a rapidly escalating conflict. Russia suffers fewer losses because of its late entry into the conflict, but ports and military bases in the Russian Far East suffer significant damage. Because of interoperability problems and a lack of peacetime training for fighting under a joint command structure, Beijing and Moscow likely do not deeply coordinate operations.¹² Rather, Russia focuses on supplementing Chinese forces in areas, such as long-range strikes, that are beyond China's capabilities.

NATO allies initiate Article V following Russia's attack on Alaska. European governments do not commit forces to the Pacific theater but remain prepared for Russian strikes against U.S. or European assets in the Baltic Sea and the High North.¹³ European militaries mobilize naval surface and submarine assets but do not deploy them to theater; and additional air assets are placed on NATO Quick Reaction Alert.

Despite the weakness of Russian forces in the Far East, Russian operations stretch allied forces thin and pose threats of attack against Japanese bases from the north and east.

While a high-end conflict scenario such as this does not guarantee a more formal post-conflict defense relationship between Russia and the PRC, it presents at least two major variables that could credibly lead the two sides to break from the past and seek a defense pact. The first concerns Beijing's strategic vulnerability as its gamble to change regional power dynamics without triggering a major war fails. This makes China more likely to succumb to Russian offers of assistance even if this means agreeing to similar support for Russia in future contingencies. The second concerns Russia overcoming fears of having a junior partner role in a more formal defense partnership with a weakened China; at the same time, Moscow looks to leverage that relationship to oppose U.S. strategic objectives in the post-conflict world.

A Russia-PRC defense pact that arises from this scenario would likely not extend to promises of support in offensive campaigns conducted by either side, but it might call on

¹¹ Priebe et al., 2023.

¹² Priebe et al., 2023.

¹³ Priebe et al., 2023.

each state to come to the defense of the other in the event that either came under attack from a third party.¹⁴

The pact could increase the scope and depth of technical and industrial cooperation to develop new weapons, communication, and support systems—even in sensitive fields and technologies—and in the development of interoperable combat systems. China could recover military strength more quickly, and Russia could take advantage of Chinese science and technology.¹⁵

China and Russia would undertake larger and more-elaborate military exercises and joint operations, increasing operational-level interoperability and signaling to the United States and its allies the risks inherent in opposing either Russia or China in their respective spheres of traditional influence.

This scenario puts Russia in a position to be a decisive actor, both at home and on the global stage. Moscow could use a mutual defense pact with China to burnish its status as a global great power at a time when the Ukraine war tarnished it. Moscow could leverage its peacemaker role (and strengthened partnership with China) to gain greater economic and diplomatic opportunities.

Japan Scenario Cooperation and Interoperability

A scenario in which Russia and China conduct combined operations against Japan and the United States involves a wide variety of areas in which Russian and Chinese training, exercises, and technical cooperation have been strongest (see Table 5.1 for the applied framework). Most notably, in this scenario the role of amphibious capabilities and ground forces (including airborne and airmobile) are limited and do not play a major role. Both militaries can contribute to air and maritime operations, particularly those capable of employing long-range precision strike capabilities. In this scenario, participation in exercises such as Naval Interaction and Joint Sea as well as joint air and maritime patrols provide the Russian Armed Forces and the PLA with at least a basic level of experience operating with each other. Most notably, Russia is able to contribute air and maritime capabilities to this scenario because both the Russian Navy and the Russian Aerospace Forces remain largely intact and have not suffered the level of attrition that Russian ground forces have in Ukraine.

In addition to these operational considerations, this scenario presents rationales for both Moscow and Beijing to support a combined operation. Beijing's rationale for initiating the conflict has been explored widely, particularly as it relates to U.S.-Japan defense cooperation.¹⁶

¹⁴ Priebe et al., 2023.

¹⁵ Priebe et al., 2023.

¹⁶ Edmund J. Burke, Timothy R. Heath, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Logan Ma, Lyle J. Morris, and Michael S. Chase, *China's Military Activities in the East China Sea: Implications for Japan's Air Self-Defense Force*, RAND Corporation, RR-2574-AF, 2018; Jeffrey W. Hornung, *Japan's Potential Contributions in an East China Sea Contingency*, RAND Corporation, RR-A314-1, 2020.

TABLE 5.1

Japan Scenario Cooperation and Interoperability Framework

Drivers of Cooperation	China	Russia
<i>Political</i>		
International legitimacy and messaging	Russia's entry into the conflict on China's behalf would help legitimize PRC aggression by posing the expanded conflict as one between global powers and not as the limited territorial dispute in which the conflict began.	Moscow's risky entrance into the conflict signals to the international community that Russia remains a strong military power with global importance despite U.S. sanctions and attrition from Ukraine.
Demonstrating a measure of commitment or demonstrating solidarity	Beijing's acceptance of Russian military actions on its behalf is primarily an operational decision to complicate U.S.-Japan operations. However, it also signals that Beijing acknowledges Russian military might and implies a strategic role in global affairs that Moscow seeks.	Moscow's willingness to provide lethal support to the PRC's cause demonstrates solidarity with Beijing, with the expectation for reciprocal benefits from China following the war.
<i>Operational</i>		
Transnational security threats requiring bilateral solutions	U.S. forces already and subsequently assigned to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and the Japanese Self Defense Forces present a significant challenge to the PLA in a conflict limited to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Russian attacks in northern Japan, the United States, and the Pacific Ocean would force U.S. and Japanese forces to focus on other areas, distribute units, and attempt to overwhelm ISR and strike capabilities.	
Burden sharing, reduce individual costs, or augmenting existing capabilities (quantitative)	Even if Russian units are focused on their own equities further north, their involvement would spread America's attention across multiple areas of responsibility and to the U.S. homeland. Some strategic capabilities such as BMD early warning would also be improved with sharing data between Russian and Chinese systems. Further, the combined quiver of Russian and Chinese long-range missiles reduces the overall demands on each, permitting them to sustain offensive operations longer.	
Bridging capability gaps (qualitative)	Russia does not maintain significant ground forces in its Eastern Military District, which is further degraded by sending units to Ukraine.	Russian ASW and electronic warfare provide additional capabilities to augment PLA capabilities.
Geographic access: bases, prepositioning, supply lines	If the infrastructure at Vladivostok ports is severely damaged, Russian naval vessels may seek support from Chinese naval bases.	The PLA and CCG operate from their own bases.

Table 5.1—Continued

Drivers of Cooperation	China	Russia
<i>Risk Assessment</i>		
Likelihood and severity of threats to respective regimes	China initiated the conflict with limited aims and low expectations for U.S. involvement. This assumption proved wrong, forcing Beijing to reconsider risks to the regime and increasing China's need for Russian involvement.	Moscow balances the risk of two potential outcomes. A weakened Chinese partner may provide greater negotiating power in the relationship, but, overall, Russia is more threatened by a significant Chinese loss. On the other hand, Moscow expects the United States to limit its kinetic responses to military forces in the Pacific theater and not complicate European security by threatening the regime in Moscow directly.
<i>Domain-Specific Interoperability Examples</i>		
Maritime	- Russian and Chinese ships and submarines independently conduct missile strikes against U.S. and Japanese forces and reinforce exclusion zones from respective maritime area of operations (AOs): Russian vessels operating from the Sea of Japan and north and east of Japan, Chinese vessels responsible for the East China Sea and southern approaches. - Coordination at sea is limited to search-and-rescue emergencies and generally performed via unsecure communications. Maritime operations for the region are centrally coordinated from a combined China-Russia command center on the Chinese mainland. - Strike plans and engagement priorities are coordinated centrally, agreed upon through senior-level consultations, and then executed within their respective AOs unilaterally.	
Land	- Chinese and Russian conventional land forces play a minor role in this scenario. - Russia may send reinforcements to the Kuril Islands and conducts CMC exercises to demonstrate the Russian resolve to maintain control of the disputed islands. - Russia may move additional strategic air defense (AD) units and systems to mainland China if requested by the PRC.	
Air	- Once the conflict has begun, it is unlikely that China and Russia will conduct combined air patrols but bomber operations may be coordinated temporally and against similar targets from a centralized headquarters (HQ). - ISR flights by manned and unmanned aircraft commence unilaterally with processed intelligence shared at the combined HQ.	
Space	- Satellite-based ISR operations conducted unilaterally with data shared in a combined intelligence center. - Anti-satellite (ASAT) operations are also conducted unilaterally against distinct targets, but the decision of when and how to attack U.S. satellites may be reached through a consultative process.	
Cyber/Information	- Cyberattacks against U.S. and Japanese systems may be deliberately coordinated with kinetic strikes, but joint coordination at this level probably remains limited with wider ranging vulnerabilities and attack effects shared later. - The focus of external messaging and cyber influence operations is on other countries that could potentially enter the conflict on behalf of the United States and Japan; e.g., Australia and South Korea.	

Table 5.1—Continued

Drivers of Cooperation	China	Russia
<i>Nonmilitary Support</i>		
What each country might do to provide support to the other not requiring military cooperation	Beijing's initial aggression and prosecution of its primary war aims is independent of Russia.	Russia could expand threats to U.S. interests in other areas of responsibility requiring U.S. military responses.

From a geopolitical standpoint, PRC decisionmakers confronting the possibility of losing outright or taking catastrophic damage could view military cooperation with Russia as a means for gaining much needed political support while also averting a loss of Chinese power and influence in the region. This consideration becomes particularly important because the PRC's primary adversaries in the conflict are the United States (its primary global strategic competitor) and Japan (its primary rival among East Asian regional powers for regional influence).

Beijing would also likely be more willing to ask for Russian support in this scenario if Chinese leaders were to assess a low or limited potential for escalation, particularly nuclear escalation. Russian long-range precision strike, cyber, space, and anti-space capabilities offer several areas that could augment the PRC's ability to threaten key U.S. and Japanese targets both in the region and within the U.S. homeland. A well-coordinated division of responsibility in these areas could demonstrate to the United States and Japan that the addition of Russian support provides a considerable enhancement to existing Chinese strategic capabilities, short of nuclear weapons. Regardless, a key wild card in Beijing's deliberations would likely focus on Russia's reliance on nuclear weapons—particularly depending on the state of Russia's critical munitions stockpiles—as a key component of its deterrence posture. As discussed in Chapter 4, leaders in Beijing, including Xi, have demonstrated their concern that Russia's willingness to use nuclear threats could lead to nuclear escalation—an outcome that Beijing would be seeking desperately to avoid.

The Kremlin would also potentially see a number of strategic incentives for agreeing to support the PRC in this scenario. First, Russia could potentially regain some of the prestige it lost in Ukraine, reassert its claim to great power status, and deliver a setback to the United States and one of its key allies in retaliation for NATO's support of Ukraine. Second, the Kremlin would have an opportunity to gain advantages at the expense of the United States, but also China. Particularly under circumstances in which China takes significant losses and faces potential defeat, Russia's participation might allow it to assume or perhaps regain its role as a "senior partner"—or at least a more equal one—in its relationship with the PRC. Russia could also leverage China's need for additional energy supplies and other critical resources, allowing Moscow to take advantage of Beijing's predicament in much the same manner that Beijing has sought to do vis-à-vis Russia since 2014. Finally, Russia's agreement to support China in this scenario would allow Russia to ask for Chinese assistance to assure that Japan would not be able to move against the Kuril Islands.

Combined planning and consultations figure prominently in this scenario, particularly in terms of the targeting and coordination of both kinetic and nonkinetic strikes. In the scenario, this might occur using liaison teams and combined planning structures. Chinese participation in Russia's strategic exercises has involved some level of combined planning, although the quality of planning and level of integration remains uncertain. In the worst-case scenario for the United States and Japan, this combined planning and consultation would take place at the PLA Joint Staff Department's Joint Operations HQ in Beijing. It is possible that this coordination could extend down to individual theater command HQs; but, due to the sensitivity, escalatory potential, and sensitivity of the actions being coordinated, this possibility is unlikely. It is also possible that planning and coordination could be as simple as strategic deconfliction based on geographic or temporal factors or some combination of the two.

This second possibility is likely the more realistic of the two planning and coordination options, particularly if the PRC's circumstances are trending as negatively as they do in this scenario. Additionally, this scenario did not play out how the PRC had envisioned; therefore, they might not have developed detailed contingency plans that include Russian force integration prior to the outbreak of these hostilities. The most prominent challenge to overcome is based on the extent to which the PRC is willing to share closely held plans with its Russian counterparts. The extreme secrecy with which Russia's leaders treated the initial plans for the invasion of Ukraine—both failing to inform Xi as well as with their own military—signify a lack of trust that also exists within the PLA. If Russian leaders have such limited trust in their own military, it is unlikely that they would be willing to trust the PLA to any greater degree. The same can be said for the PLA. In addition to trust, neither Russia nor China is likely to openly expose major problems that might reveal weaknesses. Although Russia and China place great emphasis on their strategic partnership—and in this scenario decide to militarily cooperate—both sides seek leverage when possible to gain advantages in the relationship.

Finally, this scenario contains several implications for the future of Chinese and Russian cooperation. Most notably, the losses for both the Russian Armed Forces and the PLA could lead to a realization that future cooperation is an imperative in dealing with the United States, Japan, and possibly other regional allies. As both Moscow and Beijing seek to ensure their positions in the region and maintain a strong partnership, a variety of new cooperative efforts could emerge based on both militaries' failures in the conflict scenario. Some of the most dangerous potential areas for cooperation could include (1) defense industrial coproduction of major systems, (2) greater efforts to promote interoperability, including through combined systems development and common standards in new weapon systems, (3) the establishment of combined planning cells and command centers, and (4) improved training that will build procedural interoperability, develop common TTP, and provide realistic scenarios in which the Russian Armed Forces and PLA can gain experience in coalition warfare.

Korean Peninsula: Securing North Korea's Weapons of Mass Destruction Amidst Instability

In this scenario, ROK radiation detectors record increased levels of radiation near the demilitarized zone (DMZ). The evidence suggests that the source of the increased radiation is the Yongbyon nuclear reactor in the DPRK. However, DPRK-controlled media outlets are silent on the issue and have not reported anything unusual at Yongbyon or other areas of North Korea that are likely affected by increased radiation exposure.

China contacts North Korea seeking information about the situation but is rebuffed. Frustrated by Pyongyang's unresponsiveness, Beijing attempts to gather intelligence from PRC businesspeople and tourists inside the DPRK. The Chinese team observed that PRC is not immediately threatened by the radiation because the prevailing winds are blowing southward away from China toward South Korea.

China wants to know what the United States knows about the situation in North Korea but also expresses concern that any potential deployment of U.S. technical capabilities to surveil North Korea could also be used against China. China proposes that a coordination group should be established to deal with the crisis and that all technical information should be shared. In a separate meeting, China and South Korea agree to form a trilateral coordination group. The Chinese also suggest that North Korea be included in the coordination group, as well as Russia and Japan because of their significant experiences with nuclear accidents (Chernobyl in 1986 and Fukushima Daiichi in 2011). Then, in meeting with the United States and South Korea, the PRC urges that the DPRK be included in the coordination group as well as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and suggests that the UN should also be involved.

U.S. intelligence indicates that there was an explosion at Yongbyon that caused significant damage to the reactor. The President and Secretary of State each attempted to telephone their respective counterparts in the DPRK but did not receive an answer. South Korea attempts to reassure the public that the ROK government has the situation well in hand. Seoul also tries to communicate with Pyongyang without success.

With the DPRK silent on the nuclear incident and unresponsive to outside efforts to open lines of communication, China, the United States, and South Korea start quietly sharing intelligence and exploring ways to cooperate to address the crisis. In a trilateral meeting, the United States proposes the formation of a small multinational team of experts to assess the scope of the accident. When the United States suggests including Chinese experts, South Korea demands that ROK experts also be included in the assessment because South Korea continues to be the country most affected by the radiation.

The Chinese worry that North Korea might be talking directly to the United States and increase their efforts to communicate with the DPRK via multiple channels. The Chinese also request that satellites be tasked to collect overhead imagery of North Korea, and Beijing decides to dispatch UASs into DPRK airspace. Meanwhile, China prepares to evacuate PRC

civilians from areas adjacent to the border with North Korea and deploy PLA weapons of mass destruction (WMD) defense units near the frontier as a precaution.

Because of the uncertain situation in North Korea and increased radiation levels along the DMZ, the United States halts the movement of military and dependents to South Korea. South Korea debates how to handle the rising radiation levels that are blowing southward toward the Seoul metropolitan area and how to prevent public panic. The ROK tries to discourage the United States and other governments from evacuating their citizens.

After several days of silence about the nuclear accident, the DPRK finally admits to a “minor incident.” Airborne radiation continues to flow southward with the radiation plume spreading over the western half of the ROK, including the entire Seoul metropolitan area and Incheon International Airport, the city of Pyeongtaek, nearby Camp Humphreys, all of South Korea’s western coastline, and a large portion of the Yellow Sea. Other radiation flows in the counterclockwise current flow in the Yellow Sea off the western coast of North Korea toward China. There is also the possibility of radiation leaking into the water table north of Yongbyon and into China. The most serious near-term health impact is to the inhabitants of South Korea. People exposed to high levels of radiation suffer skin burns and experience nausea and vomiting. While exposure to these levels of radiation can result in death in a matter of days or weeks, the more immediate impact is mass panic and an overloading of hospitals and medical facilities.

China Seals Its Border with North Korea

China decides to seal its border with North Korea in anticipation of a refugee exodus across the Yalu River. Beijing also continues to closely monitor radiation levels. The United States participates in a trilateral meeting in Beijing with South Korea to coordinate the response to the North Korea crisis. The United States prepares for the voluntary evacuation of U.S. government dependents in South Korea.

The ROK makes further attempts to communicate with the DPRK without success. Seoul also prepares for a limited intervention focused on dealing with Yongbyon. Meanwhile, South Korea assists with the evacuations of foreign nationals and prepares for a possible influx of refugees from North Korea across the DMZ, which has only recently been cleared of land mines.

Kim Jong-un disappears from public view and is not responding to communication efforts from China, South Korea, or the United States. This only deepens the sense of mystery and fuels speculation that he is sick or deceased. Meanwhile, outbound flights from Seoul’s two airports and those in other South Korea cities are filled with foreign residents fleeing to safety. The exodus contributes to a rising sense of panic across the country. Alarm also grows in China as radiation contaminates fish and sickens fisherman in PRC waters. China prepares to evacuate an estimated one million PRC citizens who live and work in South Korea. To this end, the Chinese team requests permission from the South Korean team for Chinese

civilian and military aircraft to land at ROK airports to extract PRC nationals. South Korea adamantly refuses to permit Chinese military aircraft or ships in the ROK.

The governor of the DPRK province of North Pyongan—the province in which the Yongbyon complex is located—publicly requests international assistance to deal with a “nuclear catastrophe.” The fact that this appeal does not come from Pyongyang—which remains tight-lipped about the situation—but from provincial authorities suggests that central government control in North Korea has weakened considerably, if not completely broken down.

China’s pursuit of international cooperation to deal with the North Korean crisis manifests itself in a series of unprecedented moves that permit international access to locations inside two different Chinese provinces. First, Beijing creates an international staging base for refugee relief operations in Yanji, the capital city of the PRC’s Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture near the border with the DPRK. Yanbian is inland, located in eastern Jilin Province. Second, the PRC establishes a logistics center to support operations to deal with the damaged nuclear reactor at Yongbyon in the key border city of Dandong in the southeastern corner of Liaoning Province. Dandong is China’s largest urban center along the frontier with North Korea, is a major road and rail hub, and is located approximately 75 miles away from Yongbyon as the crow flies.

The United States Moves Naval Assets and the Republic of Korea Considers Next Moves

The United States moves naval assets (including an aircraft carrier) into the Yellow Sea to support the operation to entomb the damaged nuclear reactor at Yongbyon. Washington prepares to send “technical and logistical expertise” to the DPRK via the PRC as part of a multinational mission. China reacts with alarm to the deployment of U.S. Navy vessels so close to China and North Korea. The United States explains that this move is being done to support humanitarian operations, China insists this is being done “too early” and there is no good reason for U.S. ships unilaterally to take up positions on China’s “doorstep.” According to the Chinese, this deployment should be conducted later and then only in cooperation with PLA Navy vessels. China stresses that all military activities should be collaborative and preferably conducted under UN auspices.

Meanwhile the ROK struggles with how to respond to the plea from the governor of North Pyongan for external assistance. The South Korean team grapples with a dilemma: ROK intervention could trigger civil war in North Korea, but not intervening means conceding the initiative to the PRC and the United States.

China Intervenes

Amid rumors of Kim Jong-un’s death, reports of armed clashes in Pyongyang, and the apparent total breakdown of central control in North Korea, the PRC decides that the time has come to intervene. Beijing launches a large-scale military intervention into the DPRK. China’s objectives go beyond merely dealing with the Yongbyon reactor and include the goal

of securing all nuclear and missile sites in northern North Korea near the PRC border. In the words of one member of the Chinese team, Beijing has decided to seize the opportunity to “solve the nuclear problem once and for all.” China also seeks to be postured for any U.S.-ROK incursion in the DPRK. Chinese leaders are opposed to this incident being used by the alliance as a pretext to unify the peninsula under alliance terms. Beijing wants to ensure that Beijing’s interests are protected in any future agreement on the direction of governance on the peninsula and believes that the North Korean Worker’s Party must be represented in negotiations toward such future agreement.

Wholesale Chinese military intervention takes the United States and ROK by surprise. Washington is also wary of the expansive Chinese intervention operation, its ambitious goals, and the medium- to long-term implications of this action. The ROK is shocked by the PRC decision itself as well as the large-scale nature of the intervention and its sweeping goals. While Chinese actions could help stabilize the situation in the short-term, they raise the specter of a medium- or long-term Chinese military footprint in the DPRK. For South Korea, Chinese boots on the ground inside North Korea constitute an impediment to the prospect of unification.

Throughout the initial weeks of the crisis, Russia participates in bilateral meetings with China and with the tripartite group (the United States, ROK, and China). Russia is then brought in to consult on a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution, which authorizes intervention in response to the crisis, with the capture of nuclear weapons and missile sites and facilities a top priority. When China begins military operations across the DPRK border to secure WMD sites and establish border security in depth, Russia places Russian Far East forces on higher alert and coordinates with China to provide Russian military advisors and observers to Chinese HQ in the DPRK.

The tripartite group now expands to include Russian and Japanese permanent representation, but the meetings begin to break down as the U.S.-ROK delegations, backed by Japan, demand that the Chinese halt their military operations while the UNSC formulates a resolution for intervention. China and Russia agree that UNSC deliberations are a priority, but insist that North Korea’s UN representative must be involved. Although the situation inside the DPRK remains murky, the DPRK UN representative assures the UNSC that the Worker’s Party remains intact and is working to contain the radiation event.

Russia Supports PRC-DPRK Mutual Defense

With Russia’s support, China invokes the PRC-DPRK mutual defense treaty, and PLA commanders in the DPRK seek to establish contact with KPA leaders to defuse any potential attacks by KPA units against the PLA and to prevent any attacks by DPRK strategic forces against the PRC homeland. Russia provides intelligence to China on internal DPRK political strife and formation of political and military factions and prepares airborne forces for missions to secure WMD sites in support of China’s main effort. Senior Russian and Chinese officers are also directed to begin planning for how Russian Far East, PLA, and KPA forces could

collectively prevent ROK forces from crossing the DMZ and American forces from moving closer to the DPRK. They determine that some Russian capabilities, such as air defenses and submarines, may be required to extend PLA and KPA anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) potential around North Korea. In other areas such as BMD, data sharing agreements are expanded. Moscow is willing to prepare forces for these roles but communicates to Beijing that it prefers to limit its role to intelligence sharing and, if needed, defensive operations.

U.S. and ROK forces prepare to cross the DMZ, but intelligence indicates that KPA forces across the DMZ appear to be intact and on alert. The status of strategic forces is uncertain. China continues to propose and insist that international efforts be coordinated through the staging base and logistics center established in northeast China, and U.S. requests to move a military HQ to the staging base are rebuffed. The ROK places intense pressure on the United States to begin military operations against DPRK strategic facilities and to send alliance forces north. Thus, on the one hand, the alliance faces an uncertain situation regarding KPA ability and willingness to resist (including to launch attacks into the ROK); on the other, it faces a unified PRC-Russia front seeking to control any change to the status quo on the peninsula in ways favorable to their partnership.

While some friction exists behind closed doors between China and Russia regarding roles and benefits in a “new” North Korea environment, Russia accepts a level of Chinese primacy in return for guarantees that economic and geopolitical benefits will accrue to Moscow for its support.

Korean Peninsula Scenario Cooperation and Interoperability

The primary difference between the Korean Peninsula scenario and the Japan scenario is Russia’s role as a junior versus senior partner. In the Korean Peninsula scenario, Russia’s role begins later and is centered on political, diplomatic, and humanitarian support in the early phases of the crisis. The most significant form of military assistance that Russia provides is intelligence and reconnaissance support, including regional monitoring, leveraging its contacts inside North Korea to gain reporting on the incident and leadership dynamics, and technical analysis related to the nuclear incident. During these early stages and beyond, Beijing attempts to place itself in equal standing with the United States and ensure that it has a voice in decisions regarding any potential responses. Similarly, Beijing’s early responses are primarily focused on ensuring that Chinese populations near the border and Chinese citizens in North Korea can be moved to safety away from the incident. China’s decision to bring Russia into the process does not occur until Beijing has committed to intervening in North Korea to seize WMD and ballistic missile sites and contain the instability that accompanied the Korean Workers’ Party apparent loss of control (see Table 5.2 for the applied framework).

There are several reasons why Russia ends up as junior partner in this scenario. First and most obvious is China’s proximity and extensive border with North Korea. China’s basing infrastructure in the Northern Theater and naval facilities near the Yellow and East China

TABLE 5.2

Korean Peninsula Scenario Cooperation and Interoperability Framework

Drivers of Cooperation	China	Russia
<i>Political</i>		
International legitimacy and messaging	The PRC can portray itself as the protector and friend of the North Korean people, uniquely positioned to lead multinational efforts. Incorporating Russian forces supports this multinational leadership role.	Moscow benefits from an opportunity to argue that a China-Russia-led response is preferable for the North Korean people and should be relied on for other international crises, compared with a response by the United States and its allies.
Demonstrating a measure of commitment / Demonstrating solidarity	A combined Chinese-Russian effort to protect the North Korean population, including a large-scale military deployment into the DPRK and refugee assistance, demonstrates a shared vision for the region. Russia demonstrates willingness to use military assets in support of Chinese-defined objectives.	
<i>Operational</i>		
Transnational security threats requiring bilateral solutions	BMD early warning: If the United States and ROK begin strikes against DPRK strategic facilities in the presence of Chinese forces, integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) functions would be improved if relevant data regarding early warning and tracking of ballistic missiles were shared.	
Burden sharing, reducing individual costs, or augmenting existing capabilities (quantitative)	A combined A2/AD approach that incorporates Russian capabilities presents a stronger deterrent to U.S./ROK actions in the DPRK. Intelligence sharing and surveillance of respective Chinese and Russian borders with DPRK leads to better understanding of the situation and the status of refugee movements.	
Bridging capability gaps (qualitative)	PRC monitoring of U.S. naval presence and enforcing sea control, if necessary, is limited and would benefit from Russian capabilities, particularly ASW.	Russia lacks both a large-scale ground force prepared to occupy the DPRK and the relationships with the KPA that China provides.
Geographic access: bases, pre-positioning, supply lines	Chinese forces operate from their own bases.	Russian vessels operating in the East China Sea may be supported by the PLAN base in Qingdao.
<i>Risk Assessment</i>		
Likelihood and severity of threats to respective regimes	Beijing's initial risk assessment centers on risks of inaction: Chinese citizens becoming casualties and displaced, worsening nuclear incident threatening China, and uncertain political control in DPRK following the disaster. Requesting Russian assistance may be seen to disperse some risks associated with their bold intervention, though, describing it as a multinational decision.	Moscow perceives little risk to its own regime in this scenario and is thus moved by political drivers to support the PRC, particularly if limited to intelligence sharing and defensive operations. If Russian forces are compelled to aggression toward ROK or U.S. forces, however, risks of retaliation against Russian forces and interests rises.

Table 5.2—Continued

Drivers of Cooperation	China	Russia
<i>Domain-Specific Interoperability Examples</i>		
Maritime	• Posturing for potential combined maritime blockade of U.S. naval forces: China and Russia potentially share maritime domain awareness (MDA) through combined HQ in Vladivostok (Russian Pacific Fleet HQ) while deconflicting AOs in the Yellow Sea and Russian unilateral surface vessel and submarine presence in Sea of Japan. MDA shared through liaison officers (LNOs) and respective communications systems without a shared digital common operating picture. • Russia takes lead in ASW, again, sharing information through LNOs or unsecure communications.	
Land	• PRC's Northern Theater Command incorporates Russian advisors and LNOs at operational command level to improve intelligence sharing and ground coordination along DPRK borders. • China leads refugee centers and humanitarian zones efforts from Yanji and with Russian assistance and logistics provided to smaller centers in the north from Vladivostok. Refugee tracking and civilian activities within the DPRK are shared via unsecure network. • Russian units placed on alert to secure strategic sites if PLA lacks capacity or speed to reach them before U.S./ROK crosses DMZ. Plans dictate geographic deconfliction within the DPRK, not unit-level integration • Russian chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear experts accompany Chinese-led teams at Yongbyon and other strategic sites. • Common rules of engagement (ROE) and engagement criteria for ground-based air defense/SAMs and indirect fire established early but require senior-level consultations to update.	
Air	• Combined strategic aviation patrols with Chinese and Russian bombers around DPRK borders that breach Japanese and South Korean ADIZs to signal collective Chinese-Russian capabilities and intentions. Patrols limited to preplanned demonstrations. • Sino-Russian IAMD data may be shared via combined computer-enabled command post implemented during past exercises. But coordination is limited to data sharing, with any tactical tasking and execution remaining within respective national chains of command. • Manned and unmanned ISR flights conducted by both militaries using deconfliction measures that dedicate DPRK airspace to segregate Russian and Chinese air zones.	
Space	• BeiDou ground monitoring stations in Russia and GLONASS stations in China improve range and accuracy of each individual system. • Common BeiDou and GLONASS time-keeping systems improve positioning, navigation, and timing and targeting performance in and around DPRK but populate separate, national C2 systems. • ASAT ROE established in senior-level consultations, decision authority to attack U.S. satellites left to Beijing.	
Cyber/Information	• Cyber defense best practices and U.S./ROK vulnerabilities shared at the operational level with little tactical coordination. • Messaging campaigns coordinated among senior government officials.	

Drivers of Cooperation	China	Russia
<i>Nonmilitary Support</i>		
What each country might do to provide support to the other not requiring military cooperation	Provides international recognition of Russian assistance strengthening Moscow's geopolitical image and relevance.	Votes in line with PRC at UNSC. International messaging promotes antipathy toward "U.S. destabilizing actions" and Russian humanitarian assistance.

seas allows the PLA to take initiative early in the crisis based on the number of forces at its disposal. Russia's border with North Korea, its infrastructure along that border, and force posture in the Russian Far East limit its response options and ability to contribute to a coalition operation. Russia does provide important capabilities in the scenario—early warning, naval platforms and capabilities (most importantly ASW), chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear detection, long-range aviation, and potentially special forces and airborne forces—but China's overwhelming advantage in available forces and geographic proximity afford Beijing the ability and capacity to act quickly and decisively, setting the terms of combined Russian and Chinese actions.

A second factor that places Russia in the junior partner role is China's central political role in the early decisionmaking process with the United States and ROK. The PRC's proximity and historical ties to the Korean Peninsula place it in a position to exert significant influence on the course of events. Although Russia finds itself in a junior status, it does provide important political and diplomatic support in the UNSC as well as through its ability to legitimate PRC claims that its actions promote stability and peace. Despite this critical support, however, tensions remain between Russia and China over the extent of Russia's involvement.

As with the Japan scenario, this scenario is more likely to involve coordination through geographic deconfliction at senior levels, potentially aided by LNOs, than meaningful interoperability. Although it is not explored in the scenario, Russia's military may have a difficult time fielding the types of forces necessary to support a stabilization operation such as this, particularly if the given mission involves seizing WMD or ballistic missile facilities. This is largely due to the level of attrition in Russia's elite forces during the Ukraine war. Depending on the quality and number of forces involved, Beijing may assign Russian forces to a small sector to ensure their involvement and demonstrate political unity between the two strategic partners; however, given PRC objectives, senior PLA officers will most likely be placed in charge of operations. Other operations involving air and maritime patrols are likely to be deconflicted geographically and temporally with most consultation and coordination taking place at a high level. Tactical and technical interoperability in this scenario would be limited.

Iran

The IAEA estimates that highly enriched uranium particles just below the 90 percent nuclear weapon-grade threshold were found in Iran. Iran denies that it has moved forward toward

weaponization and accuses the United States and Israel of instigating instability in Iran and using the nuclear issue as a pretext to collapse the Iranian regime.

Tehran grows increasingly concerned that the United States and its allies may seek to reinstitute sanctions. As a result, Iran's leaders consider options that include requests for support from Russia and China. In considering this option, Iran's military leaders identify two broad maritime operational challenges: (1) the Persian Gulf and (2) the Gulf of Oman. In the Persian Gulf, Iranian Republican Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) controls and is worried about the air defense of Iranian facilities that the United States and its allies might consider targeting, including ports, airfields, air defense installations, and landing sites that could enable amphibious assaults. In addition, Iranian military leaders remain concerned about the possibility of mining operations directed against Iranian ships and key maritime passageways. In the Gulf of Oman, the Iranian Navy (IRIN) is responsible for air defense and is tasked with preventing U.S. ships from getting through the Strait of Hormuz and into Persian Gulf. Anti-surface warfare and ASW are critical functions for accomplishing this broader mission and are the two Iranian capability areas with which Tehran remains concerned.

Russian and Chinese Expanding Relationships with Iran

Russia-Iran defense ties continue to strengthen, with negotiations for a Russian sale of S-400 air defense systems to Tehran complicating the decision calculus for Israeli leaders and planners contemplating a strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. Likewise, Iran continues to provide drones and other systems to support Russia's war in Ukraine.

China focuses on following up on the deal Beijing brokered between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which engages states throughout the region on Tehran's behalf and plays on fears of a growing threat of broader regional conflict driven by U.S. and Israeli aggression. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have intensified military dialogue with the United States but are increasingly focused on promoting dialogue with Tehran to avoid conflict that would undermine the economic goals of its council members.

Both Russia and China separately have provided intelligence support to Tehran regarding U.S. and Israeli plans and preparations but have not coordinated their activities.

Israel Strikes Iranian Nuclear Facilities

With the IAEA announcement and Tehran's hardline response, Israel executes a plan of tactical strikes against key Iranian nuclear facilities. The United States outwardly calls for Iran to negotiate new or extended Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action terms but expresses support for Israeli actions due to Tehran's "noncompliance and obfuscation" in IAEA inspections and safeguards. Following initial Israeli strikes and an ongoing campaign to sabotage various aspects of the Iranian nuclear program, Iran mobilizes its proxy forces in the region to ramp up activities against Israeli shipping and other targets and holds a tripartite meeting with Russian and Chinese envoys. Both Moscow and Beijing call for a cessation of Israeli attacks and demand that the United States and European states ease sanctions against Iran

to facilitate dialogue. Chinese and Russian leaders also inform the United States and its allies that there is no basis in international law for blockading or inhibiting Iranian shipping from conducting lawful international business and trade in international waterways.

Russia and China Provide Naval Escort

Overtly, Russia and China agree to provide a joint naval escort to protect Iranian shipping; covertly, they develop plans to support regional proxy actions directed against U.S. interests. Both Moscow and Beijing continue separate diplomatic and security efforts that are already underway in the region; they also begin a coordinated but covert effort to provide intelligence to Iran and its proxies and to provide weapons and logistics support to the Iranian Republican Guard Corps (IRGC), much of which gets transferred to proxy groups.

Despite this level of coordination, China remains more committed to regional security than Russia does. The PRC attempts to weaken U.S. influence in the GCC by portraying U.S. and Israeli actions as destabilizing while assuring the GCC of Beijing's support for its economic and security goals. Moscow accepts more risk in defending Iran and proxy actions against U.S. interests. Thus, while overarching goals bring China and Russia together, some tension exists in terms of their willingness to risk escalation to broader regional conflict.

Iran Scenario Cooperation and Interoperability

In this scenario, Russia and China are on a more-equal footing as partners than they were in either of the two previous scenarios. While conventional military support to Iran is limited in comparison, there are several areas where both Russian and Chinese comparative advantages and complementary capabilities reveal themselves. For the PLA, its posture and access to bases in the region, including the PLA base in Djibouti, provide a logistical and basing framework that could sustain operations in both the Gulf of Oman and Persian Gulf, if necessary. Similarly, PLAN maritime capabilities, particularly major combatants, provide the PLA with a robust number of ships and mission capabilities that could support a variety of missions ranging from escort, anti-surface warfare, ASW, and air defense capabilities. Russia's previous defense ties with Iran, particularly related to the sale of advanced air defense capabilities, provides Russia with a means to directly support Iran's air defense capability and its Caspian Flotilla, which possesses long-range strike capabilities. Also, the Quadrilateral Intelligence Center, which includes Russia, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, could serve as a starting point for trilateral intelligence sharing among Iran, China, and Russia. Regardless, both militaries would be challenged if asked to provide extensive support due to their limited out-of-area capacity for sustained large-scale operations. Escort and air defense missions are probably best tailored to their force structure, resident capabilities, and ability to provide sustained support to Iran (see Table 5.3 for the applied framework).

Although the possible areas of support that Moscow and Beijing can offer to Iran are more limited than they were in the two previous scenarios, there are well-defined capabilities and missions that a combined Russian-Chinese operation could perform that would send both a

TABLE 5.3

Iran Scenario Cooperation and Interoperability Framework

Drivers of Cooperation	China	Russia
<i>Political</i>		
International legitimacy and messaging	The PRC perceives an opportunity to build on its 2023 Iran-KSA deal to present itself as an effective peace broker for the region. Additionally, Beijing could publicly bring together other world powers like Russia to stand up against the “imperial intentions” of the United States.	Moscow has also made several investments to gain regional influence and international importance through its Middle East policies. This situation presents an opportunity for Russia to play a key role in a coalition of support for a country “embattled by the United States.”
Demonstrating a measure of commitment / Demonstrating solidarity	Beijing and Moscow present a common front to the region and international community ‘against U.S. aggression and in support of states who would otherwise suffer from American imperialism.’ China-Russia collaboration deepens perception of a shared interest in supporting nations not aligned to the United States.	
<i>Operational</i>		
Transnational security threats requiring bilateral solutions	The U.S. 7th Fleet generally outmatches any Chinese or Russian capabilities moved to the region. When considering additional American assets allocated for the crisis and Israeli capabilities, Iran operationally benefits more from a combined approach to military support that also complicates U.S., Israeli, and GCC decisions.	
Burden sharing, reduce individual costs, or augmenting existing capabilities (quantitative)	Both countries lack significant out-of-area deployment capabilities, making combined naval escort operations a desirable option to minimize the impact on each country’s ability to maintain naval assets dedicated to other national interests. Merging data from tactical ISR assets would also provide a more accurate operating picture at a lower cost than if operating independently. By assuming the burden of certain naval tasks that are more visible and less escalatory (counter-mine warfare, search and rescue, and air defense of Iranian ports, for example) China and Russia free up IRIN and ICGN ships for more-aggressive actions against U.S. and Israeli interests in the region.	
Bridging capability gaps (qualitative)	The PRC brings more international legitimacy to the Iranian side than Russia does.	Russia could provide more AD expertise on S-300 and S-400 systems than Chinese personnel through dedicated advisor teams. Russia is likely better situated to provide training and advice, if not additional systems, to Iran’s ship- and land-based anti-ship cruise missiles. Russia’s Caspian Flotilla could also provide long-range strike capabilities from strategic depth. Russia also has standing in the Quadrilateral Intelligence Center of Russia, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, providing a starting point for multinational intelligence sharing among Iran, China, and Russia.
Geographic access: bases, prepositioning, supply lines	Russian units may receive staging and logistics support from the PRC’s base in Djibouti where Chinese forces provide security.	If Beijing is concerned that shipping military hardware to the region could upset other key partners (Central Asian and GCC countries, for example) Russian Federation territory could be used as a conduit for less attributable Chinese donations to Iranian proxies.

Table 5.3—Continued

Drivers of Cooperation	China	Russia
<i>Risk Assessment</i>		
Likelihood and severity of threats to respective regimes	Beijing perceives little threat to its regime for initially supporting Iran. However, the political drivers may not overweigh risks associated with an escalating conflict in the region. Thus, the PRC seeks to minimize economic, political, and reputational costs by balancing clear support for Iran against the West with tempering calls for kinetic strikes against U.S. and Israeli personnel and interests.	Despite complex relationships throughout the Middle East, Moscow is less persuaded by risks to supporting Iran than Beijing is. Russian leaders may believe they can keep proxy support, shuffled through the IRGC, hidden. Russia may also attempt to color its AD contributions as a purely defensive reaction to anticipated U.S. air strikes, thereby reducing chances of American retributive actions in Russia.
<i>Domain-Specific Interoperability Examples</i>		
Maritime	- Naval deployments are publicized as being a combined Chinese-Russian operation to protect Iranian capital assets and ‘bring stability’ to the Gulf. Pictures and video of Chinese, Russian, and Iranian ships conducting patrols and air defense exercises are dispersed widely. - However, naval groups of two or three vessels operate under national leadership chains of command separated first by geographic AOs with Russian ships supporting the IRGCN in the Persian Gulf and Chinese ships supporting the IRIN in the Gulf of Oman. Where additional functional capabilities are needed (e.g., Russian ASW platforms in the Gulf of Oman) they may be assigned to the other region as well. - Coordination at sea is limited to emergencies and generally performed via unsecure communications. Maritime operations for the region are centrally coordinated from a combined Chinese-Russian-Iranian command center at Bandar Abbas.	
Land	- Chinese and Russian conventional land forces play a minor role in this scenario. - Russia may send functional advisors; e.g., AD specialists to work with Iranian S-300 and S-400 units. - Both countries deploy special operations forces teams to collect intelligence; data is primarily shared at a centralized HQ with representatives from all three countries. - Both countries deploy small, integrated teams to support Iranian proxies in the region that would complicate U.S. operations or pose additional risks to U.S. interests. Russian and Chinese teams may be composed of special operations forces, intelligence, and/or private military companies, depending on risks and benefits of attribution. Methods and substance of support would need to be tailored to each specific group. Groups like the Al Ashtar Brigades and Saraya al Mukhtar in Bahrain, for example, may require intelligence only on American and Bahraini vulnerabilities there while IRGC-Qods Force-backed groups in Syria and Iraq would benefit from advanced rocket and missile systems and UASs. - Russia may also strengthen Iran’s long-range coastal artillery capability by introducing land-based Kalibr anti-ship cruise missiles to Iranian shores. These would likely be mobile, camouflaged platforms along with decoys and small teams of Russian operators. The PLA would benefit from attaching observers to these teams that can use lessons learned to further improve PLA A2/AD activities in the Pacific.	

Table 5.3—Continued

Drivers of Cooperation	China	Russia
Air	- Iran provides overflight and airbase access to Chinese and Russian aircraft, reducing some logistics and personnel maritime transportation requirements. - China and Russia may conduct combined strategic bomber patrols along Iran's western coast for signaling purposes but are expected to receive tactical taskings from their respective national leaders at a combined HQ. - China and Russia will also use overflight and airbase access to conduct ISR flights, often by UAS to monitor the location and activity of U.S. naval vessels.	
Space	Satellite-based ISR operations conducted unilaterally with data shared in a combined Chinese-Russian-Iranian intelligence center and/or a combined operational HQ located in Iran.	
Cyber/Information	Cyberattacks against U.S. systems may be coordinated by the three countries but likely remain limited to operations with similar desired effects preplanned well in advance. It is not expected that this coordination will reach real-time information sharing, and emerging cyber vulnerabilities will likely be targeted unilaterally with the results shared later.	
Nonmilitary Support		
What each country might do to provide support to the other not requiring military cooperation	China may use its regional standing to assure GCC nations that Russian military presence in the region is beneficial to ending the crisis. Beijing could complicate U.S. coalition building efforts and attempt to weaken U.S. influence in the GCC.	Russian propaganda portrays the United States as the aggressor in a region that needs a more stabilizing presence provided by Russia and China. Moscow could increase assistance to Tehran for mitigating impacts of U.S. sanctions. Russia may also have to take steps to reassure Jerusalem that aid provided to Iran will not endanger Israel.

political message and provide a substantive military contribution. This scenario also presents the mixed interests in the region that the Kremlin and Beijing would have to balance and manage in terms of messaging and attribution, particularly in terms of supporting regional proxies. For example, Russia may request that Kata'ib Hizballah (KH) attack U.S. bases; however, if KH later fires a Russian-supplied missile at Israel, there likely would be serious negative implications for Russia's and China's relationship with Israel. This could lead to Israeli retaliation against either party. Similarly, Beijing would likely not support backing an anti-U.S. group in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) primarily because any group it supports may also present internal stability challenges to the UAE government. Accordant with Beijing's attempts to develop its relationship with the UAE, including access to bases, airfields, and ports in the country, supporting proxies in this manner would likely inhibit its efforts to gain influence and access in the region.

Differing Russian and Chinese approaches to the region could also complicate cooperation between the Kremlin and Beijing. China's perception of its role in the region's security differs sharply from Russia's. In particular, Beijing in this scenario presents itself as an effective counter to the United States and seeks to diminish U.S. influence in the GCC. The PRC's

portrayal of U.S. and Israeli actions as destabilizing provides it with a means for assuring GCC members of Beijing's support for their regional economic and security priorities. From this perspective, Beijing would be willing to support an operation to help Iran but would be unwilling to pursue courses of action that directly threaten U.S. and Israeli personnel and interests. Moscow's willingness to use regional proxies is likely indicative that Moscow would be more risk-acceptant in supporting Iran. Thus, while overarching goals bring China and Russia together, some tension exists in terms of their willingness to risk escalation to broader regional conflict.

A final wild card that is not discussed in the scenario—but should be considered—is the potential for nuclear escalation, particularly because of the involvement of a third party with nuclear weapons. With Iran's nuclear capability still nascent in this scenario, the problem of nuclear escalation could likely be managed through a combination of factors, including Israel's ability to use conventional forces to target Iran's nuclear infrastructure, no immediate Iranian retaliatory capability, and the United States' ability to influence Israeli decisionmaking. However, proxy attacks that harm U.S. and Israeli personnel and facilities could lead to retaliatory strikes and the potential for wider escalation that would harm Beijing's interests in the Gulf region and perhaps beyond. Ultimately, the question of whether Moscow's and Beijing's risk calculations are aligned is central and would have to be considered in this scenario.

In terms of interoperability, this scenario represents a potential case in which Russian and Chinese combined exercises may serve as a model. In particular, if Moscow and Beijing limit their actions to escorting Iranian ships, combined patrols with both Russian and Chinese naval ships would provide a powerful message of solidarity and support. They would also require far less coordination than the other types of military actions outlined in the previous scenarios. While labeling these combined patrols as a sign of interoperability would be a stretch, they would demonstrate a willingness for coordinated action. If the scenario included a more expansive involvement of Russian and Chinese forces, it is possible that their actions could be coordinated and deconflicted based on geographic areas of responsibility, such as China accepting responsibility for operations in the Gulf of Oman while Russia takes on responsibility for the Persian Gulf. Overall, the issues of joint and combined command institutions and HQ are similar, if not more pronounced, in this scenario because of Russia's and China's diverging interests, distances from their national boundaries, and their competitive stance in the region.

Conclusion

The three scenarios outlined in this chapter highlight a number of conditions under which Russia and China might cooperate in a future conflict involving the United States and its allies. In two of the three cases, China assumes a role of *de facto* senior partner and Russia is put into the *de facto* role of junior partner (largely because of the losses its military has incurred in Ukraine). In all three cases, the scenarios identify a variety of roles, missions, and

capabilities that both the Russian Armed Forces and the PLA could undertake. In the cases of Japan and the Korean Peninsula, the PRC is better positioned to take a leading role, in part due to its geographic proximity and its central role in the initiation of the conflict. In both cases, Russia's military does have credible capabilities to contribute, but its ability to do so may be limited based on capacity and Beijing's concerns regarding the overall direction of the operation. Ultimately, Moscow's support may be valued in some circumstances, but Beijing's immediate interests will dictate the extent to which it is willing to incorporate its counterparts in Moscow in either planning or the conduct of operations. The Iran scenario identifies a situation in which Russia and China are on a more equal footing, but it also highlights how differences in regional strategy and willingness to take on risk could limit cooperation based on a diverging set of interests and priorities.

These scenarios help illustrate the difficulties that both militaries would likely face if they were directed to conduct a combined operation. Disparate levels of readiness, the ability to deploy to distant locations, and the availability of well-trained personnel and advanced weapons all suggest that, in any array of scenarios, military cooperation may be imbalanced in terms of what the other can be expected to contribute. It may also limit the practical impact of combined support in ways that—although politically and strategically significant—are operationally detrimental to success. More broadly, issues such as combined planning at both the strategic and operational levels may limit the extent to which the Russian Armed Forces and the PLA are able to cooperate. In many respects, these issues revolve around a lack of trust, an unwillingness to cede control, and a fear of exposing weaknesses and flaws.

In this last regard, issues of relative status with the partnership (i.e., who is senior partner and who is junior partner, or if they are equals) will matter to both sides. Similarly, the insular and competitive tendencies in both militaries that were examined in the cases in Chapter 2 will figure into how both countries respond to these *de facto* roles. It is unlikely that either side will accept its role as senior partner with humility by forgoing an opportunity to gain advantage at the other's expense. Likewise, neither side will relish its role as junior partner for similar reasons. In an event such as the Iran scenario in which both are roughly equal, diverging interests may still make cooperation a tenuous endeavor.

Finally, the issue of military strategy and war strategy, particularly as it relates to nuclear weapon use and escalation, will likely play a major role in deliberations on the desirability of combined operations. Beijing's concerns with Russia's use of nuclear threats against NATO during the war in Ukraine indicate a potential area of friction in each of the scenarios that would likely complicate combined strategy development, planning, and, ultimately, the political calculations in Moscow and Beijing. With Russia and China on distinctly different strategic trajectories, both have developed views on escalation and risk that may not be compatible.

Conclusion: Prospects and Pitfalls for Future Military Cooperation

A Growing Partnership

The importance that Putin and Xi have placed on the Russia-China relationship and their commitment to this partnership since Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrates that Moscow and Beijing are willing to sustain their mutual support even in the most difficult situations. As Russia's fortunes have declined over the past decade, particularly since its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, China's relative power has continued to increase, making China the *de facto* although not explicitly acknowledged senior partner in the relationship. Undoubtedly, this reversal of roles that has taken place over the past two decades is both understood and unwelcome in Moscow, but the relationship is a critical lifeline for Russia as its military founders in Ukraine, its relations with the United States and Europe deteriorate, and it is faced with a host of negative strategic developments as a consequence of its actions, including Sweden and Finland's entry into NATO, increased NATO defense spending, and an unexpected display of unity within the alliance. China's support has helped Russia withstand some of the most negative consequences of Western sanctions, particularly through its purchase of record amounts of energy and continued engagement at the highest levels. From Moscow's perspective, partnership with China is a strategic imperative for Russia to maintain any claim to great power status.

Likewise, the Russia-China partnership is critical for Beijing. China's leaders have long argued that the United States is determined to encircle China and impede its growth as a great power. The United States' alliance networks and its role as architect of the current international system (at the time of writing) are the most effective and useful tools for achieving this objective. With no alliances of its own, Beijing views Moscow's mutual support as its most important strategic relationship and a counterweight to U.S. power. As the *de facto* senior partner in the relationship, Beijing simultaneously sees a significant opportunity to exploit Russia's weakness—an opportunity it has leveraged to gain access to inexpensive energy, advanced military technology, and strategic resources. Much like Russia, the partnership is critical to China's view of itself as a great power.

The growth of the Russia-China strategic partnership since the early 1990s has been a central feature of the post-Cold War international security system and especially pronounced

in the realm of defense ties. Beginning with Russian arms sales to China in the early to mid-1990s, the relationship has covered a wide variety of needs for both militaries, including PME, training, and major exercises. Based on the trajectory of these developments, the prospect for future operational cooperation in a conflict scenario seems realistic. Indeed, the trajectory of Russia-China bilateral exercises suggests and perhaps indicates a desire to develop interoperability between the two militaries that could enable a future combined operation.

Strategic cooperation and coordination in the overall military-to-military relationship suggests that expanded cooperation might eventually include some form of combined military operation, but this possibility remains uncertain at best under present circumstances. Enhanced training and exercises represent an incremental increase in the threat each side can pose to the United States and its allies and may provide advantage to either country's (or both countries') political-diplomatic strategy. Deeper integration involving some level of Russia-China mutual defense treaty, if consummated and evolving toward a full-scale alliance, could provide both countries with vastly greater capabilities and strategic credibility. However, because of geostrategic conditions and their historical experiences with alliances, the development of a mutual defense treaty is unlikely for the foreseeable future, despite the importance that Putin and Xi have placed on the strategic partnership.

Both Russia and China prefer threats, intimidation, gray zone tactics, and hybrid warfare to an all-out military clash with the United States, but an actual war between the United States and either country could present scenarios in which discussions of mutual military support become more realistic. First, if Russia and China assess the United States to be weakened or distracted, leaders in both countries might perceive an opportunity to act together to exploit the situation. Similarly, in a scenario in which Russia or China assesses the other to be under threat of catastrophic defeat, combined military action might be considered a necessity to prevent their ally's defeat and the increase in relative power and freedom of action that the United States and its allies would enjoy as a result.

In the current geostrategic context as of this writing, the likely costs of direct military confrontation with the United States, the willingness of either country to enter such an operation—either independently or as a coalition—is unlikely, especially from Beijing's perspective. However, if the PRC continues on an upward trajectory and Beijing perceives greater opportunities to assert Chinese power, its willingness to accept the costs and risk associated with a mutual defense treaty or similar arrangement may also grow. As Russia and China continue to deepen cooperation, they appear poised to expand military ties into vast, new arenas, which include in the air and space domains, undersea or ASW operations (which have been a weakness for both navies), cyber and electronic warfare, and psychological operations and social media influence campaigns.

Short of a mutual defense treaty, other forms of military cooperation should be expected to intensify. The two sides may seek to leverage greater political-diplomatic value from enhanced exchanges and joint exercises, at times including third parties, such as Iran, or multinational organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Beijing could seek to enhance its claims to disputed areas by hosting joint exercises in these spaces. Indeed,

the two sides have already organized naval exercises in the East and South China seas for a number of years, and, in 2016, Russian naval vessels transited the Senkakus in an action suspected of being organized in advance to give the Chinese an opportunity to sail through the islets to substantiate territorial claims.¹ Such exchanges and exercises could carry substantial geopolitical implications if they were situated in a broader push by China to marshal international support from third countries for its claims.

In terms of technical cooperation, greater engagement on early warning systems may start with Russia helping China build such a system and culminate in the integration of the two countries' missile launch detection systems.² Russia has already announced that it is helping China build an early warning system to detect ICBM launches, although details of the assistance are murky.³ Russia's assistance can ensure the two countries' systems are compatible, which would facilitate information sharing and make subsequent integration possible.⁴ These steps could set off an arms race and considerably deepen Sino-Russian military coordination against the United States and its allies.⁵

This deeper integration would be the result of more-complex and more-frequent training and exercises between Russian and Chinese forces—interactions that would be likely to engender expanded technology and skills transfers. Similarly, increased integration would also potentially lead Chinese and Russian militaries to consider operating in new geographic areas or domains, perhaps with new operational concepts that were developed jointly. If this level of cooperation could be realized, the impact on U.S. deterrence and NSS would be enormous—even in the absence of an actual conflict. It would effectively force the United States to focus on a single threat that extends the length of the Eurasian landmass, outnumber it in nuclear weapons and strategic depth, and overwhelms it in conventional forces.

What would these developments mean in practical terms? As the scenarios in Chapter 4 demonstrate, there are several considerations that Moscow and Beijing would be likely to address before agreeing to conduct a combined operation. Key to those assessments will be first-order questions about whether entering a combined operation with the other would enhance Russia's or China's national security, create unacceptable risks, endanger regional

¹ "China, Russia Naval Drill in S.China Sea to Begin Monday," Reuters, September 11, 2016; James D. J. Brown, "China-Russia Naval Cooperation in East Asia: Implications for Japan," National Bureau of Asian Research, March 26, 2019.

² Kashin, 2019d.

³ Dmitry Stefanovich, "Russia to Help China Develop an Early Warning System," *The Diplomat*, October 25, 2019.

⁴ Pavel Felgenhauer, "Russia Exports Its Missile Early-Warning Knowhow to China," *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 16, No. 140, October 10, 2019. The press in both countries has reported experts raising this possibility as one that would considerably strengthen the position of Russia and China vis-à-vis the United States. See, for example, "The Military Union of Moscow and Beijing May Transform from a Formality into Reality [Военный союз Москвы и Пекина может превратиться из формального в реальный]," *Vedomosti*, October 6, 2019.

⁵ Kashin, 2019d.

dispositions, decrease national power, or create conditions that could lead to the downfall of either government. These questions are not unique to the consideration of entering into a coalition; however, leaders in both capitols are likely to weigh different factors when considered in the context of becoming a coalition partner. In addition to these questions, Moscow and Beijing will have to deliberate over the nature and capabilities of their coalition partner. In this area, several questions remain that ultimately will have a major influence on how Russia and China see each other as coalition partners. These include:

- How does China view and how does the PLA evaluate Russia's military performance in Ukraine? Will China's perception reduce the likelihood that China would want to partner with Russia? What impact will that evaluation have on PLA reform efforts?
- Will Russia consider participating in other contingencies before a solution is achieved in its war in Ukraine?
- What will Russia's armed forces look like after the war in Ukraine? What type of missions will Moscow prioritize? Will a reconstituted military undergo radical change or revert to an earlier Russian operational model?
- Will Russia and China assess U.S. strength differently as a result of the war in Ukraine?
- How will Russia and China understand their roles in the relationship (i.e., major and minor partner)? Will their assessments differ? If not, will there be consequences?

Challenges to Future Cooperation: Fissures in the “No Limits” Relationships

The relationship between Russia and China is critical for both countries. Putin and Xi have reaffirmed this on multiple occasions. They continue to seek ways to deepen the relationship. The defense component of the Russia-China strategic partnership is perhaps the most prominent, if not widely discussed, of all interactions between the two countries. The economic, informational, and diplomatic benefits of the military-to-military engagements are placed front and center on the global stage. They have also proven valuable as a tool for incorporating new partners, such as Iran and South Africa. The level of attention that the United States and some of its allies have assigned to understanding and considering strategies to undermine this cooperation demonstrates, in part, its value to Moscow and Beijing.

The benefits for Russia and China in terms of defense cooperation are both tangible and symbolic. For Russia, the relationship has provided economic benefits as China emerged as one of Russia's most-significant defense export markets—at times its largest buyer by far. It has also enabled Russia to maintain its strategic relevance and provided critical support in times of political, economic, and diplomatic need. For China, the relationship has been essential to the PLA's modernization through the sale of arms and military engagement—particularly training and exercises—that China's military sorely lacked. Strategically, it has provided a strong partner to China as it confronts the United States and its vast network of

alliances and partnerships. Difficulties and tensions between Russia and China have been present and will continue in the future, but Putin and Xi have downplayed those problems and emphasized the strategic benefits the partnership provides.

Even considering these benefits, our research has identified a number of challenges that will bound what type of cooperation is possible between Moscow and Beijing. Most notably, a range of issues will likely limit future possibilities for military cooperation in a future conflict scenario with the United States and its allies. This is particularly the case for major military operations including a combined military effort involving the Russian armed forces and the PLA. Our research for this report revealed several historical, cultural, policy, and technical challenges that both sides will confront as part of a decision to support each other operationally in a wartime environment. In some cases, these issues are deeply rooted and will be difficult to change. In others, leadership decisions could enable changes that would facilitate closer integration and greater levels of interoperability.

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia (and the Soviet Union) and China have fluctuated between partnership and rivalry. As the historical examples presented in Chapter 2 demonstrate, even in cases in which Moscow and Beijing worked toward common ends, elements of their rivalry were present. The examples of North Korea and Vietnam illustrate this strain. In addition, both countries have sought either a senior or equal position in the relationship and have resented being relegated to a junior or subordinate status. These viewpoints have also influenced how they have dealt with other allies and partners. The Soviet Union was viewed as condescending and dismissive of Egyptian culture by Egypt's political and military leaders. Chinese leaders attempted to assert their position in Vietnam, but Hanoi could play China off its rival, the Soviet Union. For both Russia and China, this sense of cultural or ideological seniority has led both countries to assume the role of leader in their relationships. The Soviets did this in Egypt and during the Warsaw Pact, and the Chinese in North Korea and Vietnam. At different points in their history, they asserted these claims with one another, at times causing severe tensions (e.g., Vietnam and the Sino-Soviet split).

From a practical standpoint, this history raises questions about command and leadership and how that could be structured in a future combined operation. As pointed out in the scenarios, several options could be considered, depending on the level of integration that Moscow and Beijing desire. These command options could include a coalition (the greatest degree of integration), deconfliction (less integration, separated by time, space, and function), and coordinated independent operations (general agreement on objectives and areas of responsibility, but no integration of efforts beyond that). In any of these circumstances, there would need to be some strategic level of command and agreement on war aims and strategy. At the operational level, operational objectives, phasing, missions and responsibilities, targeting, timing, and command authorities would likely have to be addressed. A key point that the scenarios illustrate is that the general missions and tasks that the Russian Armed Forces and PLA can contribute to are fairly well understood based on the overall capabilities, training, and exercise activity that has been observed from both militaries. The question of command

arrangements is not. Our research in Chapters 3 and 4 highlights several areas that may be significant complications.

As they weigh the benefits of combined military action between their militaries, leaders in Moscow and Beijing would have to consider several issues related to what military cooperation in a given scenario would entail, including (1) national objectives, (2) risk calculations, (3) trust, (4) assessments about the value a potential partner would add, and (5) the desirability of interoperability. In each of these cases, differing perspectives highlighted in the preceding chapters will make integration and, ultimately, a combined operation a difficult choice for both governments, but likely harder for Beijing than for Moscow.

In considering national objectives, Beijing's growing power and Russia's domestic problems and international woes increase the power asymmetry between the partners. While China has taken care to treat Russia as an equal at the symbolic level, the real power trends are not lost on Russia. Festering concern about status may fuel suspicions in Moscow about China's evolving motives in the relationship. The increasing costs of Moscow's war in Ukraine, across all components of national power, likely will increase the asymmetry between the two powers; Beijing's concerns about the economic and political costs of supporting Russia's action (regardless of how lukewarm that support is) may exacerbate existing frictions.

China also has a greater vested interest than Russia in the existing international system, which has enabled China to generate substantial economic power. China does not share Russia's preference to overtly challenge the United States, and Moscow's aggression against Ukraine creates difficulties for Beijing as it attempts to manage deteriorating relations with European actors that remain important for economic and technological reasons.

As China's power increases and Russia continues to face difficult choices in Ukraine, the difference in Moscow's and Beijing's willingness to accept risk becomes a significant issue in shaping a combined operation. Beijing's response to the invasion of Ukraine and Moscow's willingness to threaten nuclear weapon use highlight the most significant strategic difference between the two partners. Xi's warnings to Putin suggest a continued difference of perspective between Moscow's and Beijing's views on nuclear weapon use and nuclear escalation. The potential for escalation was present in each of the three scenarios, a condition that would surely factor into future Chinese decisions about the desirability of acting in a military coalition with Russia.

Similarly, the issue of trust was highlighted in several instances, including in our historical examination of Russian and Chinese alliance behavior, consideration of defense policy issues and military planning, and within each of the scenarios. In the context of a future combined operation, trust would factor prominently at the strategic level, including whether leaders in both countries can trust their coalition partner in light of the multiple competing interests, the potential reliability of that partner, and a general proclivity in Moscow and Beijing to not trust either their own militaries or others. In the three scenarios examined in Chapter 4, both sides will assume sensitive missions that—if not managed properly—could lead to escalation, failure of the operation, or an exposure to U.S. and allied retaliation that would weaken one or both parties. At the operational level, combined planning and C2 would

require some degree of open communication regarding current plans, future actions, intelligence assessments, and honest assessments regarding changes in status that have proven difficult for both the Russian Armed Forces and PLA internally. It is unlikely that this situation would improve for either side with the addition of a coalition partner.

Closely related to the issue of trust is the question of how each side perceives the other as a potential coalition partner. This is a particularly timely question given the Russian Armed Forces' poor performance and degradation in Ukraine. Over the past 30 years, the PLA has viewed its Russian counterparts as highly experienced and competent. The PLA approached military competitions, exchanges, and exercises with the Russian Armed Forces as opportunities to gain valuable experience and insights based on Russia's recent military operations. Chinese leaders also viewed the Russian military as technologically advanced and as a source of operational know-how. However, largely because of a dearth of official PLA sources examining Russia's performance in Ukraine, it is unclear whether these perceptions have changed. This question is particularly important to whether China would view the Russian military as a capable and useful coalition partner. It likely may not.

In addition to China's views of the Russian military, there are also questions about Russia's views of the PLA. In most training events, the majority of learning transfer went from the Russians to the Chinese. There is little evidence to suggest that the Russian Armed Forces found the same experiential value in these exercises and training events that the PLA did. Also, the PLA is a military with no combat experience for the past 45 years, which presents a stark contrast to the Russian Armed Forces that have been engaged in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine. From this perspective, Moscow may view the PLA as a well-resourced but questionable partner.

Additional factors that are likely to be considered in deliberations about the value of a coalition partner include both strategic and material factors. This report is focused on military cooperation, but, as all three scenarios indicated, the political, economic, and informational value that Russia and China can provide should not be underestimated. These strategic factors would be critical elements in any decision to conduct a combined operation. Materially, both militaries can provide systems and capabilities that would form the basis for a combined operation, but there is a significant imbalance in this area. The PLA continues to modernize and has not had to face the large-scale attrition and consumption—most notably in areas such as ground forces and long-range precision strike capabilities—that Russia is now forced to confront. Although Russia's navy and aerospace forces have sustained far less damage than Russian ground forces, it is unclear whether Moscow would be willing to make a sizable commitment of these forces and capabilities absent a resolution or termination of the war in Ukraine. For this reason, in material terms, the PLA is a much more attractive coalition partner to Russia than the Russian Armed Forces are to China.

Finally, neither China nor Russia has a recent history of an interoperable military alliance with any other country, much less any history of joint C2 structures or devolving authority to field commanders to innovate and partner to solve operational challenges. Although the Russian military has hosted Chinese forces and exercised with China and other nations in

multinational settings numerous times on land, in the air, and at sea, such exercises have been either a relatively recent development or fairly small scale (and sometimes both). Should the two sides decide to deepen military ties even further, they may face challenges deriving from their military culture and lack of experience in executing joint operations with partners. Indeed, both countries have struggled with joint operations independently. Operating in a coalition would only complicate these challenges.

If the two sides did decide to pursue interoperability as a core feature of their military relationship, they would need to make several choices to build the technological infrastructure, systems, and procedures and norms necessary for conducting a combined operation. The scenarios in this report highlight a wide variety of complex operational actions that both militaries could undertake to support each other. In broad terms, both militaries have the platforms to conduct these missions, but it remains unclear whether they could do so in an integrated fashion. The PLA has placed significant emphasis within its own ranks on building an informatized operational system. That has proven a challenge, and the PLA is still evolving toward a joint force and still seeking to overcome challenges related to interoperability within its own services. Russia's armed forces have demonstrated that their ability to conduct joint operations in Ukraine is very limited as well. To build a combined force structure capable of coalition operations, both would need to not only progress on their own problems but also begin working on similar issues in addressing interoperability challenges with a foreign partner. The United States and its allies have spent considerable time and resources on building this infrastructure, particularly through NATO and with South Korea. Similar efforts would likely be required for Russia and China to achieve these outcomes. As of this writing, it remains unlikely whether the Russian armed forces or PLA would pursue this direction under current conditions.

If Putin and Xi determine, however, that such cooperation is in the two countries' interests, then these considerations are likely to be overridden by the nations' political strategies. In an era when both regard competition with Washington as their leading national security challenge, it is likely that the challenges enumerated above will be seen more as operational problems or minor annoyances than as insuperable obstacles to deeper ties. This may particularly be the case if Moscow and Beijing continue to experience sustained declines in their relationships with the United States and its allies.

Implications

The findings in this report have several implications for planners and policymakers. First, the China-Russia strategic partnership is vital to Putin and Xi, but its importance preceded them and will extend beyond their tenures. Elites in Russia and China have viewed and will continue to view this relationship as vitally important to both countries' interests in spite of the many disagreements and areas of friction that may exist. As the war in Ukraine has demonstrated, both sides will act in their own interests which, at times, are at odds with one

another; however, both Putin and Xi have found a way to reinforce the importance of this strategic partnership even when difficult issues have arisen. From this perspective, efforts to break apart the relationship are unlikely to be successful and may end up fortifying the motivations of both Russia and China for strengthening the relationship.

The most effective way for the United States to counter the Russia-China strategic partnership is by ensuring the health of its own alliances and pursuing ever greater cooperation with its most important allies and partners. Strategically, the success of the U.S. network of allies and partners has led to Russia's and China's desire to pursue strategic cooperation. The most significant difference between the United States' alliances and the Russia-China strategic partnership is the alignment of values of objectives that exists among the United States and its allies. There are differences, sometimes significant differences, within these alliances; however, the core beliefs that animate the alliances are fundamentally different from the transactional nature of the relationship that exists between Moscow and Beijing. The enduring nature and joint level of commitment on the part of the United States and its allies is viewed by Moscow and Beijing as a major obstacle for both countries. Accordingly, these alliances provide the United States and its allies a significant competitive advantage.

While the possibilities for cooperation in a combined operation appear to be limited at the moment, U.S. planners and policymakers need to consider the circumstances under which Russia and China might pursue cooperation and factor those considerations into current planning efforts. The limitations that exist now may not exist in the future, depending on whether Putin and Xi perceive a significant degradation in the international security environment that would require enhanced military cooperation in operational terms. While we argue that military cooperation in the scenarios outlined in this report is unlikely, this judgment is based on the current geostrategic context. It is not set in stone. Policymakers and planners need to consider how Russian and Chinese combined operations would alter the United States' current strategy and posture.

In this context, policymakers and planners should avoid overestimating the current state of military cooperation and operational integration that exists between Russia and China. As this report has described, there has been a growth in combined exercises over the past decade, including Chinese involvement in Russia's most-significant strategic exercises. Likewise, combined Russia-China maritime and air patrols continue in areas sensitive to the United States and many of its allies and partners. However, the scope and complexity of these activities strongly suggests that their primary value remains largely symbolic and intended to demonstrate to the United States and others a level of combined resolve between leaders in Moscow and Beijing. Similarly, the symbolism and messaging involved with these exercises is likely intended as a deterrent signal directed at the United States and its allies. Regardless, beyond the symbolic and deterrent value these activities provide, there are a number of challenges at present that practically limit the degree to which either military can effectively engage in combined operations with the other.

More broadly, deterrence issues in the context of the Russia-China relationship will become increasingly complicated based on Moscow's and Beijing's differing risk calcula-

tions and perspectives on the role of nuclear weapons. Although the United States is unlikely to undermine the strategic partnership in general, areas of friction such as this provide an opportunity to inject doubt into the minds of senior leaders in Russia and China about the costs and risks associated with a conflict involving the United States and its allies. Ukraine has demonstrated a significant difference in how Putin and Xi think about nuclear weapons and nuclear escalation. Reinforcing the message that the United States and its allies are committed to collective defense, including in terms of extended deterrence, and will not stand down in the face of nuclear threats drives home the message to Beijing that Moscow's greater willingness to accept risk could have dire consequences for the PRC in a future conflict involving combined military efforts.

Abbreviations

A2/AD	anti-access/area denial
AD	air defense
ADIZ	air defense identification zone
AO	area of operations
ASAT	anti-satellite
ASW	anti-submarine warfare
BMD	ballistic missile defense
C2	command and control
CCG	Chinese Coast Guard
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CMC	Central Military Commission
CMAG	Chinese Military Advisory Group
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
CT	counterterrorism
DMZ	demilitarized zone
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDR	German Democratic Republic
HQ	headquarters
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IAMD	integrated air and missile defense
ICBM	intercontinental ballistic missile
IRGC	Iranian Republican Guard Corps
IRGCN	Iranian Republican Guard Corps Navy
IRIN	Iranian navy
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
JASDF	Japan Air Self-Defense Force
KMT	Kuomintang
KPA	Korean People's Army
LNO	liaison officer
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NLF	National Liberation Front
NSS	National Security Strategy
PCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Committee
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAAF	People's Liberation Army Air Force
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PME	professional military education
PRC	People's Republic of China
PVA	People's Volunteer Army
ROK	Republic of Korea
SAM	surface-to-air missile
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SRV	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
THAAD	Theater High-Altitude Air Defense
TTP	tactics, techniques, and procedures
UAS	unmanned aerial system
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WMD	weapons of mass destruction

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Unless otherwise indicated, the authors of this report provided the translations of bibliographic details for the non-English sources included in this report. To support conventions for alphabetization, sources in Russian and Chinese are introduced with and organized according to their English translations. The original rendering in Russian and Chinese may appear in brackets after the English translation.

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In this report, the authors explore possible future cooperation scenarios in which the Russian Armed Forces and the People's Liberation Army could operate together as coalition partners. The authors examine historical patterns of Russian and Chinese alliance behavior as well as current military-to-military engagements between these two militaries that include exercises, training events, such operational activities as joint maritime and air patrols, and high-level exchanges. Given these military engagement trends, three scenarios that illustrate how Russian and Chinese forces might operate together under different strategic and operational circumstances are then examined. These scenarios are then used to identify the prospects and pitfalls for future Russian and Chinese military cooperation in conflict and to explore implications for U.S. policymakers, commanders, and planners.

\$37.50

ISBN-10 1-9774-1334-X
ISBN-13 978-1-9774-1334-5



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