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Implications of China-Russia Cooperation

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Chapter 3

Growing China-Russia Military Relations: Implications and Opportunities for U.S. Policy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter assesses the main dimensions of the Sino-Russian defense relationship and discusses the outlook for further cooperation on security issues.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Military ties between China and Russia have increased dramatically in recent years and look set to deepen in key dimensions, including regional security cooperation, arms sales, military exercises, and defense dialogues. Sino-Russian security cooperation presents challenges to U.S. interests, including to regional security balances, U.S.-led sanctions, and U.S. military freedom of action and access. These challenges would grow if China and Russia were to form a full-fledged defense alliance. Fortunately, this scenario is unlikely to develop, especially if U.S. policymakers prudently look for opportunities to constrain their defense ties, or at least to avoid strengthening them. Most likely, the future will bring expanded Sino-Russian defense industrial cooperation, joint exercises, and the deepening of regional security collaboration in select areas.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- In the short term, arms control issues give Washington a tool to divide China from Russia, given that U.S. and Russian officials share concerns about China's growing nuclear power and strategic opacity.
- In the long term, the U.S. should apply more resources to evaluating Sino-Russian defense ties and ensure that U.S. defense dialogues with allies and friends comprehensively address this issue. Strengthening U.S. alliances and security partnerships with other countries is imperative since these networks provide the U.S. unique strategic advantages over China and Russia.
- Washington should discourage technology transfers and other exchanges that can enhance Chinese and Russian military cooperation by warning third parties that contributing to either country's military power could decrease their access to U.S. defense technology and subject them to other security-related sanctions.

Growing China-Russia Military Relations: Implications and Opportunities for U.S. Policy

Richard Weitz

Sino-Russian defense and security collaboration has continued to grow in many areas, including arms sales, defense dialogues, joint exercises, and other bilateral and multilateral activities. Since the Cold War, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has acquired more weapons from Russia than from all other countries combined. Beijing and Moscow have signed several confidence-building measures that constrain their military actions regarding the other, including limits on military deployments near their shared borders. More recently, the two countries have expanded their national security dialogues, military exchanges, and strategic consultations, within both bilateral and multilateral frameworks, notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). China's and Russia's shared security objectives encompass averting bilateral conflicts, maintaining border security, promoting arms transfers, and influencing third parties such as the United States.

The leaders of both countries view their defense relationship as a major policy success that they desire to sustain. Most importantly, neither side views the other's military as a near-term threat. One reason that the Russian government has encouraged its defense companies to supply sophisticated maritime and air defense platforms to the People's Liberation Army (PLA), though Russia rarely exports a leading-edge system to any country until its decision-makers are confident that a more advanced system is or will soon enter service with the Russian armed forces, is

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Moscow's confidence that the PLA would employ these systems only against other countries. Another driver of their defense relationship is that Beijing's and Moscow's contentious ties with Western countries leave each as the most crucial security partner of the other. Until recently, Chinese and Russian representatives routinely denied that their cooperation is directed against the United States or any other country. However, at the time of his April 2018 visit to Moscow, China's new defense minister General Wei Fenghe said that his visit, which included a keynote speech at the Moscow Conference on International Security, aimed to signal to Washington and others the growing closeness of Sino-Russian military ties.¹ Furthermore, at the time of the July 2018 NATO summit, Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu stated that "Russia and China are rigorously improving strategic ties to be better prepared for the challenges of today's world, as the U.S. resorts to deception, hybrid wars, and controlled chaos."² Whatever they say, the wide-ranging ties between China and Russia challenge important U.S. national security interests and make both countries more formidable rivals of the United States. For instance, Russian arms deliveries to China have enhanced the anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities that the PLA would employ against the United States and its Asian allies.

Nonetheless, Sino-Russian mutual defense commitments and engagements remain significantly weaker than those between the United States and its principal allies in Asia or Europe. Though military collaboration between Beijing and Moscow is growing broader, along most dimensions it is not deep. In particular, there is little indication that China and Russia will soon build a formal mutual defense alliance.

This chapter first assesses the main dimensions of the Chinese-Russian defense relationship, beginning with regional security cooperation in Central Asia, East Asia, and the Middle East. The next section then analyzes Sino-Russian functional security cooperation, including Russian arms sales to China, military exercises, joint security statements, and political-military tactics. The third section covers possible future scenarios for security cooperation and discusses several possible alternatives that could drive China and Russia closer together or farther apart. The last section assesses policy implications for the United States and offers several recommendations for responding to growing Sino-Russian security ties.

¹ "Chinese Defence Chief Says His Visit to Moscow Is a Signal to the U.S.," *South China Morning Post*, April 4, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2140182/chinas-defence-chief-calls-his-moscow-trip-signal-us>.

² "Uncertainty, Tension in World Affairs Push Moscow & Beijing Together—Russian Defense Minister," RT, July 12, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/432629-russia-china-military-shoigu>.

Regional Security

Central Asia

In Central Asia, Beijing and Moscow share concerns over Islamic extremism, migrating militants, and transnational narcotics trafficking. Their overlapping interests lie in limiting the Western military presence in Eurasia, cultivating regional security structures under their control, and averting wars, forced regime change, and other sources of local instability that would threaten their economic and security priorities. Their cooperation within Central Asia is embodied in the SCO, which now includes India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as full members. Unlike NATO or the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization, however, the SCO has no joint command or standing military structures or functions. Its counterterrorism center focuses on exchanging information about terrorist threats and harmonizing member countries' terrorism-related laws and regulations but lacks an independent operational capacity.

Due to its proximity and protracted instability, Afghanistan has long been a major area of concern for Beijing and Moscow. China and Russia have at times sharply criticized the U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan, especially its inability to suppress narcotics trafficking, and clearly do not want to see a long-term military presence in their backyard. Yet they also worry about a Western military drawdown that could worsen instability in Central Asia and undermine their regional integration projects. Both China's Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union traverse Central Asia. The two countries have expressed alarm at the recent spread of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Eurasia and launched a controversial trilateral peace initiative involving the Afghan Taliban, which now encompasses the Afghan government, India, Iran, and other parties.³

Even so, the future could see a greater rivalry between China and Russia over Central Asia and Afghanistan given the proximity of this region to both countries and potentially competing economic and security interests. Chinese and Russian national companies have already competed for the exploration, development, and transit of energy reserves out of the

³ Cristina Burack, Mikhail Bushuev, and Masood Saifullah, "U.S. Skips Out on Afghanistan-Taliban Conference in Moscow," *Deutsche Welle*, April 14, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/us-skips-out-on-afghanistan-taliban-conference-in-moscow/a-38426486>.

region and into the global economy.⁴ As a long-time guarantor of security and economic linkage in the region, Russia has retained sizeable influence throughout these post-Soviet republics. One of its principal goals since has been to preserve its preeminent position as a major oil and gas supplier and transit route, specifically to Europe but increasingly to China and the rapidly developing nations in Asia as well. For instance, this consideration has encouraged Moscow to pursue the recently announced Caspian Sea agreement. Meanwhile, China, under its Belt and Road Initiative, values Central Asia for transit, moving not only energy but also other goods from western Chinese provinces through Central Asia and into Europe. Though Russia would prefer that Central Asia remain within its sphere of influence, it has tolerated the rise of Chinese influence as preferable to Western influence, given how the relationships between Russia and Western countries are at their lowest point since the Cold War. However, Russian leaders may come to regret this accommodation because China's presence is likely to become more pervasive and powerful than any plausible Western role. At some point, China might exploit its superior economic position in Central Asia to secure a military presence in a region hitherto dominated by the Russian armed forces.

East Asia

Another important region of Sino-Russian security interaction is East Asia. Unlike in Central Asia, where Russia retains major economic interests and assets, in East Asia China's economic primacy is nearly absolute. Russia's military presence in the Russian Far East is limited largely to fortifying some of the islands that it disputes with Japan and providing its strategic submarines a bastion against U.S. antisubmarine warfare capabilities. Meanwhile, Chinese military capabilities and ambitions have been growing to the point where the PLA can largely ignore Russian military activities in the region. Yet, due to historical divergences as well as neither side making the issue a priority, Russia has not fully endorsed China's territorial claims in the South or East China Seas, while China has not unreservedly backed Russia's occupation of the Southern Kuril Islands (known as the Northern Territories in Japan). Russia also sells substantial quantities of arms to Vietnam. Beijing's self-confidence could continue to expand to the point where Chinese leaders feel more (or even overly) confident about pressing

⁴ Hu Bin, "Oil and Gas Cooperation between China and Central Asia in an Environment of Political and Resource Competition," *Petroleum Science* 11, no. 4 (2014): 596–605, <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2Fs12182-014-0377-7.pdf>.

Russia to curtail its defense cooperation with Vietnam and remove other impediments to China's regional security hegemony.

Regarding the Korean Peninsula, Beijing and Moscow perceive benefits from recent developments at the expense of the United States. Chinese and Russian analysts do not think that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) would deliberately attack either of their countries, or even the United States or its allies. Both Beijing and Moscow view Pyongyang's pursuit of nuclear weapons as partly justified as a quest for a robust deterrent and defensive instrument against the Pentagon. For example, they find it hard to imagine North Korea giving up its nuclear option without the United States and other countries' guaranteeing protection of the regime.⁵ Instead, they want South Korea to be included in any nuclear-weapons-free zone.⁶ Russian scholars also doubt the current North Korean government would ever surrender its nuclear arsenal given concerns about U.S. threats.⁷ Furthermore, they continue to be more concerned about the regional chaos that would result from the DPRK's abrupt collapse, as well as the U.S. military presence on the Korean Peninsula, than about the adverse impact of Pyongyang's nuclear and missile development programs. This leads them to challenge U.S.-proposed coercive measures against Pyongyang.

In the past, China and Russia have joined forces in the UN Security Council to block severe sanctions on North Korea and criticize U.S. missile defenses in the Asia-Pacific. On the Korean Peninsula, as elsewhere, China and Russia profess to perceive U.S. missile defenses as threatening their missile forces. Their military representatives have been making joint presentations at various regional security conferences. Their objections have encompassed U.S. missile defense collaboration with close allies like South Korea, Japan, and NATO countries as well as the national missile defenses in North America. Although China and Russia acknowledge the currently limited capabilities of U.S. missile defenses, they argue that the United States is positioning itself to establish an interlinked global defensive network that would invariably degrade the effectiveness of their strategic missiles. In a joint statement issued on June 8, 2018, Beijing and

⁵ *Hankyoreh*, March 8, 2018, <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/international/china/835218.html>.

⁶ *Segye Daily*, August 16, 2018, <http://www.sedaily.com/NewsView/1S3DUHM176>; and "U.S., North Korea May Return to Confrontation before Year-End—Russian Expert," TASS, August 6, 2018, <http://tass.com/politics/1016207>.

⁷ "U.S., North Korea May Return to Confrontation before Year-End."

Moscow described U.S. missile defenses as disrupting regional strategic balances and global stability.⁸

In the future, China and Russia will likely strive to expand the current détente between Pyongyang and Washington to encourage the removal of all sanctions on North Korea and the withdrawal of all U.S. military forces, including missile defenses, from South Korea. Still, even here it is not impossible to envisage major Sino-Russian competition for influence in a future, more valuable North Korea (one retaining nuclear weapons and largely freed from most sanctions, exporting strategic minerals, and providing Russia with opportunities to reach Chinese economic competitors through new trans-Korean rail lines, pipelines, and other conduits). South as well as North Koreans want to reduce their economic dependence on China and are therefore aiming to build pipelines, railways, and other infrastructure developmental projects to deepen their Russian ties. The two Koreas and Russia have tried to develop trilateral commercial cooperation as well.⁹ Russia also wants to reduce its economic dependence on China and sees the Korean Peninsula as a bridge to deeper East Asian ties.¹⁰ However, bilateral and trilateral cooperation between the Koreas and Russia could arouse Chinese concern since many Chinese believe they warrant security primacy over the Korean Peninsula.¹¹

The Middle East

Although China and Russia are both heavily involved in the Middle East, China has focused mostly on economic and energy issues, though it sometimes sells weapons to Middle Eastern countries, such as Syria and Iran.¹² In May 2018, the Chinese special envoy for Syria, Xie Xiaoyan, stated that Moscow and Beijing are cooperating efficiently on the Syrian issue, adding that there remains a “huge space” for expanding their collaboration.¹³

⁸ “Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo he Eluosi Lianbang lianheshengming (quan wen)” [Joint Statement of the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation (Full Text)], June 8, 2018, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/t1567243.shtml>.

⁹ The trade volume of North Korea with China was approximately \$5,300 million, or 94.8% of North Korea’s national foreign trade. See Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA), *2017 North Korea Foreign Trade Trends* (Seoul: KOTRA, 2018).

¹⁰ Heung-ho Moon, “The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership and a Peace Regime on the Korean Peninsula,” *Sino-Soviet Affairs* 41, no. 4 (2018): 69–97, http://www.riss.kr/search/detail/DetailView.do?p_mat_type=1a0202e37d52c72d&control_no=645b52eef2fe59614884a65323211ff0.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹² Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, August 1, 2018, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

¹³ “China, Russia Have Potential to Expand Cooperation Regarding Syrian Crisis—Envoy,” TASS, May 13, 2018, <http://tass.com/world/1004011>.

Thus far, the Chinese and Russian governments have consulted mostly to promote a political solution in Syria. Beijing has echoed Moscow's call for the international community to respect Syria's territorial integrity.¹⁴ In addition, they have jointly cast a string of vetoes in the UN Security Council to block U.S.-backed measures against the Assad government. In particular, they have shielded the regime from Western accusations that it has employed chemical weapons, instead blaming the insurgents for the alleged attacks. In April 2018, Shoigu praised Beijing for joining with Moscow against "the irresponsible behavior of some Western countries that, under a false pretext, attacked a sovereign state."¹⁵ China has offered to assist in Syria's postwar reconstruction, without demanding the same kinds of prior political reforms as Western countries.

In addition to objecting to U.S. military strikes and U.S.-backed regime change in general, another motivating factor for Sino-Russian cooperation has been their joint concern about the thousands of Chinese and Russian citizens who have traveled to Syria to fight with various terrorist organizations.¹⁶ Beijing sent military advisers to Syria in 2017 to help train the government forces to use their Chinese-purchased weapons and possibly to study the war, but it has not been very active in the Russian-led military campaign. Still, China "supports Russia's intervention in Syria but does not consider Syria a strategic priority."¹⁷ Russia has been much more active in the Middle Eastern security domain. Not only has the Russian military made a decisive contribution to reversing the course of the Syrian civil war and keeping Bashar al-Assad in power, but Moscow has offered major arms packages to Egypt, Iraq, and other countries. One of the interesting features of Russia's intervention in Syria is how its military has partnered with Iran. Not only have Russian pilots provided air support for the Iranian and pro-Iran Lebanese Hezbollah forces in the region, but Iran has allowed Russian planes to use its airfields on some Syrian-bound missions.

Thus far, Chinese and Russian regional security policies in the Middle East, though generally compatible, have not been that closely linked. However, the U.S. decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear

¹⁴ "Special Envoy of the Chinese Government on the Syrian Issue Xie Xiaoyan Attends International Symposium on the Syrian Issue," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), May 14, 2018, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1559820.shtml.

¹⁵ Tom O'Connor, "Russia and China Militaries Reach 'New Heights' Together, Agree to Challenge U.S. in Middle East," *Newsweek*, April 24, 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/china-russia-military-reach-new-heights-together-agree-challenge-us-middle-899689>.

¹⁶ Yixiang Xu, "Evolving Sino-Russian Cooperation in Syria," U.S. Institute of Peace, October 3, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/10/evolving-sino-russian-cooperation-syria>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

deal may change this dynamic. Chinese and Russian officials have jointly criticized the U.S. decision and affirmed their intent to work with Iran to sustain the deal. They might pursue joint measures to circumvent U.S. extraterritorial sanctions designed to limit their commercial dealings with Iran, such as designing mechanisms to allow Chinese and Russian firms to circumvent the U.S.-controlled or -influenced financial system when conducting business with Iran. The SCO might also expand to include Iran now that India and Pakistan have become its first new members since the organization's formation in 2001. Turkey is already a dialogue partner, and given its importance in the Belt and Road Initiative, it could eventually consider membership as well. Such moves could spark interest among Arab states to apply to the SCO, especially if they perceive that the United States is disengaging from regional leadership and decide to pursue China and Russia as potential security partners.¹⁸

The distance of the Middle East from China and the asymmetry of interests, given Beijing's economic orientation toward the region, means that the Middle East is unlikely to generate major Sino-Russian competition in the near term. However, Chinese interest in securing better control over the main source of its imported oil, which comes primarily from Sunni regimes alienated from Russia, and China's growing economy each may stimulate longer-term divergences. China has been far more successful than Russia (or the United States) in maintaining good ties with regional rivals, including Iran and its allies as well as the anti-Iranian Sunni powers. If the Russian-U.S. military competition in the Middle East escalates, Chinese policymakers may seek to distance themselves more from Russian policies in the region.

Functional Security Cooperation

Cooperation between China and Russia is growing in many areas. The two countries have signed several arms control and confidence-building measures, expanded contacts between their national security establishments, and institutionalized their defense and regional security dialogues, military exchanges, and strategic consultations, within both bilateral and multilateral frameworks. China and Russia's extensive security ties

¹⁸ Jonathan Fulton, "Could the SCO Expand into the Middle East?" *Diplomat*, February 24, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/could-the-sco-expand-into-the-middle-east/>; and Jonathan Fulton, "China Is Trying to Pull Middle East Countries into Its Version of NATO," *Washington Post*, June 21, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/21/how-china-is-shifting-toward-the-middle-east/>.

encompass bilateral and multilateral agreements; formal and informal mutual consultations; pledges of cooperation against separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism; and public declarations of mutual nonaggression, noninterference, peaceful coexistence, antiterrorism, international law, and respect for national sovereignty, equal security, and territorial integrity.

Arms Sales

Russia's voluminous arms sales to China have enhanced the PLA's effectiveness in several areas, especially in terms of air defense and maritime aviation. In recent years, China has resumed purchasing complete Russian weapons systems rather than, as before 2014, just specific subsystems, components, licensed production, or spare parts. Indeed, Moscow has offered the PLA some of its most sophisticated weapons—the Su-35S Flanker-E high-performance fighter jet and the S-400 Triumf (NATO designation: SA-21 Growler) air defense system are two prominent examples. The Su-35S will provide Chinese engineers with the ability to learn more about the jet's AL-41F1S engine, Irbis-E radar, and electronic warfare suite. China became the first foreign country to buy the Su-400 in late 2014, even before India, which until recently was Moscow's most privileged buyer. India typically was the first foreign country to buy Russia's most advanced weapons, occasionally even being allowed to purchase systems that Moscow refused to offer the PRC. China received delivery of the air defense system, which can target aircraft and short-range ballistic missiles, in April 2018. Compared with the S-300 that China bought from Russia earlier, the new S-400 has better sensors, software, and missiles.¹⁹ The two countries have also agreed to coproduce new weapons systems, including reconnaissance drones and dual-use systems with military as well as civilian applications, such as helicopters.²⁰ Progress, however, has been modest.

As noted earlier, Russian decision-makers prudently avoid selling China their most advanced weapons until an even more advanced system has entered, or is about to enter, service with the Russian armed forces. For example, Russia is acquiring the more advanced S-500 to replace the Su-400, and the Russian air force has an even more advanced version of

¹⁹ Franz-Stefan Gady, "Russia Delivers 1st S-400 Missile Defense Regiment to China," *Diplomat*, April 3, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/russia-delivers-1st-s-400-missile-defense-regiment-to-china>; and Christopher Woody, "China Now Reportedly Has a Full Set of Russia's Advanced S-400 Air-Defense Missile System," *Business Insider*, May 11, 2018, <http://www.businessinsider.com/china-has-russian-s-400-air-defense-system-2018-5>.

²⁰ "Rostec and China to Sign Contract for Heavy Helicopter Production at the End of 2016," Rostec, July 11, 2016, <http://rostec.ru/en/news/4518543>; and "China Teams Up with Russia to Develop Rocket-Launched Reconnaissance Drone," TASS, March 30, 2018, <http://tass.com/defense/996974>.

the Su-35 and is beginning to acquire fifth-generation planes. However, blatant cases of Chinese reverse engineering continue, even following the recently adopted rigorous intellectual property agreements between the two countries. This could lead Moscow to renew export curbs on protected Russian-supplied defense technology to counter knockoff production.

Despite Russian concerns over reverse engineering and the improving capacity of China's own military-industrial complex, this partnership will likely continue because the PLA cannot acquire most weapons from Western countries due to sanctions and export controls. Meanwhile, Russia seeks arms sales to support its military modernization program through export revenue and larger production runs. They also provide an opportunity for Moscow to gain a deeper understanding of, and ideally influence over, future Chinese defense activities. In addition, high-tech arms sales help dilute the perception, which neither partner wants to further, that Russia is becoming a raw materials appendage to China. The PRC has limited arms sales to Russian allies in Central Asia out of deference to Russia's preeminent defense position in the region. Beijing has also disclaimed any intention of pursuing military alliances or bases in Central Asia. Furthermore, Russian strategists perceive the PLA's growing capabilities as distracting Pentagon planners from concentrating on Russia. Arms sales also enhance Moscow's influence with other potential Chinese adversaries such as Japan. Japanese leaders want to limit Sino-Russian defense cooperation while reducing security tensions with Moscow to gain leverage over Beijing.

Military Exercises

Regular military exercises have also become a well-established feature of the Sino-Russian defense relationship. Chinese and Russian multilateral and bilateral war games have increasingly varied in size, format, and location. In September 2016, the two countries held naval drills in the South China Sea for the first time. In June 2017, the Russian and Chinese navies participated in the first stage of the Joint Sea 2017 naval exercises in St. Petersburg and Kaliningrad. Chinese state media claimed that the objective of the drills was to ensure coordination in maritime joint rescue missions and economic activities.²¹ The naval drills took place in novel locations. In July of that year, maneuvers occurred in the Baltic Sea, whereas the second phase in September took place in the Sea of Japan and, for the

²¹ Prashanth Parameswaran, "Military Drills Put Russia-China Ties in the Spotlight," *Diplomat*, June 20, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/military-drills-put-russia-china-ties-in-the-spotlight>.

first time, in the Okhotsk Sea.²² In the Baltic, the Russian fleet consisted of “one frigate, fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, and marines”; the Chinese deployed “one destroyer, one frigate, one supply ship, ship-borne helicopters, and marines.” The joint drills simulated the following on a map: “ship-to-sea firing by secondary cannons, air defense, joint landing and inspection, maritime search and rescue, and underway replenishment.”²³ In the second stage of Joint Sea 2017, the drills focused on joint submarine rescue and antisubmarine warfare techniques.²⁴

In April 2018, Chinese and Russian officials announced that the 2018 Joint Sea exercises would take place in the fall in the Yellow Sea, off the eastern coastal city of Qingdao—near the security-sensitive Korean Peninsula. In August, moreover, the SCO states conducted the Peace Mission 2018 counterterrorism drills in the Ural Mountains, with a combined force of some three thousand troops as well as five hundred weapons systems. These ground exercises have been held every one or two years since 2005. The 2018 drills were the most inclusive drills in the organization’s history, including China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan, as well as, for the first time, India and Pakistan. The SCO aspires to reduce tensions between these South Asian rivals, which impede Chinese and Russian regional security and economic ambitions. The PLA also regularly joins Russian-led multinational showcase events, such as the International Army Games (which include an Aviadarts military aviation contest and other elements that sometimes occur on Chinese territory) and tank biathlons.²⁵ The May 2016 aerospace security drill in Moscow represented the first joint command air-and-missile defense exercise between the two countries. In December 2017, Russia and China held the joint Aerospace Security 2017 exercises in Beijing. According to the Russian state media, the six days of drills prepared their militaries for “combat operations when organizing air missile defenses, operation and mutual fire support, as well as responding to sporadic and incendiary ballistic and cruise missile strikes.”²⁶

²² Ankit Panda, “Chinese, Russian Navies Hold Exercises in Sea of Japan, Okhotsk Sea,” *Diplomat*, September 21, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/09/chinese-russian-navies-hold-exercises-in-sea-of-japan-okhotsk-sea>.

²³ “China, Russia Conduct Simulation Exercise for Joint Naval Drills,” Xinhua, July 24, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/24/c_136466432.htm; and Prashanth Parameswaran, “China, Russia Launch First Military Drills in Baltic Sea,” *Diplomat*, July 26, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/07/china-russia-launch-first-military-drills-in-baltic-sea>.

²⁴ Panda, “Chinese, Russian Navies Hold Exercises.”

²⁵ “First Stage of Aviadarts—2018 Military Aviation Contest Kicks Off in Russia,” TASS, March 2, 2018, <http://tass.com/defense/992456>.

²⁶ “Russian-Chinese Joint Air Defense Drills Kick Off in Beijing,” TASS, December 11, 2017, <http://tass.com/defense/980318>.

In their ground exercises, China and Russia rehearse skills such as fighting insurgent movements, interdicting guerrillas, liberating hostages, providing close air support, and preparing for airborne and other special forces assaults. They also have conducted naval exercises that cover maritime search and rescue, antisubmarine warfare, combined air defense, freeing of seized ships, escorting of civilian vessels, and amphibious assaults on Pacific islands. These bilateral drills serve several purposes, including enhancing interoperability between the two armed forces through the development of joint tactics, techniques, and procedures. They also encourage arms sales and other defense industrial collaboration and send signals to third parties—reassuring partners while deterring adversaries. Finally, the joint drills enable China and Russia to stay informed on each other’s military capabilities as a means of mutual confidence building.

Defense Dialogues and Meetings

Chinese and Russian leaders have described the two countries’ military ties as a critical dimension of their broader strategic partnership. Over the course of the 1990s, both sides established confidence- and security-building measures, developed processes to avoid future incidents, placed constraints on conventional military activities within one hundred kilometers of their border, constructed rapid communication networks, and arranged regular consultations between their general staffs and defense ministries. Chinese and Russian leaders frequently meet bilaterally and at gatherings of major regional security institutions. For example, at the Russian-Chinese Intergovernmental Commission on Military-Technical Cooperation, the deputy chiefs of staff and other national security officials have met regularly.²⁷ From 2013 to 2018, Lieutenant General Xu Qiliang, the vice chairman of the Chinese Central Military Commission, and Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu co-chaired its sessions. In April 2018, Xu told Shoigu that “every one of our sessions is a great success. We have achieved a uniform understanding on aspects of military-technical cooperation.”²⁸ General Zhang Youxia, the other vice chairman of the Chinese Central Military Commission, recently replaced Xu as the Chinese co-chair at these intergovernmental commission sessions. Moscow has also arranged for instructors from the International

²⁷ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on September 13, 2016,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1397276.shtml.

²⁸ “Russian-Chinese Military-Technical Cooperation Has Never Been Better—Chinese Central Military Commission Vice Chairman (Part 2),” Interfax, April 24, 2018, <http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?pg=3&id=828002>.

Special Forces Training Center in Chechnya to provide antiterrorism training for Chinese special police forces in Xinjiang, which borders Central Asia.²⁹ On June 29, 2017, China and Russia signed a roadmap on military cooperation for 2017–20 that focuses on top-level planning for military cooperation through the end of the decade. The agenda includes paying more attention to cooperation between Chinese and Russian border regions.³⁰

The last year has seen a number of important Sino-Russian meetings. In December 2017, Shoigu met with the vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, Zhang Youxia, in Moscow and affirmed that comprehensive cooperation is a priority of Russian defense policy.³¹ In April 2018, Chinese defense minister Wei Fenghe met with Shoigu in Moscow while attending the seventh Moscow Conference on International Security. During the meeting, Wei stressed China's desire to demonstrate solidarity with Russia against the United States, advocated stronger bilateral security relations, and spoke of both countries forming a "united position" on the international stage. Wei maintained that "the two countries' comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination is 'as stable as Mount Tai,' adding that strengthened cooperation between Chinese and Russian militaries has contributed to regional and global peace and stability."³² On May 31, 2018, Major General Shao Yuanming, deputy chief of the Joint Staff Department of China's Central Military Commission, and Colonel General Sergei Rudskoy, chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, co-hosted the twentieth round of bilateral strategic consultations.³³ The two countries reached broad consensus on important international and regional issues and agreed to further deepen bilateral military cooperation and strategic coordination. Much of their discussion was bolstered by shared concern about the United States, with both sides criticizing the new U.S. sanctions against Russian

²⁹ Yixiang Xu, "Evolving Sino-Russian Cooperation in Syria," U.S. Institute of Peace, Brief, October 3, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/10/evolving-sino-russian-cooperation-syria>.

³⁰ D.D. Wu, "China and Russia Sign Military Cooperation Roadmap," *Diplomat*, June 30, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/china-and-russia-sign-military-cooperation-roadmap>.

³¹ "Russia, China to Boost Defense Cooperation," TASS, December 8, 2017, <http://www.tass.com/defense/979852>.

³² "Chinese Defense Minister Comments on Moscow International Security Conference," TASS, April 3, 2018, <http://www.tass.com/world/997455>; Alice Scarsi, "China Sent Delegation to Russia to Show 'Russo-Chinese Unity' against the U.S.," *Express*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/940792/china-news-russia-alliance-military-ties-usa-trade-war-salisbury-attack>; and Hong Yu, "China Ready to Strengthen International Defense Cooperation: Defense Minister," *Xinhua*, April 5, 2018, available at <http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0405/c90000-9445912.html>.

³³ "China, Russia Hold 20th Round of Strategic Consultations in Beijing," China Military Online, May 30, 2018, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-05/30/content_8045918.htm.

and Chinese defense industries.³⁴ Later in July, Chinese defense minister Wei Fenghe and Russian ground forces commander-in-chief General Oleg Salyukov met in Beijing. They emphasized expanding and deepening cooperation in all military areas and pushed for greater development of China-Russia relations.³⁵

Joint Statements

In joint defense and security statements, Chinese and Russian representatives advocate nonaggression, antiterrorism, noninterference in internal affairs, adherence to international law, and respect for national sovereignty, equal security, and territorial integrity. Representatives from both sides deny that they view one another as military threats. Previous evidence of the contrary, such as statements by prominent Russians expressing alarm about China's long-run ambitions to recover lost Chinese territory in Siberia, is no longer being updated. Each government prudently avoids publicly expressing concern about the other's military activities, while jointly (if typically indirectly and implicitly) criticizing the United States and its allies. For example, in a joint statement on strategic stability issued during President Vladimir Putin's visit to Beijing in June 2016, the Chinese and Russian leaders warned against the threat to international stability from "some countries and military-political alliances" that "seek decisive advantage in military and relevant technology." They also expressed concern about the adverse strategic impact of "long distance [conventional] precision attack weapons" as well as "the unilateral deployment of anti-missile systems all over the world," which their statement claimed "has negatively affected global and regional strategic balance, stability, and security." In their joint declaration, China and Russia called for "fair and balanced disarmament and arms control," new measures to keep terrorists from using biological and chemical weapons, respect for the UN Security Council and international law, noninterference in countries' internal affairs, refraining from enlarging military alliances, and a wider conception of the concept of "strategic stability." The two governments also released other declarations during

³⁴ Tom O'Connor, "Russia and China Declare Closer Military Ties in 'New Stage' as They Resist U.S.," *Newsweek*, May 30, 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/russia-china-declare-closer-military-ties-new-stage-they-resist-us-949847>; and "China, Russia Hold 20th Round of Strategic Consultations in Beijing."

³⁵ Tom O'Connor, "China Military Tells Russia They Will 'Jointly Deal with Threats and Challenges' as Tensions with U.S. Rise," *Newsweek*, July 3, 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/china-military-tells-russia-they-will-jointly-deal-threats-challenges-us-1007451>.

Putin's visit supporting their views on international law and cybersecurity.³⁶ In their most recent joint statement, issued in June 2018, Chinese and Russian leaders declared their intention to “enhance existing mechanisms of military cooperation, broaden practical military and military-technical collaboration, and jointly counter regional and global security challenges.”³⁷

Under President Xi Jinping, the PRC's policies and rhetoric on nuclear issues have moved much closer to Russia's. For example, both Chinese and Russian official discourse present a similar anti-American narrative regarding many security issues. In the Sino-Russian narrative, Washington compelled Moscow and Beijing into accepting security agreements and practices that codified initial but fleeting U.S. advantages, pursued “absolute” rather than “equal” security that disregards Russian-Chinese interests, applied sanctions selectively to promote U.S. commercial rather than security interests, and encouraged “terrorists” that are seeking to subvert anti-American regimes aligned with Beijing and Moscow. Previous differences between Russian and Chinese approaches to arms control with the United States and its allies are narrowing. In particular, Chinese defense officials now express much more concern about U.S. missile defense, echoing Russian concerns about these systems. Meanwhile, the previous comprehensive network of Russian-U.S. arms control has collapsed under the weight of bilateral tensions. The only difference in the Russian and Chinese perspectives, which may become more important, is that Moscow wants Beijing to participate in the next round of strategic arms control talks, which Chinese officials show no enthusiasm for doing.

Other Activities

Since the PLA has not fought a major conflict in decades, the Chinese defense community studies foreign militaries and their operations closely. Such learning is one reason for the PLA's enthusiasm about participating in joint exercises with the advanced military of Russia. Chinese national security decision-makers are likely studying Russian tactics in Ukraine and Syria for lessons on how Russia has been making major territorial gains with limited expenditure of conventional military power. Russia's annexation of Crimea and military consolidation in the area are considered the precedent of the current embrace of hybrid tactics, with the invasion of Georgia in

³⁶ “China, Russia Sign Joint Statement on Strengthening Global Strategic Stability,” China.org.cn, June 27, 2016, http://www.china.org.cn/world/2016-06/27/content_38751766.htm.

³⁷ “Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo he Eluosi Lianbang lianheshengming (quan wen)”

2008 being the precursor of this current adoption of hybrid warfare.³⁸ China meanwhile has been utilizing hybrid tactics in its pacification policies in Xinjiang, Taiwan, and Tibet, as well as in its behavior in the East and South China Seas—for example, the installation of artificial islands and air-denial systems.³⁹ It is possible that Chinese perceptions of Russian techniques have contributed to China's changing tactics regarding the East and South China Sea disputes. For example, like Russia in Crimea, China has presented the world with a *fait accompli* by declaring an air defense identification zone and more recently constructing artificial islands around these territories. Like Russia in Ukraine, China has consolidated its recent gains by reinforcing its military potential in the area. Their mutual learning has manifested not only in the like-for-like application of the same tactical actions but in the construction of an underlying narrative for these actions and the adaptation of such tactics in different circumstances. Russia's actions established a narrative that has demonstrably been co-opted by China.⁴⁰ The notion of the “dark hand” of Washington, one that among its other actions manipulates dangerous “extreme nationalism” with hybrid tactics, was applied in the case of Crimea and Ukraine and has been readily adopted by China.⁴¹ The presence of the “little green men,” the irregular forces involved in the annexation of Crimea, equally has been used and adapted for Chinese purposes. A former admiral in the U.S. Navy, James Stavridis, claimed in December 2016 that China had established its own “little blue sailors,” the “maritime militia.”⁴² The maritime militia “is a civilian force posing as fishing boats and other noncombatants, but is clearly under the operational control of the government.”⁴³ This itself created a discernable precedent for maritime hybrid warfare, which some claim has in turn been co-opted by Russia in the Arctic.⁴⁴

³⁸ Richard Weitz, “China, Russia, and the Challenge to the Global Commons,” *Pacific Focus* 24, no. 3 (2009): 271–97, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1976-5118.2009.01026.x>.

³⁹ Lora Saalman, “Little Grey Men: China and the Ukraine Crisis,” *Survival* 58, no. 6 (2016): 135–56, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396338.2016.1257201>.

⁴⁰ Lino Miani, “Beyond Crimea: Hybrid War in Asia?” Affiliate Network, May 2, 2016, <http://affiliatenetwork.navisioiglobal.com/2016/05/beyond-crimea>.

⁴¹ Saalman, “Little Grey Men.”

⁴² James Stavridis, “Maritime Hybrid Warfare Is Coming,” *Proceedings Magazine*, December 2016, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2016-12-0/maritime-hybrid-warfare-coming>.

⁴³ Daniel L. Kuester, “Naval War College Professors Testify on State of South China Sea,” Navy News Service, September 30, 2016, https://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=96943.

⁴⁴ Paul A. Goble, “Moscow Acting in the Arctic the Way Beijing Is in the South China Sea, French Analyst Says,” *Euromaidan Press*, February 16, 2017, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/02/16/moscow-acting-in-the-arctic-the-way-beijing-is-in-the-south-china-sea-french-analyst-says-euromaidan-press>.

Scenarios

Sino-Russian Alliance

The next few years will likely see a deepening of the comprehensive Sino-Russian defense and security partnership. The Chinese and Russian national security communities share common objectives that can be promoted through further cooperation, such as border security, military technology development, and counterterrorism. They also perceive threats from U.S. and allied positions and policies that they can cooperate to thwart, such as U.S. missile defense and Western military intervention in regional hotspots. They conversely see opportunities to expand their influence at the expense of the United States, including by undermining U.S. bilateral and multilateral alliances.

In theory, China and Russia could sign a more comprehensive mutual defense treaty, under which each country would render military aid to the other in cases of armed aggression against one partner by a third party. The Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, signed in 2001, promotes security ties but lacks a mutual defense clause such as that found in the mutual defense treaty that the PRC and Soviet Union signed in 1950. The 2001 treaty stresses mutual nonaggression, noninterference, peaceful coexistence, antiterrorism, international law, and respect for national sovereignty, equal security, and territorial integrity.⁴⁵ Although China has consistently denied any intent to seek foreign military alliances and bases, it has made major changes to its foreign security policies in recent years. In the South China Sea, Beijing has adopted a more assertive stance, pursuing massive construction projects and the militarization of artificial islands in disputed territories. China could likewise decide to revise its no-alliance policy, though this would be a major departure from recent policies. Perhaps the only factor that might force Beijing and Moscow to take such an overtly anti-American step would be if they both came to simultaneously fear a near-term U.S. military threat. Even U.S. military action against Iran or North Korea might not drive them to follow that course if, as with the use of U.S. military power in Syria, the limited scope of the action was clear.

More plausibly, China and Russia could deepen their defense collaboration by increasing the frequency, size, and ambitions of their military exercises and other engagements. In particular, they could prepare

⁴⁵ “Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation,” July 24, 2001, available at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t15771.shtml.

to conduct more extensive joint military campaigns, such as in Central or East Asia. Both countries seek capabilities meant to negate the United States' technological strengths and exploit asymmetrical weaknesses in U.S. defenses. For example, Chinese and Russian security experts have discussed ways to cooperate against U.S. missile defense systems, especially those in Northeast Asia, beyond their joint command post exercises.⁴⁶ More extensive Sino-Russian collaboration on ballistic missile defense (BMD) could range from simply exchanging more intelligence assessments to coordinating pressure against other countries in Europe or Asia to abstain from deploying U.S. BMD assets, selling each other BMD-penetrating weapons, and undertaking joint R&D programs for common anti-BMD technologies. Through the latter approach, China and Russia could pool their resources or expertise to overcome U.S. BMD systems stationed on their peripheries.⁴⁷ Yet despite closer security ties, envisioning a scenario where a combined Sino-Russian force engages in joint military action is difficult. Even in Central Asia, the SCO lacks standing military structures or traditional defense functions. As a result, Beijing and Moscow would have to cobble together a joint force in the midst of a crisis, such as if one of the governments were to come under threat from Islamist or pro-Western groups. There is also no evidence that China and Russia have been coordinating their political-military pressure against third parties like Japan on a regular basis.

Renewed Rivalry

The shadow of past conflict and future competition hangs over a potential Sino-Russian military alliance. Despite being formal military allies at one time, China and Russia have a history of conflict, including a vicious border fight in 1969. Since then, Russian representatives have viewed the PRC's rapidly advancing military capabilities with some apprehension. Still, they mostly accept this trend as a preferable alternative to Western military power in Russia's neighborhood. They also tend to downplay, and possibly underestimate, China's growing military capabilities. Looking ahead, Russian leaders may increasingly fear a rising, aggressive China in their own backyard, especially if they see a declining West in the future. The over 2,600 mile border shared by China and Russia may also become

⁴⁶ "Russia, China to Hold Second Missile Defense Drill in 2017," Sputnik, October 11, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201610111046212661-russia-china-missile-defense>.

⁴⁷ For further discussion of Sino-Russian cooperation on BMD, see Richard Weitz, "A Way Forward on Ballistic Missile Defenses," China-US Focus, September 5, 2012, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/a-way-forward-on-ballistic-missile-defenses>.

a renewed source of tension if Beijing revives its territorial claims. Yet it would probably take a direct, major, and simultaneous U.S. threat to both countries to drive them into another formal military alliance, given these obstacles and their general satisfaction with their currently strong but flexible alignment of limited liability.

Future trends may weaken the Sino-Russian security partnership even without overt U.S. countermeasures. Beijing's doubts about Moscow were earlier evident in Chinese concerns about Russia's capacity to ensure the security of Central Asia. This region has thus far not seen much overt rivalry between the two sides due to their harmonious near-term interests, but Central Asia's stability is becoming more crucial for the PRC's plans both for east-west integration and for securing its western borders against sub-state terrorist threats. Chinese anxiety about Russia's will and capacity to maintain Eurasian stability has been less evident following Russian military successes in Ukraine and Syria but could worsen again should Moscow show weakness in the face of mutual threats to Sino-Russian regional interests. If Chinese leaders believe it necessary to intervene militarily in Central Asia, Moscow could grow uneasy about the implications of China's rising power for Russian influence in Eurasia.⁴⁸

Nonetheless, developments that could drive the two apart will likely have a limited impact, focused on a geographic region or functional area rather than comprehensively breaking up the Sino-Russian security alignment on a global scale. For example, should one of the Sino-Russian regional divergence scenarios discussed earlier come to pass, such as one pertaining to Central Asia and the Middle East, it would not necessarily follow that these differences would spill over into one area, let alone all others, where the two countries interact. They could probably contain the dispute in one sphere to prevent it from contaminating others.

Tightening Ties

The favorable drivers of Sino-Russian defense cooperation will most likely deepen. Russia may sell China more advanced air, sea, and ground platforms. It may also begin buying military technologies from Chinese manufacturers, including major weapons systems like the Type 054A frigate, which joined the 2015 joint naval exercise with the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean Sea. As discussed earlier, China and Russia have

⁴⁸ U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations* (Washington, D.C., 2017), 16, <http://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Russia%20Military%20Power%20Report%202017.pdf>.

already agreed to co-develop new major weapons systems and sell them to third parties, which might include states hostile to U.S. interests. They could also plausibly deepen their defense collaboration by increasing the frequency, size, and ambitions of their military exercises and other bilateral engagements. In particular, they could prepare to conduct more extensive joint military campaigns in places like Central or East Asia.

Yet the obstacles to more substantial Russian arms sales to China are considerable. Russian weapons exporters seek to balance sales to China with new deals with other buyers. Some of these buyers, such as India and Vietnam, are potential Chinese military adversaries. China's need for Russian military imports is declining due to the improving capacity of the Chinese military-industrial complex, though the need persists in some niche areas such as high-performance engines. Russian arms dealers worry about having to compete with increasingly formidable Chinese weapons manufacturers, with PRC arms exports emerging as more serious competition to Russian weapons exporters in third markets. Thus far, Chinese defense exports have contested Russian military sales in only a few low-value markets. Yet Russian policymakers understand that Chinese technological prowess could allow the PRC to find a niche for its defense exports by selling lower-priced weapons that are only slightly less capable than their Russian equivalents. For instance, in 2016, Moscow expected the Royal Thai Army to order Russian T-90MS main battle tanks. Instead, Thailand negotiated to buy China's less expensive MBT-3000 tanks.

The traditional abandonment-entrapment dilemma further restrains collaboration; Russian and Chinese policymakers fear being dragged into a conflict by the other. For this reason, Beijing has distanced itself from Russian military activities in Ukraine, while Moscow has refrained from fully backing Chinese territorial claims in the East and South China Seas. While China has not joined Western states in condemning Russian actions in Georgia and Ukraine, it has not fully endorsed them either due to Chinese economic interests in both countries, a desire to shield itself from Russia's unpopularity in the West, and strong concerns about separatist movements. Russian policymakers, meanwhile, have strived not to antagonize traditional allies like India and Vietnam even as Russia builds ties with China. Even if they refuse to acknowledge such a position in public, some Russian policymakers may also see other Asian countries as potential balancers of a China whose military and other power has been rising rapidly relative to Russia.

A final consideration is that Chinese and Russian security concerns predominately focus on different geographic areas and functional issues.

This situation promotes but also constrains their defense relationship. Though both sides worry about Eurasian terrorism and stability, Russia prioritizes European security issues, while the PRC is preoccupied with the Asia-Pacific. Due to these different priorities, Russia and China do not presently have a major bilateral dispute where their vital national interests conflict. Equally important, neither country requires the other's help to achieve its most critical security goals, allowing them to accept with benign indifference cases when the other fails to render support.

Policy Implications

Despite denials by China and Russia that their cooperation is directed against the United States or any other country, their wide-ranging ties present security challenges for Washington and its allies. These overlapping challenges include China's and Russia's growing nuclear and conventional power, hostile information policies such as state-sponsored discourse attributing malign motives to U.S. foreign policy, and hybrid tactics to neutralize the United States as a counterweight to Russian and Chinese regional power. The passive strategic reassurance that Moscow and Beijing provide to one another as they pursue their respective challenges to U.S. interests and leadership is sometimes amplified by more concrete and extensive cooperation on specific issues. For instance, Russian arms sales to China circumvent Western sanctions on both countries and give the PLA weapons that it cannot acquire from domestic suppliers.

The Trump administration's recently released national security, national defense, and nuclear strategies make clear that U.S. national security officials perceive China and Russia as a direct challenge to U.S. power, influence, and interests.⁴⁹ The Trump administration observes that both countries are "pursuing asymmetric ways and means to counter U.S. conventional capabilities."⁵⁰ For instance, they are developing A2/AD capabilities designed to keep the U.S. military away from their national territories. Of note, the PLA's A2/AD capabilities (e.g., cruise and ballistic missiles, cyber weapons, air defenses systems, and naval and land mines) have been enhanced by its purchase of Russian anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles. Increased Chinese A2/AD could impede U.S. freedom of navigation

⁴⁹ White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C., December 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

⁵⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, *U.S. Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, D.C., February 2018), <https://www.defense.gov/News/SpecialReports/2018NuclearPostureReview.aspx>.

operations and the United States' ability to defend its allies and project power in the Asia-Pacific, while enabling China to continue to expand its presence in the western Pacific.⁵¹

Not only has the Sino-Russian arms trade provided the PLA with Russian military technologies, but the sales have also enhanced Russian military power indirectly through generating increased revenue for Russian defense firms. These companies reinvest these profits into R&D that benefits the Russian military. China's growing military power also forces the Pentagon to pay greater attention to Asian military contingencies rather than concentrating against Russian military power in Europe. In addition, Chinese and Russian arms sales proliferate A2/AD capabilities to other countries, potentially negating some U.S. conventional power-projection advantages and threatening U.S. primacy in the global commons. Russia, for example, is negotiating new arms deliveries to Iran worth billions of U.S. dollars. From a regional security perspective, such deals make U.S. deterrence less credible since U.S. adversaries like Iran and North Korea now see China and Russia as possible security counterweights against the United States. Such increased military cooperation also puts pressure on U.S. relationships with allies such as Japan, which look to Washington for protection against China and Russia. The Sino-Russian security partnership allows Moscow to focus its military efforts on Ukraine, Syria, and other areas outside Asia. Their overlapping security spheres, centered on their joint border region, give China and Russia a de facto secure "strategic rear"—a sphere where they do not perceive a threat from each other and that lies beyond the reach of the U.S. military.⁵²

The two countries may cooperate more directly against U.S. interests in the future. Russia may sell more advanced weaponry to China as well as begin buying substantial military technologies from Chinese manufacturers. As discussed earlier, they have already agreed to co-develop new dual-use and dedicated weapons systems such as reconnaissance drones, transport helicopters, and large-body aircraft—some of which may be sold to third parties hostile to U.S. interests. Agreements between China and Russia to cooperate more on space exploration and satellites might include more

⁵¹ Rakesh Krishnan Simha, "China Emulates Russian Military Strategy in the Pacific," *Russia Beyond*, August 20, 2015, http://rbth.com/blogs/2015/08/20/china_emulates_russian_military_strategy_in_the_pacific_48627.html.

⁵² Artyom Lukin, "Why the Russian Far East Is So Important to China," *Huffington Post*, January 12, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/artiom-lukin/russian-far-east-china_b_6452618.html.

extensive collaboration on space security.⁵³ U.S. diplomats have been countering Sino-Russian initiatives to limit U.S. military use of outer space. China and Russia are also independently developing means to disrupt or destroy U.S. satellites. If they were to collaborate more directly, it could make U.S. space assets even more vulnerable. One reason that some U.S. analysts want to establish a new space force is to better counter Sino-Russian threats in this realm. Their growing foreign military activities may also increase the risk of accidents or inadvertent encounters with the U.S. and other militaries, given that confidence- and security-building measures are harder to negotiate on a trilateral, rather than bilateral, basis. China and Russia could also coordinate on security issues related to the Arctic region, which could challenge U.S. and European access to this region.⁵⁴

In the short term, arms control issues provide a means for the United States to amplify Sino-Russian differences. The Russian government has become increasingly insistent that future strategic arms control treaties encompass additional countries besides Russia and the United States, including China. The PRC's nuclear arsenal is growing in terms of numbers, diversity, and capabilities. Yet it remains opaque about the number and capabilities of its nuclear warheads and delivery systems, as well as about its targeting and nuclear weapons employment doctrines (beyond citing the country's no-first-use doctrine). According to independent estimates, Russia and the United States have thousands of nuclear warheads, while Britain, France, India, Israel, and Pakistan have only several hundred. Most Western analysts place the Chinese arsenal at several hundred deployed strategic nuclear warheads, which is roughly the same size as the arsenals of France and the United Kingdom.⁵⁵ However, there are a few Russian (and U.S.) analysts that estimate that China has more than one thousand warheads.⁵⁶ The U.S. government maintains that Moscow and Washington need to reduce their much larger arsenals before negotiating binding limits on other countries.

⁵³ "Russia, China to Hold Experiment to Increase Satellite Data Accuracy," TASS, July 5, 2018, <http://tass.com/science/1012076>; and "Russia, China Sign Memorandum on Cooperation in Space Exploration," TASS, June 8, 2018, <http://tass.com/science/1008745>.

⁵⁴ Sonja Jordan, "China, Russia Cooperating in Arctic as Region Gains Strategic Importance," *National Defense*, June 20, 2018, <http://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2018/6/20/china-russia-cooperating-in-arctic-as-region-gains-strategic-importance>.

⁵⁵ "Nuclear Weapons: Who Has What at a Glance," Arms Control Association, June 2018, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhohaswhat>; and "World Nuclear Weapon Stockpile," Ploughshares, July 5, 2018, <https://www.ploughshares.org/world-nuclear-stockpile-report>.

⁵⁶ Alexei Arbatov, "Engaging China in Nuclear Arms Control," Carnegie Moscow Center, October 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Arbatov_China_nuclear_Eng2014.pdf. See also "GU Students Help Discover China's Hidden Nuclear Tunnels," Georgetown University, December 5, 2011, <https://www.georgetown.edu/news/china-tunnels-discovery.html>.

However, the Trump administration shares Russian anxieties about Beijing's growing nuclear capabilities. If Beijing and Moscow continue to diverge regarding these issues, the Trump administration may wish to explicitly call on Beijing to join the next round of forced cuts, adhere to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and make other proposals to raise the prominence of these Sino-Russian differences on disarmament issues. The current U.S. policy of nonrecognition of Chinese and Russian subconventional assertiveness has not reversed either country's recent gains. The United States needs additional economic, diplomatic, legal, and other nonmilitary tools to complement military countermeasures to deter Chinese and Russian subconventional assertiveness without escalating conflicts into armed exchanges.

In the long term, Washington should devote more attention and resources to assessing Sino-Russian arms sales, military exchanges, and other security ties. This effort should encompass expanded dialogues with U.S. allies and friends, including building on recent U.S. efforts to limit major arms sales both to and from China and Russia.⁵⁷ Trade agreements and related measures could improve defense industrial ties with key U.S. partners and discourage them from buying Chinese or Russian weapons or selling defense technologies to either country. Just as Western energy sanctions on Russia have focused on denying transfers that China cannot substitute for, U.S. and other Western sanctions on China and Russia should target products and services that neither country can substitute for the other. The United States should continue to strive to maintain its military technological advantages over both states in critical areas such as air power, networked information technologies, and missile defense. Future U.S. administrations should also make a great effort to strengthen U.S. foreign defense and security alliances. While keeping such commitments can be costly in terms of defense spending and sometimes lives, they provide the United States with strategic advantages over Russia and China, including military allies, forward-operating and -staging bases, diplomatic and intelligence assistance, and international legitimacy for even primarily U.S. unilateral operations. The current administration's National Defense Strategy states the following about the importance of U.S. alliances and partnerships:

Mutually beneficial alliances and partnerships are crucial to our strategy, providing a durable, asymmetric strategic advantage that no competitor or rival

⁵⁷ Though without providing details, Christopher Ford, assistant secretary of state and head of the State Department's Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation, stated that the Trump administration had already deprived Russia of millions of dollars in potential arms sales. See Hudson Institute, Policy Podcast, April 2018, <http://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/PT6-ChrisFord.mp3>.

can match....Every day, our allies and partners join us in defending freedom, deterring war, and maintaining the rules which underwrite a free and open international order. By working together with allies and partners we amass the greatest possible strength for the long-term advancement of our interests, maintaining favorable balances of power that deter aggression and support the stability that generates economic growth. When we pool resources and share responsibility for our common defense, our security burden becomes lighter.⁵⁸

In addition to traditional regional allies like Japan and South Korea, the United States should deepen ties with developing partners like India and Vietnam. The latter could act as natural counterweights to Chinese military power in South and Southeast Asia, while targeted U.S. efforts could limit these countries' defense ties with Moscow. Although Turkey has insisted on buying Russian and Chinese weapons despite U.S. pressure, and the Trump administration has declined to apply sanctions against India and various Middle Eastern countries for buying Russian weapons, the threat of sanctions alone, such as limits to defense industrial cooperation with the United States, may help deter some sales.

Conclusion

The depth of Sino-Russian defense cooperation should not be overstated. The mutual defense commitments between the two countries are modest, especially when compared with those between the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia. China and Russia lack joint standing defense structures and are not capable of conducting a large joint conventional military operation. Despite closer security ties between China and Russia, it is unlikely that there will be a scenario where a combined Sino-Russian fleet engages in joint military action. Even in Central Asia, the SCO lacks standing military structures or functions, and some of its other members, including new member India, would resist a Sino-Russian defense condominium at their expense. Even where their security concerns overlap, the two governments have not engaged in comprehensive joint countermeasures such as pooled R&D against U.S. ballistic missile defenses. Their tabletop exercises signal to the United States their joint concerns but do not advance their joint or individual capabilities. Russia and China both want to remain major but independent great powers, and there is little indication that they will soon enter a formal mutual defense alliance.

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge," January 2018, 8, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

The United States could more proactively try to counter Sino-Russian security ties through more assertive policies—though with the potential caveat of driving China and Russia closer together instead of apart. For example, by decisively challenging China in the 1950s, including making nuclear threats to deter Chinese aggression, the United States helped split Beijing from Moscow because Chinese leaders became frustrated when the Soviet Union would not offer to back China with its own nuclear threats due to the risk of nuclear war. Today, the United States has applied a range of sanctions and other measures against both China and Russia, but not any targeted directly at the Sino-Russian alignment and designed to discourage or punish one country from cooperating with the other. Under present conditions, such dual-aimed threats could succeed, but they also could drive them closer together.

Defense ties between China and Russia have increased dramatically and will probably continue to do so. Areas of focus will likely encompass regional security issues, weapons sales, bilateral and military exercises, and defense and security dialogues. Their security cooperation challenges U.S. interests in maintaining regional security balances and in preventing Sino-Russian ties from facilitating the circumvention of U.S. sanctions and constraining U.S. military access to key geographic and functional areas. These challenges would increase should China and Russia form a full-fledged defense alliance, such as that existing between Japan and the United States, though this scenario is unlikely to develop, given adequate and balanced U.S. countermeasures.

