

Ana Brown

A literature review on modern Sino-Russian relations analysis

Formulating policy in the Eurasia and Asia-Pacific region requires Washington to navigate the complex dynamics of the US-Russian-Chinese triangle. The strategic partnership between China and Russia is rooted in a combination of dissatisfaction with the current US-led world order and pragmatic considerations, but is lacking a shared long-term vision for the global order: China considers Russia to be on an irreversible path of demographic and economic decline, leading to a permanent state of marginalization. However, Russia's historical and cultural identity clashes with the idea of being relegated to a subordinate role as a mere supplier of resources to China.¹ Despite this friction, there is also a complex relationship of interdependence between the two nations. As a result, this partnership may be constrained and even weakened over time, as evidenced by disagreements over energy, weapons sales, and Russia's annexation of Crimea and consequent invasion of Ukraine.

Assessing the level of strategic cooperation in China-Russia relations post-Cold War has proven to be a challenging endeavour. Despite numerous attempts to understand the degree of alignment between the two nations and how it has evolved over time, there has been a remarkable lack of progress, as reflected in the titles of major books on the subject. There is a substantial body of research on the topic out there, which can be challenging to navigate. The

¹ <https://fairbank.fas.harvard.edu/research/blog/sino-russian-relations/>

aim of this essay is not to discuss the points of friction but rather identify where they lie and define the future pillars for the in-depth analysis of the drivers of China-Russia relationship.

The question of whether the relationship between China and Russia is characterised by rapprochement or rivalry² dominated discussions in 2000, and twelve years later, the question had barely shifted to "rivalry or partnership?"³ The description of this bilateral relationship has been plagued by imprecise and contradictory terms. Since the mid-1990s, the relationship has been referred to as "partnerships,"⁴ including "limited partnership,"⁵ "strategic partnership,"⁶ or "limited defensive strategic partnership,"⁷ as well as various "axes," such as "axis of convenience,"⁸ "axis of necessity,"⁹ or "axis of insecurity."¹⁰ Adding to the confusion, the term "alliance" has also been used as a point of reference in scholarly discussions of China-Russia relations.

None of these, however, or any other applied terms have been defined in a manner that produced a clear understanding of the nature of the Sino-Russian relations. This is where

² Sherman W. Garnett, *Rapprochement or Rivalry? Russia–China Relations in a Changing Asia* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2000)

³ Robert E. Bedeski and Niklas Swanström, *Eurasia's Ascent in Energy and Geopolitics: Rivalry or Partnership for China, Russia and Central Asia?* (Routledge 2012)

⁴ David Kerr, "The Sino–Russian Partnership and US Policy Toward North Korea: From Hegemony to Concert in Northeast Asia," *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (2005): 411–438

⁵ Sherman W. Garnett, ed. *Limited Partnership: Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia: Report of the Study Group on Russia-China Relations* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 1998)

⁶ Jeanne L. Wilson, *Strategic Partners: Russian-Chinese Relations in the Post-Soviet Era* (ME Sharpe 2004)

⁷ Chenghong Li, "Limited Defensive Strategic Partnership: Sino–Russian Rapprochement and the Driving Forces," *Journal of Contemporary China* 16, no. 52 (2007): 477–497

⁸ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and The New Geopolitics* (Brookings Institution Press 2009)

⁹ Andrew Kuchins, "Russia and the CIS in 2013: Russia's Pivot to Asia," *Asian Survey* 54, no.1 (2014): 129–137

¹⁰ Sir Tony Brenton, "Russia and China: An Axis of Insecurity," *Asian Affairs* 44, no. 2 (2013): 231–249

Alexander Korolev brings absolutely immense expertise by assessing China-Russia military romance. His article “How Close Are Russia and China? Assessing Military-Strategic Cooperation in International Relations” was first published in the Journal of Strategic Studies in 2020 and examined the extent of military-strategic cooperation between Russia and China in the current international system. Korolev argues that the two countries' relationship is not a formal alliance, but rather a strategic partnership based on shared interests and mutual support in the face of common threats. Dr. Alexander Korolev is a Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Relations in the School of Social Sciences, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, at the University of New South Wales, Sydney and a visiting researcher in the Political Science Department at Brown University. His general research interests, international relations theory and comparative politics with special reference to China and Russia, are largely reflected in the essay.

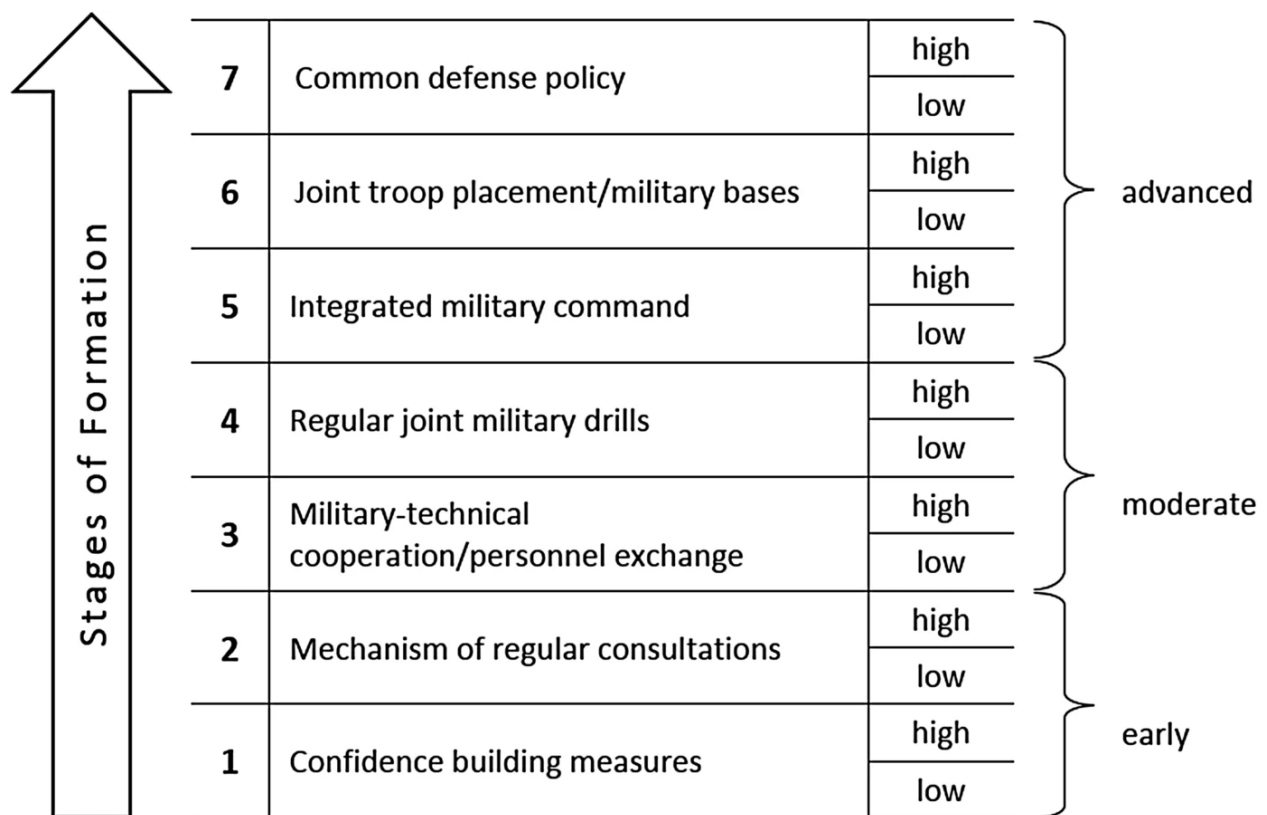
The article has two primary objectives, one narrow and one broad, which are interconnected. The narrow objective focuses on accurate evaluating of the extent and trajectory of strategic cooperation between China and Russia in the post-Cold War era. The intention is not to redefine the nature of their relationship but rather to assess changes in cooperation over time and provide a rough estimation of the absolute level of cooperation. Consequently, the analysis presented here leans more towards description and categorization rather than establishing causal relationships. This approach does not imply that understanding the causes of China-Russia cooperation is insignificant; however, it emphasizes the need to define and measure variables before delving into their explanations, particularly given the current state of research in this field.

Hence, the primary emphasis is on describing and quantifying China-Russia strategic cooperation, rather than exploring its underlying causes. However, since there is a lack of existing frameworks to assess alignment, achieving the narrow objective necessitates fulfilling a broader goal: constructing an objective and logically justifiable framework for evaluating strategic cooperation. This framework can subsequently be applied to other cases in the future. It should be noted that the framework presented below is an initial attempt and will likely require further refinement. Nevertheless, it represents a crucial endeavor to address a significant gap in the literature on International Relations. "Cooperation," whether in military or non-military contexts, is a fundamental dependent variable that permeates the field of International Relations. Yet, the objective measurement of cooperation has been limited, which has profound implications for research in this field. Consequently, some of the perceived puzzles regarding increasing or decreasing cooperation that scholars have attempted to explain may not actually exist when objectively measured, while others might have gone unnoticed.

Dr. Korolev identifies seven indicators of military cooperation and groups them into the three clusters of early, moderate, and advanced cooperation. Each indicator is ordinal, that is, the early-stage indicators precede the moderate and advanced indicators. In turn, the presence of advanced indicators, even at lower levels, indicates a higher overall degree of military cooperation. In other words, the degree of cooperation is determined by the highest stage that is manifested, and higher stages subsume lower stages. For example, stages 3 and 4 require stage 2, and stages 5, 6 and 7 necessitate stages 2, 3, and 4. However, some early-stage indicators can be expected to fall off when they are no longer necessary, and their continuous

presence might indicate backsliding rather than development. It is the expansion of higher-level indicators that reflects increasing alignment. Importantly, it is hypothetically possible to see “moderate,” or even “advanced,” indicators without “early” ones depending on peculiarities of a particular case.¹¹

Picture 1. Analytical framework developed by Alexander Korolev



The article then goes on to provide great amount of empirical evidence and statistical data about the military aspect of Sino-Russian relations.

¹¹ Korolev, Alexander. How Close Are Russia and China? Assessing Military-Strategic Cooperation in International Relations. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 2 (2020): 203-3

While the modern Chinese-Russian strategic partnership is substantive and productive, the two countries share rather dubious diplomatic past. Gilbert Rozman explores the historical background and dynamics of the relationship between China and Russia, particularly in the context of the post-Cold War era, in his book "The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order." He also examines the factors shaping their bilateral interactions, such as shared interests, geopolitical considerations, and strategic cooperation.

Normalization of Russia-China relationship, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, started with signing a border agreement in 1991 and, consequently, establishing diplomatic ties in 1992. On December 18, 1992, a significant milestone was reached in the Russia-China post-Cold War relations when Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin signed "The Memorandum of Understanding on the Guiding Principle for the Mutual Reductions of Armed Forces and the Strengthening of Trust in the Border Region." This memorandum aimed to establish a foundation of trust along their shared border. Over the next two years, negotiations continued with the objective of reducing military forces in the border region and enhancing mutual trust. This progress led to a significant visit by Russia's Chief of General Staff, Mikhail Kolesnikov, to Beijing in April 1994.

In July 1994, another crucial agreement was signed between the two countries, known as "The Agreement on the Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities." Its primary objective was to further reduce tensions along the border and establish protocols for addressing accidental border crossings, which occasionally occurred due to the extensive length of the shared border.

Additionally, this agreement facilitated regular information exchanges between the border army units of both countries, ensuring transparency in their movements and activities.

Just two months later, in September 1994, Jiang Zemin visited Russia, and during this visit, two significant documents were signed. The first was the "Joint Statement on No First Use of Nuclear Weapons against Each Other and Not Targeting Strategic Nuclear Weapons at Each Other," affirming their commitment to avoid using nuclear weapons against one another. The second was the "Agreement on the Western Part of China-Russia Border," successfully resolving the border disputes in the western segment. These developments marked an elevation in bilateral relations, transitioning from "good neighborliness" to "constructive cooperation."

These series of agreements and visits between Russia and China during the early 1990s laid the foundation for increased trust, mutual reductions of armed forces, and the resolution of border-related issues. They played a crucial role in shaping the post-Cold War relationship between the two countries, setting the stage for further cooperation and collaboration in various domains.

By 2011, the nature of the relationship achieved a "comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership" connotation, the highest level of cooperation from China's perspective.

The partnership between China and Russia is motivated by two broad factors: common views on what they object to in the contemporary world order and practical concerns.¹² Regarding world order, both countries hope to end what they have seen as US hegemony and institute a more multipolar system. Both China and Russia believe in maintaining geographic spheres of influence. For Russia, this means having decisive influence in the foreign policy of the states of the “near abroad,” or republics of the former Soviet Union. For China, this means a privileged position for its territorial claims in the South China Sea and the maintenance of a friendly government in North Korea. For both China and Russia, preventing revolutions in Central Asia or other former Soviet republics that would bring democratic, pro-Western governments into power is a priority.¹³

The desire to dominate in Central Asia is brilliantly analysed by Carla Freeman in her article “New strategies for an old rivalry? China–Russia relations in Central Asia after the energy boom.” The increasing demand for energy is a driving force behind China's deepening connections with Central Asia, and it also plays a significant role in its relationship with Russia, both on a bilateral level and within the region. Central Asia holds strategic importance for Moscow, considering it as its “near abroad,” a region historically influenced by Russian dominance and dependence, falling within the Kremlin's sphere of privileged interests.

¹² For Chinese views on world order, see Liselotte Odgaard, “Between Integration and Coexistence: US-Chinese Strategies of International Order,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 15–39.

¹³ Bolt, Paul. *Sino-Russian Relations in a Changing World Order*. Air Force Research Institute (AFRI), *Strategic Studies Quarterly* (SSQ), 155 N.

Moscow's control over pipeline networks still places it as an intermediary for energy transportation between Central Asia and Europe.

However, China's extensive borders with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, coupled with its substantial and expanding investments in oil and gas in Central Asia, pose a challenge to Russia's traditional energy dominance. China's presence inherently undermines Russia's position in the energy arena. Recognizing the mutual benefits, both powers have sought avenues for collaboration in Central Asia. One such initiative is the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a multilateral forum that enables them to jointly address shared threats and seize opportunities in the region. Through the SCO, China and Russia can navigate their interests and engage in cooperative efforts to strengthen their influence in Central Asia. Freeman's studies on rivalry have explored how various shocks can impact rival states or states prone to rivalry, sometimes leading to conflict escalation and other times fostering cooperation. Analysing the impact of the 2008-2009 shock on Russo-Chinese competition in Central Asia provides a compelling case that draws on the insights from these studies.

Recent historical trends demonstrate that both Russia and China, driven by shared interests, have actively worked to mitigate competition and identify areas of cooperation within the region. These shared interests primarily revolve around geopolitical considerations, as both Moscow and Beijing have concerns regarding the strategic agenda of the United States. They also have a common interest in regional stability, with energy cooperation playing a significant

role in their relationship. Russia, in its pursuit of new energy supplies, has turned its attention eastward, while China seeks to diversify its oil and gas suppliers to enhance its energy security.

However, as many studies reveal, since the decline of the energy boom, Moscow has increasingly employed tactics to enhance its relative influence in Central Asia, indicating its growing apprehension regarding China's expanding role in the region. In response to these tactics, China has sought to provide reassurances but has refrained from making significant concessions or accommodations. This dynamic highlights the delicate balance between competition and cooperation in Russo-Chinese relations, particularly in the context of Central Asia.¹⁴

¹⁴ Carla P. Freeman (2018) New strategies for an old rivalry? China–Russia relations in Central Asia after the energy boom, *The Pacific Review*, 31:5, 635-654, DOI: 10.1080/09512748.2017.1398775