

A Challenge to Unipolar Hegemony: Understanding the contours Sino-Russian Military Cooperation

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Abstract: *Sino-Russian military cooperation has a long history stemming from their shared ideological leanings during the twentieth century. However, this military cooperation has evolved greatly, especially during the last two decades during which this multifaceted cooperation has emerged as a balancing force to US unipolar hegemony since the end of the cold War. This paper seeks to understand the history, development, and ongoing dynamics of the Chinese and Russian military cooperation that seeks to strategically invalidate the chaos rendered in the wake of US invasions of Iraq, Afghanistan and a host of other interventions throughout the world. This paper also attempts to validate the potential of this cooperation to act as a stabilizing force in the sphere of global politics as the world moves from unipolar hegemony to a skewed multi-polarity in the coming decades..*

Key Words: Sino-Russia, Military Cooperation, International Relations

Introduction

Historically, the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China had worked together. This partnership has a long history that dates back to the establishment of the People's Republic of China. It was founded on a communist philosophy, which kept these two countries connected as they worked to spread communism and resist capitalism. In the early 1950s, the United States and its allies attempted to halt the spread of communism by forming alliances spanning most of the Eurasian coastline. Starting in East Asia with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia and progressing to Turkey, the US alliance system in the perusal of containment against the former Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Such policies exacerbated the situation, thus bringing both communist countries closer to seek closer cooperation in a variety of other areas.

Countries must have mutual objectives in order to work together over the long run. Economic gains, common foreign policy goals, and close military and diplomatic relations are the key forces behind state cooperation in the field of international politics. Later, when the former Soviet Union refrained from taking sides in numerous situations and sought to reach a compromise with the West and the United States of America instead, things were to shift drastically. These two nations grew closer after the Cold War due to a number of geopolitical and geo-economics factors. The primary dynamics we'll talk about in this chapter are based on the advantages both nations have in these areas and how they're growing their collaboration.

The cooperation between China and Russia on military matters is one of the most important aspects for both nations. China is experiencing troubles in the South China Sea and feels besieged by its neighbors, who are

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supported by the United States of America, similar to how Russia was already uneasy with NATO during the annexation of Crimea. The two countries have had close military and defense relations since 1949, so this cooperation is nothing new. Russia has the most cutting-edge weapons outside of America, and China is a suitable and reliable consumer from whom to purchase that technology. When it comes to their military ties, these two nations have a great deal to offer one another.

Dimensions of Military Cooperation between Russian and China

In terms of geopolitics and geo-economics, Russia and China are very close allies. They are automatically very close in terms of military cooperation due to these two characteristics. Both nations are currently working together on every aspect of defense and defense production. The largest purchaser of Russian military hardware is China, and this list is extensive. China wants Russian weaponry because they are highly advanced, and another reason is that Western nations are reluctant to supply Beijing with defense-related technology due to US pressure. There were instances where the USA exerted pressure on other nations to avoid security ties with China.

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Israel backed down on a deal involving an airborne radar system for \$250 million in the year 2000. (Perlez, [2000](#)) Although Israel had previously equipped one aircraft with the Phalcon radar system and was scheduled to deliver it to China, China had already paid 100 million dollars for this agreement. If this agreement had come to pass, China could have acquired an advanced airborne warning and Control System commonly known as AWACS. Such systems are quite sophisticated and functions as airborne radar that serves to gain communication and intelligence superiority in aerial combat.

The mutual understanding and defense needs of the two countries form the foundation of this collaboration. At a cost of \$2 billion, Russia last year agreed to supply China with 24 of its most advanced fighter aircraft. (Stolyarov, [2015](#)) The SU-35 is a twin-engine, very sophisticated jet fighter. The Chinese air force will be able to use this aircraft to counter more capable regional air forces like Japan and India.

Chinese Military

In light of the geopolitical landscape in the Pacific theatre, China's military is modernizing and will likely play a significant role going forward. In order to match the technological might of its rivals in the event of a confrontation, China is investing heavily in upgrading its military forces. China just commissioned one aircraft carrier and intends to commission another one soon. Similar to this, the People's Liberation Army Air Force of China last year agreed to purchase 24 SU-35 fourth-generation fighter aircraft from Russia. Chinese defense spending was 145 billion USD in 2015.

This enormous sum demonstrates China's intense desire to upgrade its military. Three branches of the Chinese military exist: the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), and Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). The People's Liberation Army, which has 2.3 million men, is the largest army in the world. (China Military Strength, 2023) The People's Liberation Army is modernizing and regularly engaging in drills with the armed forces of other nations. Currently, the PLA's top priorities include protecting the motherland from invasion or attack by foreign forces and, if necessary, preparing for amphibious assaults in the near future. In order to prepare for amphibious operations, the PLA declared last year that it will quadruple the size of its AMID (Amphibious mechanized Infantry Division). (Gady, [2015](#))

The Chinese military's naval arm is closely scrutinized by the western nations. China is already involved in conflicts in the South and East China Seas, and her navy will have a crucial role to play going forward. China's "String of Pearls" policy is focused on the Maritime Silk Road. The presence of US naval

squadrons in the Pacific Ocean has Chinese strategists quite perplexed.

They believe that building military installations close to China's maritime border will choke off its commerce lanes. That raises serious concerns for China's economic and strategic plans. In 2012, China deployed its first aircraft carrier, and she is currently developing a second. Although China does not seek a blue-water fleet, she does want to prevent potential enemies from undermining her naval and geopolitical interests in the area, particularly in the East and South China Seas.

In all, Russia possesses 67 submarines, and this enormous number of submarines gives Russia the strongest edge against any sea-based strike on China's major territory. These submarines have the ability to prevent surface ships and aircraft carriers from approaching their continent. (Submarine Fleet Strength by Country (2023), n.d.)

China possesses a variety of submarines, but the Russian-built Project 636 Kilo class is the finest. It would be quite challenging to find this diesel submarine underwater. One submarine of this sort shadowed the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier last year without being noticed. (Mizokami, [2022](#))

This submarine's particular engine makes it soundproof, and the substance used to construct her body virtually eliminates the possibility of being discovered. In addition, both nations regularly conduct naval drills to develop their combat readiness. In the Mediterranean Sea last year, the navies participated in a cooperative naval exercise. (Gubin & Rbth, [2023](#)) These naval drills were crucial given the Syrian Crisis, the Crimean Problem, and their vicinity to the three main straits of the world—the Suez Canal, the Strait of Gibraltar, and the Strait of Bosphorus.

The Peoples Liberation Army Air Force is likewise in the process of modernizing. In response to rising hostilities in the South China Sea and escalating hostilities with Japan, China is expanding its air force. Chinese Air Force has never stopped looking for trustworthy AWACS (Air Warning and Control System). This is a system that is based on radar in the air, may serve as a war room and can tell friendly aircrafts about the position, speed, and other information linked to incoming hostile aircraft.

China attempted to negotiate and even inked an agreement with Israel for decades, but it was canceled due to pressure from the US. China then shifted its focus on the development of domestically produced KJ-500 AWACS aircraft capable of monitoring more than 60 aircrafts within a 500 KM radius. (Electronic Weapons: China Climbs the AWACS Ladder, n.d.)

If tensions rise along China's borders, this jet has tilted the odds in China's favor. This device will be able to detect every aircraft that will take off within a 470 km radius. In addition, China is developing stealth aircraft and debuted the J-31 stealth aircraft in 2012. (Ward et al., [2012](#)) In addition to that, the Chinese have successfully developed the J-31 program which is a 5th-generation stealth fighter. Due to their superior technology and the material used for their body, stealth fighter aircraft cannot be detected by radar. Chinese stealth aircraft have experienced some performance issues, and last year they eventually agreed on an agreement with Russia for the supply of jet engines for its stealth aircraft.

Russian Military

The Russian military is expanding and is demonstrating her professional and battle-tested attitude in Syria. The Russian military was in poor condition and was still recovering from the humiliation she suffered during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979–88 when the Russian Federation was founded in 1991.

Russian military reform under Vladimir Putin with an estimated net budget of \$400 billion, Putin began this program in 2010 to upgrade the Russian military. Ideally, 2020 was supposed to be the completion year for this overhaul. The Russian military's 2016 budget has been set at 49 billion US dollars. This budget is enormous for the Russian military even when its involvement in the Syrian conflict is taken into consideration.

The Russian Air Force is likewise growing and equipped with cutting-edge aircraft, with the SU-35 being one of the most technologically sophisticated aircraft of the fourth generation. An advanced fifth generation fighter aircraft PAK FA, with radar capable of even identifying other stealth aircraft, is also in the works.

The state-of-the-art Borei class SSBN submarine, which cost 718 million US dollars, has also been launched by the Russian Navy to bolster its naval capabilities in the North and the Atlantic Ocean. (Grady, 2015) Additionally, this submarine will be equipped with 12 Bulava ballistic missiles. Her cutting-edge propulsion technology prevents noise from being picked up by SONAR (Sound Navigation and Ranging) or other ships while she is moving. The operational serviceability of the Russian navy in strategic locations throughout the globe will increase thanks to this new submarine. The Russian Navy will have an advantage over other navies in the globe thanks to this submarine, which is hailed as the most cutting-edge 4th generation submarine in the world.

Due to advanced defense technologies that are more affordable than western defense systems, the Russian military industry is growing quickly. The world's huge demand for Russian defense equipment is evidence that the country's defense sector is growing rapidly. The S-300 missile system, T-90 tanks, and MIG 25 fighter aircraft are in high demand among all the armaments, followed by Kilo class submarines. India and Russia agreed on a 7 billion dollar deal last year for the S-400 missile system, military logistic helicopters, and submarines. Such military transactions reveal a great deal about the worth and demand of Russian military hardware or defense systems. In contrast to the USA, the Russian Federation is not involved in hostilities outside its boundaries, thus they are both affordable and trustworthy with no supply-related difficulties.

Russia has renewed its agreement to supply Iran with the cutting-edge S-300 missile system. A deal for \$800 million was made. The agreement between Iran and Russia was reached in 2007; however, it was abandoned because of UN sanctions on Iran or maybe as a result of other circumstances. (Herszenhorn, 2015) With a range of 300 km, this missile system is the most sophisticated and cutting-edge one available. This system is capable of engaging multiple targets simultaneously. It is a multirole system designed to neutralize different types of threats ranging from aircraft to ballistic missiles. Iran will undoubtedly benefit greatly from this missile system both in the Gulf region and in the Straits of Hormuz.

Israel and the United States of America won't ever consider attacking Iran from the air after receiving this missile system. This missile system uses cutting-edge technology to accurately hit its targets and is extremely dependable.

Grand Strategies of China and Russia

A grand strategy is a plan created by the states to

accomplish their long-term objectives from their range of options. This phrase plays a significant role in the study of international relations and is mostly dependent on the effectiveness of state initiatives. This comprehensive approach was developed following an examination of the states' internal and external environments. to deal with significant challenges that affect national interests or the interests of large countries that also prioritize global interests Many factors, including economic policies, military capabilities, the caliber of leaders, diplomats, alliances, and long-term planning, influence this grand strategy. Grand Strategies are not always made by historians or military strategists; economists also play a significant part in developing a Grand Strategy for a country.

The success of each country's grand strategy depends heavily on Sino-Russian collaboration and Chinese and Russian grand plans. States use elaborate plans to accomplish long-term goals in the areas of geopolitics and geo-economics. Analyzing the relative strength and capability of states in relation to their goals is necessary for good planning when creating a grand strategy. As we previously learned, the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China have been working together once again for the last 20 years.

States develop a solid and dependable grand strategy using a variety of factors, including economics, statecraft, statesmanship, military might, and global political situations. For various reasons, both China and Russia need a grand plan. Although China's economy is rising, its national interests in the South and East China Seas are not secure. She also feels as though the USA-supported coalition is surrounding her. Similar to the Russian Federation, which required a grand

strategy to overcome the detrimental consequences of the sanctions imposed after it annexed Crimea.

The economic direction and lack of any challenge to the current International political system is another crucial component of this confluence of purposes in their grand strategy, on which they are working. In the aftermath of the ongoing war in Ukraine, this collaboration has deepened even further. Due to this collaboration, even the balance of power on the planet will stay unchanged, protecting global stability and prosperity.

Imperatives of China and Russia in Geopolitical Context

All nations have certain powerful regions of capability, influence, and power, although some of those areas are shallower than others. Similar to how China and Russia both have significant positions in global geopolitics and geo-economics; they nevertheless face some challenges that might make it difficult for them to realize their strategic objectives. As an example, following the horrific events of 9/11, the USA approached Pakistan for strategic assistance in the fight against terrorism, despite the country's large military presence globally. (Musharraf, 2006) The USA didn't just request assistance from Pakistan but also from the Russian Federation, despite the fact that at the time there were poor relations between the two nations as a result of the Russian federation's strong measures against opposition people and parties and its breaches of human rights. The United States' future geopolitical and geo-economics objectives in the Middle East may depend on the Russian Federation and China developing strong diplomatic and economic ties in the region.

China's Imperatives

At the moment, China is at the epicenter of global geopolitics and geo-economics. China is the world's largest importer of raw materials and exporter of consumer goods. With 1.3 billion people, China is also the largest country in the world. She is strategically located close to the Straits of Malacca, through which 70% of global traffic passes. The political and economic positions of her neighbors are likewise quite powerful. The countries of



Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and Russia are in



close proximity to China. The world wants to have strong commercial relations with the Chinese government because of the global expansion of her corporate concerns. Since this world is not founded on utopian ideals, even China has certain problems that might impede its advancement in the geopolitical and economic spheres.

China's greatest obstacle is the situation of its maritime borders. Since the seas are not open, she must share them with her neighbors hence the term "close seas" is used. Any state can cut off its economic lifeline in the case of a conflict by enforcing a naval blockade or utilizing area denial tactics such as mines. Chinese anxieties are confirmed by the American military presence in the area, and the

militarization of the Indo-Pacific region is increasing her sense of economic and political insecurity. In actuality, America is intensifying her military readiness in China's environs. Both military bases and increased military cooperation with the nations in the area that surround China are examples of this military presence.

Figure 1

Source: <http://www.southchinasea.org/maps/territorial-claims-maps/>

The issue in the South China Sea

The South China Sea conflict, which involves Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and China as claimants, is another crucial problem for China. Large underwater gas and oil resources as well as the crucial shipping corridor known as the Straits of Malacca give this area a very high geo-strategic significance. China has made significant investments in the South China Sea region, including a \$4.9 billion investment in the Huangyuan gas field.

Figure 2

Source: <http://www.chinabriefing.com/news/2011/05/31/chinas-territorial-disputes-in-the-south-china-sea-and-east-china-sea.html>

Issues in the East China Sea

China also has to deal with the issue of the East China Sea. In this issue, South Korea, Japan, and China are the primary claimants. The issue here is that although the East China Sea is 360 nautical miles wide with competing claims of and exclusive economic zone of nearly 200 nautical miles as permitted under UNCLOS by Japan and China. The regions of their claim will, to put it simply, overlap.

Taiwan has a claim to the South China Sea's underwater resources as well. The primary source of contention between Japan and China is the abundance of oil and gas reserves in South China. China has made significant investments in the East China Sea region. It has already made 4.9 billion dollars in deposits for subterranean gas fields and plans to make an [additional](#) 5 billion dollars in the near future. (Aizhu, [2013](#))

The Chinese government has long had severe concerns about American Marines stationed in the Pacific Ocean. America is bolstering her presence in the Pacific area by

expanding the number of her bases and arming her allies with cutting-edge equipment. After the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2003, many Asian countries believed that the United States' strategic influence was waning and that it was now more focused on the Middle East in order to protect its strategic interests there. By launching this Policy of Pivot to Asia in 2013, the Obama administration reaffirmed its commitment to the nations of the Asia-Pacific region. Japan and the United States agreed to build a new military facility in the Philippines as well.

This will enable the United States and its allies to better encircle China at sea. The presence of Japanese and American forces will undoubtedly give the Philippines a boost of confidence, and China will be discouraged from waging war against the Philippines as a result of their presence. In addition to this, the USA stationed troops in Australia last year to strengthen her position in the region. In order to strengthen Japan's military capabilities against China in the event of a confrontation, the United States is also providing Japan with the cutting-edge F-35 fighter fighters. (Janes | Latest Defence and Security News, n.d.)

Russian Imperatives

Due to it being a transcontinental country and near

proximity to Central Asian Republics, Russia is in a particularly fortunate position as a nation. Without a question, her diplomatic sphere of influence is expanding and her economy is growing, particularly in light of her involvement in the ongoing Syrian Civil War. Russia is seen as a trustworthy friend by President Bashar Al-Assad, and Syria is home to a Russian Naval station in the coastal city of Latakia. Without a question, Russia's acquisition of Crimea enhanced her reputation as a military superpower, but it also brought about certain unfavorable economic conditions. The manner in which Russia invaded Crimea speaks volumes about her growing political and military influence in world affairs and politics.

Russia is a significant participant in regional politics and an SCO partner (Shanghai Cooperation Organization). Russia is also in the forefront of the battle against terrorism in

Central Asia, and the two countries work closely together to prevent the spread of terrorism in the area. The Russian Federation has good military and commercial ties with the main regional nations of the world and is one of the leading exporters of weaponry in the world. Due to its extensive transit across her sphere of influence, Russia must play a significant role in the development of the BRI. Unfortunately, Russia has several needs that might compromise its position as a significant international force.

The largest issue Russia is now dealing with is population decline. There are currently 146 million people living in Russia, and the population is steadily declining. There are several causes for this population decline. First, due to the dismal economic situation following the collapse of the former Soviet Union, there is an issue with immigration from Russia to other regions of the world. Conditions for going abroad improved after the former Soviet Union's fall, and the public began to choose western nations because of their promising futures. (Miller, [2011](#))

According to some estimates, 109 million people will live in Russia in 2050 if population growth continues at the current rate. President Putin of the Russian Federation started offering incentives to mothers who want to have more than two children. Brain drain, wherein educated people chose to display their professional skill in other nations rather than the Russian Federation, was another issue Russia once faced.

The ethnic conflict between ethnic Russians and migrants is another issue that the Russian Federation is dealing with. These immigrants left the Central Asian republics in search of a brighter future in Russia since the economic conditions there are superior to those in their own countries. These migrant laborers are a disguised gift for the Russian Federation since they provide a supply of inexpensive labor and provide Russia the benefit of producing industrial goods at a low cost. Due to the Russian economy's low cost of production, international commerce with Russian goods is booming.

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Russian Chinese Cooperation in Defense and Global Politics

In order to create and carry out a great grand strategy, Russia and China are also collaborating in the area of defense cooperation. One of the most advanced defense businesses in the world is found in Russia. China has the money to purchase this Russian Federation technology. Both nations collaborate strategically in accordance with one another's requirements. China has purchased a Russian S-400 System to strengthen her coastal defenses against incoming missiles, along with fighter planes. After these missiles are installed, neither Taiwanese nor American forces will ever consider violating Chinese airspace. After the native Russians, China will be the first country to use this missile system. Following the Japanese air force's acquisition of F-35 fighter jets, Russia and China also agreed to a contract for the cutting-edge SU-35 fighter aircraft last year. China will be able to secure her geopolitical goals in the South and East China Seas with the aid of this collaboration.

Both of these powers contributed significantly and positively during the past 20 years. They positively contributed their ideas for answers to all the major global problems. Various states have different zones of influence on problems and matters in international politics. They carry out their duties in accordance with their unique economic might and diplomatic standing. In this way, the idea of restraint is put into practice. There were several instances over the last 20 years when the globe was on the verge of anarchy or, to put it another way, when the balance of power in

the world was about to shift. By demonstrating their shared opinions on crucial issues, these two major powers both played vital roles.

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