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# The Enduring Sino–Russian Strategic Relations of Mutual Dependence—The Attribute of Military Cooperation

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## ABSTRACT

Beijing's relatively ambiguous response to the Ukraine War has tested how firm the Sino—Russian strategic partnership is. This article aims to decipher the endurance and complexity of Sino-Russian strategic relations by evaluating the nature and dynamics of Sino-Russian defense cooperation amid the worsening international environment against both countries. By examining two Sino-Russian Joint Exercises and analyzing their joint military patrols, exercises, and technological projects, this article argues that the general Sino-Russian military collaboration has been enhanced. Beijing and Moscow have gradually strengthened the combat orientation of their military cooperation to deter the perceived third-party threat, solidify their strategic partnership and against the challenges posed by conflicting interests in the overall bilateral interaction. Both Beijing and Moscow consistently remain vigilant against the risks of abandonment and entrapment, emphasizing the importance of maintaining strategic autonomy and refraining from formal alliances. However, they confront the worst-case scenario of being simultaneously dragged into two separate armed conflicts by a shared adversary. Therefore, align with their own national interests, the ability of Beijing and Moscow to achieve a delicate equilibrium between avoiding entrapment and preventing abandonment will determine the vitality and long-term trajectory of their strategic partnership.

Profoundly reshaping international geopolitics, the Ukraine War has once again put Sino-Russia relations on the spotlight.<sup>1</sup> NATO has been vigilant on Sino-Russian military cooperation, especially in the area of arms transactions. Beijing has offered moral support to Russia by labeling NATO's eastward expansion as the origin of Putin's war. However, it has put the Sino-Russia arms trade of lethal weapons on hold. A country at war would normally expect stronger support from its strategic partners than in peacetime. Apparently, there is a clash of vested interests between China and Russia under the circumstances of the Ukraine war. This raises a critical question of how firm the Sino–Russian strategic partnership is. Nevertheless, the general Sino-Russian military collaboration has continued and even been enhanced in the areas of joint war drills, exchange of visits by top defense officials, officers' training, and bilateral collaboration on the R&D of strategic weapons systems.<sup>2</sup> For

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<sup>1</sup>Chatham House, *Seven Ways that Russia's War on Ukraine has Changed the World*, Special Report, 20 February 2023; Evan Medeiros, 'China's Strategic Straddle: Analyzing Beijing's Diplomatic Response to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine', *China Leadership Monitor*, June 1, 2022; Mykola Kapitonenko, 'Russia's Invasion of Ukraine has Changed the World Order', *National Interests*, March 4, 2022.

<sup>2</sup>China's de facto Deputy-Commander-in-Chief Zhang Youxia visited Moscow in November 2023 to co-chair the annual meeting of the Joint China–Russia Military R&D Programs. When Putin received him on 8 November, he particularly named a few high-end collaborative projects, such as high-orbit groupings, joint research of military space technology and so on. 'Putin calls for more joint Russia–China military technological cooperation', *Lianhezaobao*, November 19, 2023; *The New China News Agency*, November 9, 2023, and *Sputnik*, 9 November 2023. Accessed November 13, 2023. <https://sputniknews.cn>.

instance, Sino-Russian naval exercises in the Sea of Japan and a joint combat patrol into the waters near Alaska in 2023 point to the direction of continued bloc-coalescing.<sup>3</sup> This paradox demonstrates the dialectical intricacies of the bilateral relations underlined by 'friendship in need'. This article attempts to decipher such complexity through evaluating how the two countries deepen their defense ties to deter the perceived third-party threat amid worsening geopolitical tension in the world.

To this end, this article will delve into the nature of Sino-Russian military cooperation. Practically both countries seek to generate an enhanced deterrence effect against their commonly perceived security threat, largely through their third-party targeting and combat-oriented war drills. At the same time, they are determined to act autonomously in alignment, carefully managing the partner's possible attempts of entrapment and abandonment in campaigning for its interests at the expense of the other. Based on the new findings related to Sino-Russian joint military patrols, exercises, and technological projects, the article argues that the vigorous defense ties facilitate Beijing and Moscow to draw a subtle balance between sustaining mutual support and ensuring individual autonomy. This dialectics underlines the subtlety of their partnership and the need to further explore it theoretically and empirically.<sup>4</sup>

## Theorizing the Dichotomous Logic of Strategic Partnership

The military component is at the core of the relations among top powers, serving as a gauge of intimacy or suspicion in their daily interactions and the depth of their cooperation or lack of it, especially in times of crisis. Further, whether the bilateral military ties entail the substance of combat collaboration informs the nature and shape of an overall strategic partnership. Strategic partnership offers an institutionalized framework for partners to interact and a context to compare different ways partners and allies manage their security challenges. In analyzing allied strategic partnerships, Renard sees it inherently about security issues and defense cooperation.<sup>5</sup> This relevance can be extended to explain the behavior of certain non-allied strategic partners facing common military threats. Bound by formal treaties, allies are not shy in openly expressing their mutual defense commitments. However, they eschew defining their relations with non-allies, i.e. rival states, in strategic terms. The word 'strategic' in many languages carries a thick connotation of defense meaning, such as in Chinese and Japanese. This explains why Tokyo is reluctant to use the word to depict its relations with China.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, China and Russia have substantiated their strategic partnership through incrementally enhancing combat-oriented defense cooperation, as shown by the contents of their joint war games analyzed in the two case studies in the later sections of the article.

## Conceptual Underpinnings

Most strategic partnerships necessitate only symbolic military interaction, as indicated by the majority of China's strategic relationship with 110 countries. The depiction with the word 'strategic' for these partnerships is generally rhetorical to show the level of closeness.<sup>7</sup> When the military elements of the bilateral ties are pronounced in a partnership, it normally reflects a situation where

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<sup>3</sup>Stephen Blank, 'The Un-Holy Russo-Chinese alliance', *Defense & Security Analysis* 36(3), (2020).

<sup>4</sup>Andrej Krickovic and Chang Zhang, 'Fears of Falling Short versus Anxieties of Decline Explaining Russia and China's Approach to Status-seeking', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 13(2), (2020), pp. 219–251; Fabienne Bossuyt and Marcin Kaczmarek, 'Russia and China between Cooperation and Competition at the Regional and Global Level: Introduction', *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 62(5–6), (2022), pp. 539–556.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas Renard, 'Partnering for Global Security: The EU, its Strategic Partners and Transnational Security Challenges', *European Foreign Affairs Review* 21(1), (2016), pp. 9–33.

<sup>6</sup>Yinan He, '40 Years in Paradox: Post-normalization Sino-Japanese Relations', *China Perspectives*, (4), (2013).

<sup>7</sup>Filippo Boni, 'Strategic Partnership and China's Diplomacy in Europe: Insights from Italy', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 25(4), (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481221127571>.

the stakeholders collaborate against common security threats. Defense cooperation then becomes a mutually preferred means of coalescing and serves as the defining criteria of the strategic relationship.

Strategic relationship as a concept is normally vague in depicting the exact nature of the relationship between non-allies. It entails a conundrum of defining frameworks. Its loosest form expresses a relationship of convenience dominantly driven by utilitarian needs on the one end. On the opposite end, it takes the form of quasi alliance which this article defines as a strategic relationship based on institutionalized mutual security and military support without an official pact of alliance signed by top leaders of the parties involved. This differs from Cha's definition: 'two states that remain non-allies but share a third power as a common ally'; but comes near to Gabuev's, namely soft alliance.<sup>8</sup> In-between there are a number of variants of alignment such as structured coalescing against targeted foes, targeted grouping on strategic foreign affairs, coordinated positions on specific world issues, and so on.<sup>9</sup> In the definitional term, a non-allied strategic partnership with strong military cooperation points to the direction of quasi alliance, as it shares features of an alliance in dealing with powerful opponents together.<sup>10</sup>

A strategic partnership with strong defense cooperation, as in the case of China and Russia, experiences two normal deviations that allies encounter in alliance-making: abandonment and entrapment that underline allies' dilemma in managing the asymmetrical nature of an allied relationship.<sup>11</sup> It is natural for one ally to minimize its sacrifices in handling a crisis endured by another, while it expects to receive full support from allies in offsetting a grave threat to itself. Article 5 in allied treaties such as NATO and Australia, New Zealand, and United States Treaty (ANZUS) obliges members to join others' wars, which may create anxieties of entrapment. Treaty obligations are indeed expensive. This is one reason why NATO membership has been inaccessible to Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, countries do join an alliance relationship to collectively enhance national security, as the benefits provided by the alliance's security insurance outweigh concerns of abandonment or entrapment. Therefore, these deviations rarely dominate an allied relationship.<sup>13</sup>

The concepts of abandonment and entrapment may not be readily applicable to define a non-allied partnership under no treaty obligation. However, when non-allied strategic partners cooperate in an intensified global military confrontation, they constantly face realistic prospects of abandonment and entrapment. This article defines the notion of abandonment in a non-allied context as official or *de facto* withdrawal by one partner from a previously agreed common stance in international affairs, specifically in a way of revoking mutually upheld commitment or institutionalized framework to supporting each other in world affairs. Entrapment is defined as attempts by one partner to involve another in its adventurous action against the latter's will. This is particularly relevant to one partner's war initiatives that would hurt the other's vital national interests. Logically, without treaty bondage, they are more prone to the reality of abandonment and entrapment than allies. Specifically, they would be more resolute not to get directly involved in a military conflict with their strategic partners for fear of being entrapped. This is why a non-allied strategic partnership often falls short of quasi-alliance and changes constantly under different circumstances. In practice,

<sup>8</sup>Alexandra Gabuev, 'A Soft Alliance? Russia—China Relations after the Ukraine War', Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, February 2015; Victor Cha, 'Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism in Asia: The U.S., Japan and Korea', *International Studies Quarterly* 44(2), (2000), pp. 261–291.

<sup>9</sup>Menon, Rajan, 'The Strategic Convergence between Russia and China', *Survival* 39: 2, 1997; Thomas Wilkins, 'Alignment, Not Alliance—the Shifting Paradigm of International Security Cooperation: towards a Conceptual Taxonomy of Alignment', *Review of International Studies* 38(1), (2012), pp. 53–76.

<sup>10</sup>Frederick Kliem, 'Why Quasi-alliance Will Persist in the Indo-Pacific? The Fall and Rise of Quad', *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 7(3), (2020).

<sup>11</sup>Glenn H. Snyder, 'The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics', *World Politics* 36(4), (1984), pp. 461–495.

<sup>12</sup>Joshua Shiffrin, 'Why NATO Should Be Cautious about Admitting Ukraine', Commentary, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 24, 2023.

<sup>13</sup>Stephen Walt, 'Why Alliances Endure or Collapse', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 39(1), (1997), pp. 166–167.

however, it is comparable to allies' behavior to avert entanglement—being dragged into an unwanted war.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, a shared external threat galvanizes strategic partners to forge concerted responses from a position of weakness. It functions as a force for congruence, encouraging countries to stick together.<sup>15</sup> Conceptually, they engage in quasi-alliance building, a notion that more emphasizes the process and objective of quasi-alliance rather than the status of quasi-alliance per se. Quasi-alliance *building* allows more flexible state behavior for non-allies to coalesce and is thus more subject to deeds of abandonment and entrapment. This visibly differs from Korea/Japan quasi-alliance under US sponsorship.<sup>16</sup> Quasi-alliance building is designed to mitigate vulnerability in an unfavorable military balance. Under the circumstances, the non-allied strategic partners would be more anxious about abandonment. At the same time, confronting a superior opponent would entail great and uneven costs to partners, which makes them more conscious of unnecessary involvement in each other's military conflict. Vigilance against entrapment becomes a rational choice and explains why partners seek quasi-alliance building to realize common interests rather than quasi-alliance as an end status.

### **Balancing the Need of Mutual Support and Avoidance of Overt Commitment**

China and Russia belong to a small cohort of non-allied major powers that need to manage the challenge of abandonment and entrapment in order to maximize self-interests and minimize risks in quasi-alliance building. Literature on the defects of alliance-making in terms of abandonment and entrapment is rich.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, the abandonment/entrapment literature for non-allied major powers is relatively scant, except for the literature on non-allied state interactions in the U.S.-centered security networks. However, the theoretical logic is similar and simple: if regime survival is at stake for Partner A, it will fear abandonment by Partner B; but if helping Partner B's drastic action puts its own survival at stake, Partner A will fear entrapment.<sup>18</sup>

The prospects of abandonment and entrapment are both structural in the Sino-Russo relationship, as the two countries endure a series of conflicts of interest that are long-lasting and difficult to resolve.<sup>19</sup> For instance, the absence of shared values erodes the foundation of the Sino—Russian ties. Geopolitically, Russia concerns about Chinese penetration into Central Asia through the BRI, while China is unhappy to Russia's arms sales to countries hostile to China, e.g. India.<sup>20</sup> Further, the bilateral relationship long suffers a negative historical legacy. The collective memories of past unpleasant encounters still hold firmly, e.g. over Russia's annexation of Chinese territories in the late Qing and China's siding with the US during the Cold War.<sup>21</sup> Economic interdependence is asymmetric and concentrated on a small number of commodities. Strategically, Russia and China both entertain hope to reset relations with the West because a non-confrontational relationship with the West is beneficial to them both. This was reflected by Putin's quick embracement of Washington's past signals of 'reset' and underlined why Xi Jinping expresses hope to stabilize Sino-US relations each time he meets Biden. Were such an opportunity presented to them, their close partnership could

<sup>14</sup>Michael Beckley, 'The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks for U.S. Defense Pacts', *International Security* 39(4), (2015), pp. 7–24.

<sup>15</sup>Stephen Walt, 'Testing the Theory of Alliance Formation: The Case of Southeast Asia', *International Organization* 2(2), (1988), p. 275.

<sup>16</sup>Victor Cha, 2000.

<sup>17</sup>For instance, Even Resnick, *Allies of Convenience: A Theory of Bargaining in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Columbia University Press, 2019); Glenn Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, Cornell University Press, 1997; Yoichi Funabashi (ed.), *Alliance Tomorrow: Security Arrangements after the Cold War*, (Tokyo: Tokyo Foundation, 2001).

<sup>18</sup>Senior Colonel Du Chao (杜超), Research on China's Security Environment and Future War in the 21 Century (21世纪中国未来战争与环境安全问题研究), (Shenyang: Baishan Publishing House, 2015), p. 66.

<sup>19</sup>Rajan Menon, 'The Limits of the Chinese—Russian Partnership', *Survival* 51(3), (2009), pp. 99–130.

<sup>20</sup>Jingdong Yuan, 'What Belt and Road Means for Sino-Russian Relations', *Asia Dialogue*, March 18, 2018.

<sup>21</sup>Niu Jun (牛军), 'Do Not Forget a Warning by Lenin in Managing Sino-Russia Co-existence (中俄相处, 不要忘记列宁的一句话)', *Marching Together in a Same Boat (同舟共进)*, (12), (2014), p. 79.

have become a liability, although such an opportunity becomes increasingly more unthinkable. Militarily, while Beijing shows no support for Russia's Ukraine invasion, Moscow would be unlikely to help Beijing's irredentist war in the South and East China Seas. These features are relevant in relation to the concept of abandonment that are not normally found among the allies. Abandonment is thus existential as a logic in the Sino-Russo partnership and influences leadership mentality. For instance, Russia's cold reaction to the Xi-Biden summit in the US in November 2023 vividly reflects this relevance. Beijing's 'No-limits' characterization of the Sino-Russian relationship may just mirror-imagine its anxiety over Moscow's non-committal attitudes in regard to Washington's intensified encirclement of China under its Indo-Pacific strategy. When the 'No-limits' rhetoric was uttered, it was Beijing that bore heavier US pressure and may have hoped to tighten ties with Moscow against prospects of abandonment. The Ukraine war may have created the opposite effect, as the rhetoric is no longer heard.

In a similar lens, each of them understandably guards against entrapment by the other's adventurism. Historically they experienced painful lessons. Stalin entrapped China in the Korean War against Mao's willingness.<sup>22</sup> He achieved his objective of bleeding the US in a major war but at the expense of the death of 170,000 Chinese soldiers.<sup>23</sup> The People's Liberation Army (PLA) bombarded the Quemoy Island of Taiwan in August 1958 amid Khrushchev's visit to Beijing. In breach of an earlier bilateral agreement on the secrecy of the visit, Mao Zedong unilaterally announced this summit in Chinese media when Khrushchev was on his way back to Moscow. Mao intentionally used this disclosure to signal Soviet support for the strike against Khrushchev's willingness, which the latter interpreted as an act of entrapment.<sup>24</sup> These happened when the two countries were even treaty allies. Today both countries back each other up over most international issues and the two militaries deepen cooperation. However, Putin launched the Ukraine invasion just 4 days after his Beijing summit with Xi Jinping when Xi uttered the 'No-limits' pledge to advance the partnership in February 2022. Is this comparable to Mao using Khrushchev's 1958 visit to Beijing to convey a false signal of Soviet support for the PLA bombardment of Kinmen? Such an association enters people's minds instinctively, even if Putin later denied that he informed Xi about his invasion plan.<sup>25</sup> Entrapment or not, the Western media linked the two events together and Beijing was in an awkward situation to explain.<sup>26</sup> This episode presents a current example to testify the possibility of entrapment in the relationship of strategic partnership.

Therefore, whether Beijing and Moscow can strike a sensible balance between avoiding entrapment and preventing abandonment will determine the vigor and long-term fate of their strategic partnership. For the time being, Beijing and Moscow have firmly preferred to stick together. As mentioned earlier, Beijing and Moscow pursue substantiated military cooperation as a chosen choice to offset a regime-threatening preventive war that might be imposed upon them from a third-party origin.<sup>27</sup> The more serious this threat is perceived, the less likely abandonment occurs. Strategically, both countries see US reluctance to fight

<sup>22</sup>Elizabeth Stanley, 'Ending the Korean War: The Role of Domestic Coalition Shifts in Overcoming Obstacles to Peace', *International Security* 34(1), (2009), pp. 42–48.

<sup>23</sup>The PLA Academy of Military Science, *The 70 years of the PLA*, The PLA Academy of Military (Science Press, 1997), p. 123.

<sup>24</sup>Thomas Bernstein and Hua-yu Li (eds.), *The Soviet Influence on China in the 1950s*, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), pp. 131–152. *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*, Volume 3. Version of Chinese translation, Beijing: Social Science Literature Publishing House, 2006. Yan Mingfu and Zhu Ruizhen (閻明復, 朱瑞真), 'Recording the Four Meetings between Mao and Khrushchev in 1958 (憶1958年毛澤東與赫魯曉夫的四次會談)', *Journal of CPC Historic Documentation* (中共黨史資料), No. 2, 2006, p. 30–31.

<sup>25</sup>In his Valdai speech on October 27, 2022, Putin revealed that he did not inform Xi of his plan of invasion at their Beijing summit in February; *Greater China Live*, Shenzhen TV, October 28, 2022.

<sup>26</sup>See Chris Buckley, "'Abrupt Changes': China Caught in a Bind Over Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', *The New York Times*, February 25, 2022; Victoria Cavaliere, 'US Sees China in "Awkward" International Position on Ukraine', *Bloomberg*, February 27, 2023.

<sup>27</sup>Jack Levy, 'Preventive War and Democratic Politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 2008. The PLA's Western War Zone Commander Wang Jianghai linked China's state survival to such situations. Wang Jianghai (汪江海), 'The War Zone Must

two wars against two major military powers simultaneously.<sup>28</sup> This is the reason why Dr Kissinger advised Trump to reset relations with Putin to loosen up the Sino—Russian alignment<sup>29</sup> and proves the value of their quasi-alliance building. To Beijing, a Russia hostile to the West pins down a huge proportion of NATO resources in Europe and constrains its Asian expansion. For instance, NATO has committed \$US 178 billion to aid Ukraine by February 2024.<sup>30</sup> The Ukraine war has been one factor in the US delaying delivery of weapons that Taiwan has already paid for.<sup>31</sup> Likewise for Moscow, the US Asian pivot targeting China has negatively affected Washington's European focus and troop deployment. This may have somewhat helped reduce the chances of a direct Russia-US military clash. Common concern over regime survival works against acts of abandonment.

In addition, the two armed forces mutually benefit from close cooperation in military terms. For instance, Moscow can then concentrate on Europe with a minimum number of soldiers deployed in the Far East, which is three times more expensive than deployed in Europe.<sup>32</sup> Beijing has viewed a solid partnership with Russia as a key peace dividend at the end of the Cold War. It has relieved Beijing's worry of being dragged into a two-front fight simultaneously from land borders in the north and coastal regions in the south. Threats of land invasion from the north have haunted the Chinese for centuries, except for a short period of the Sino-Soviet alliance.<sup>33</sup> Now a secured north border allows the PLA to prioritize the maritime conflicts, especially around the first island chains in the West Pacific. These factors underline the Sino-Russian depiction of their strategic partnership as 'not an alliance but better than an alliance', which is theoretically unique for an analysis. It touches upon the core of the realist concepts of alignment resilience and vulnerability. Conceptually, it reflects efforts of quasi-alliance building, embedding shared objectives in the exercise of strategic autonomy. Flexible patterns of interaction allow Beijing and Moscow to swiftly emphasize or de-emphasize some aspects of their partnership over others in response to the evolving international circumstances.<sup>34</sup> Specifically, it is their increased combat sophistication of joint exercises in the bilateral military cooperation that has worked against the odds of abandonment, as the two states have realized that there is no better alternative to this objective.<sup>35</sup> This has set the relevant context for the case studies of this article.

In contrast, amid a war by one partner or in preparing for a major war by each, prospects of entrapment may present a challenge to them in the dialectics of 'quasi-alliance building'. There are repeated calls by security experts in both countries to adopt 'Plan B' (the option of military alliance) but the leadership firmly selects default on such an option. Under no hard treaty obligation, it is easier for them to pursue their own national interest independently while reaping cooperative benefits.<sup>36</sup> For example, Beijing has enjoyed greater leeway in its response to the Ukraine war than Belarus which suffers collateral Western sanctions. Indeed, both Beijing and Moscow regard freedom of action in world geopolitics as a core national interest. This contrasts sharply with an

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Lift its War Fighting Capability Through the Nation's Integrated Strategic Mobilization System (依托一体化国家战略体系和能力提高战区备战打赢能力), *Study Times* (学习时报), May 15, 2023.

<sup>28</sup>General Milley, ex-chair of the Joint Chief of Staff, made it clear that 'fighting China and Russia simultaneously would be very difficult for the U.S. Melley's testimony to the House Armed Service Committee hearing on March 29, 2024. David Vergun, 'Milley Says War with China and Russia Not Inevitable', *DoD News*, March 29, 2023.

<sup>29</sup>M.K. Bhadrakumar, 'US-Russia-China Triangle in Flux, Again', *The Indian Punchline*, July 24, 2018.

<sup>30</sup>*Fact Sheet: US Assistance to Ukraine*, Institute for the Study of War, *ISW Press*, February 8, 2024.

<sup>31</sup>Miaojung Lin and Debby Wu, 'Delay in US Arms Shipment to Taiwan Improving, Official Says', *Bloomberg*, November 7, 2023. Accessed November 15, 2023. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-11-07>.

<sup>32</sup>Comments by Senior Colonel Li Li, Ret. (李莉) of the PLA National Defense University, *News in Focus Today* (今日关注), CCTV-4, April 13, 2013.

<sup>33</sup>Li Yuanpeng (李元鹏), 'The Late-Qing Debate on National Defence Priority: Coastal Line Defense or Land Border Defense (晚清关于战略重点的海防与塞防之争)', *China Military Science*, (2), (2002), p. 57.

<sup>34</sup>Liselotte Odgaard, 'Chinese Perspectives on Alliance and Alignment: Entrapment Concerns in China's Foreign Relations', *Asian Affairs* 54(3), (2023), pp. 432–452.

<sup>35</sup>Bobo Lo, *The Sino-Russian Partnership: Assumptions, Myths and Realities*, *Russie.Nei.Report*, No. 42, Ifri, March 2023.

<sup>36</sup>Former Chinese foreign minister Fu Ying (傅莹), 'Sino-Russian Relations: Alliance or Partnership (中俄关系: 是盟友还是伙伴)', *Contemporary International Relations* (现代国际关系), (4), (2016), p. 10.

alliance relationship where allies surrender a degree of sovereign power to pursue collective defense. Indeed, they choose to pay a heavy premium for the security insurance offered by Article 5 of alliance treaties, e.g. ANZUS.

Therefore, the Sino-Russian partnership is ultimately drawn by the very depiction of non-alliance, amid the efforts to produce an effect of quasi-alliance making to show to the common foe, as embodied in the contents of their joint war drills. Such dialectics determine the nature of Sino-Russo military cooperation as a peacetime endeavor to deter a physical top-power war rather than an expression of mutual support on the battlefield unless both of them are simultaneously pushed into armed conflict against the same enemy. As a result, aversion to entrapment in a military crisis is the bottom line for the non-allied strategic partners to abide by. This precaution has been structured into the routine emphasis of China and Russia on enhanced military cooperation through operational interconnectivity, while they try to eschew the structural constraints of an alliance relationship in doing so. More practically, this dialectic reveals the strong need for both sides to hedge against the prospects of a war with the superpower. This need has obliged China and Russia to prioritize attaining military security over other structural problems in bilateral relations.

### **Sino-Russian Military Cooperation: The Same Dream in Separate Beds?**

Strategically, the Sino-Russian quasi-alliance building is designed against the US effort to expand NATO into Russia's backyard and to the Indo-Pacific to encircle China.<sup>37</sup> Washington's identification of China and Russia as its primary foes has moved the trilateral interaction again in the direction of two against one, albeit with the position of each party changed as compared with the Cold War Strategic Triangular. This reflects a situation in which three major powers are sufficiently important to each other that a change in the relationship between any two of them has a great impact on the interests of the third.<sup>38</sup> The strengthened Sino-Russian partnership parallels the worsening of Sino-US and Russo-US relations to the point where Beijing and Moscow have promoted targeted military cooperation by raising the levels of combat sophistication in their joint exercises. In this context, military leaders in all three countries are increasingly preoccupied with a new normal of 'fight tonight'.<sup>39</sup> General Milley, ex-chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, acknowledged in March 2023 that at any moment about 80% of US soldiers were put on high combat alert, which was unprecedented in US current history.<sup>40</sup> Today, the trilateral interaction has greatly militarized, potentially uplifting the Sino-US Thucydides rivalry to the level of a potential armed conflict.<sup>41</sup>

### **The Opaqueness of Military Cooperation**

Ultimately, it is the military power that Beijing and Moscow count in ensuring regime security. Yet they have intentionally left the details of their military cooperation less elaborated. For instance, third-party targeting is an un-pronounced feature of the partnership, although it is clearly demonstrated by the operational nature of Sino-Russian war drills and by the geographic locations for these exercises to be displayed. Military coalescing and third-party targeting are both natural and rational for China and Russia to counter Western challenges. However, Beijing's official statement has disguised such a tendency, constrained by its 3-Nos principle in conducting the Sino-Russian partnership, namely No alliance, No confrontation, and No third-country targeting, which was first

<sup>37</sup>Gauri Marain Mathur, 'Return of the Old Giant to the Indo-Pacific', *Journal of Defense Studies* 16(2), (2022), pp. 93–99.

<sup>38</sup>Francine Frankel and Harry Harding (eds.), *The India–China Relationship: Rivalry and Engagement* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>39</sup>'Fight tonight' is a quotation of Admiral Harris, former commander of the U.S. Pacific Command. Now it has become the buzzword of U.S. military getting combat ready vis-a-vis China and Russia.

<sup>40</sup>Milley, M., *Interview with Defense One*, March 31, 2023.

<sup>41</sup>Suisheng Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy*, (Stanford University Press, 2023); Gompert, D., *War with China: Thinking through the Unthinkable*, RAND, 2016.



stated in the *China-Russia Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation* in 2001; and was reiterated repeatedly ever since.<sup>42</sup>

As shown by the detailed analysis of the case study in the later sections, Sino-Russian military cooperation is at the high end of such cooperation among non-allied major powers.<sup>43</sup> For instance, the two militaries simulate realistic battlefield situations in their routinized war games. The establishment of a joint command and control structure and sharing of sensitive military intelligence during the exercises do not normally occur among non-allies. In doing so, both Beijing and Moscow have signaled that their strategic relationship is not rhetorical but one with military teeth. On the other hand, the current Sino-Russian military cooperation is a peacetime endeavor, as mentioned earlier. On the other, the two militaries are hedging against a worst-case scenario where the other's war becomes 'our war', if an armed conflict takes place simultaneously in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, e.g. Russia vs NATO or China vs Taiwan.<sup>44</sup> The two militaries operationally prepare for such a prospect through war drills, sending an opaque signal for the opponents to guess what they would do in such a circumstance.

### **Managing the Abandonment/Entrapment Dynamics**

A basic IR consumption is that combat-oriented cooperation has to anchor in solid mutual trust. Substantiating military relationships through sophisticated war drills helps address the issue of confidence building and serves the purpose of alleviating concerns of abandonment. Although the Sino-Russian depiction of their relationship—'not an alliance but better than an alliance' – highlights the fact of being 'no allies', the wording of 'better than an alliance' is rich in meaning. Its connotation of avoiding entrapment" is anchored in both sides' willingness to take joint action in imaginable scenarios without treaty obligation. Their increasingly sophisticated military exercises testify such a point of departure, which has created momentum for Sino-Russian military cooperation to transcend the stage of mutual confidence building to one towards effective defense coordination in major power rivalry.<sup>45</sup> The two case studies in this article show the beginning of this transition following Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea. Not visibly affected by Russia's war in Ukraine, this transition has further evolved into an open show of force against specific targets with regular joint combat controls in sensitive geostrategic locations.

On the other hand, Beijing's caution against entanglement continues to dominate its overall design for military cooperation with Russia. First, since the two militaries signed *The Cooperation Agreement of the Ministry of National Defense* in 1993, only a limited number of official documents have been adopted to guide defense cooperation. Yet most of them are either issue-oriented or set on an *ad hoc* basis. These are generally soft-institutionalization measures of military diplomacy in the form of regular ministerial dialogues, consultation, forums of military researchers, and contextual provisions for each joint event. One such agreement advocates an exchange of view on military AI application by the two militaries, again with no binding effect on both.<sup>46</sup> Beijing and Moscow have so far avoided formulating an overarching and legally written pact signed by national leaders to underpin military cooperation. For instance, the two militaries have long achieved routinized

<sup>42</sup>Beijing repeatedly adjusts the 3-Nos principles. For instance, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi conveyed his 3-Nos version when visiting Russia in 2023: No change in Beijing's position on the Ukraine War (supporting Ukraine's sovereignty) no matter how good Sino-Russian relations are; No change of China's position on normal trade relations with Russia, no matter how powerful the West's sanction pressure is; and No change in China's position on military cooperation with Russia with no compromise on Western demand and no self-constraints over the way of cooperation because this is China's sovereign right.

<sup>43</sup>Dmitry Gorenburg, Paul Schwartz, Brian Waidelich and Elizabeth Wishnick, *Russian-Chinese Military Cooperation: An Increasingly Unequal Partnership*, CNA Research Memorandum, March 2023, p. 68.

<sup>44</sup>The author's interview with a senior PLA officer during the 9<sup>th</sup> Xiangshan Forum in Beijing, October 21, 2019.

<sup>45</sup>Alexander Korolev, 'How closely aligned are China and Russia', *International Politics* 57(5), (2019), pp. 760–789.

<sup>46</sup>The agreement was arrived in an online conference between China's new defense minister Dong Jun and his Russian counterpart on 31 January 2024. A joint forum would be created for the effort. *South China Morning Herald*, 4 February 2024.

troop visits to each other's territories but they have so far selected to enter no formal troop-visit agreements.

There is an absence of detailed provisions in the signed military agreements on sensitive military issues, i.e. the intelligence sharing schemes. These formal agreements are not necessarily a criterion of an alliance relationship, as non-allies also sign them in military cooperation, e.g. between Japan and Korea. Lack of them, however, indicates how far the concerned parties are willing to go for legally abiding long-term commitment. China and Russia intentionally create grey areas to interact with flexibility on issues sensitive to them. This may mean that they intend to retain a convenient exit from the existing cooperative arrangements. The vigilance on entrapment thus remains to be relevant. On the other hand, as the two case studies show, Beijing and Moscow have worked to alleviate the liabilities that come with their expedient approach towards such a strategic matter of defense cooperation. For instance, intelligence sharing is conducted at the service level and for each joint exercise. This provides sufficient room for the two militaries to deepen operational interconnectivity and trust among senior officers.

### Sino-Russian Military—Technological Cooperation

The nature of Sino—Russian military ties cannot be fully understood without an operation analysis to decode the details of their military cooperation, which covers three basic categories: 1) normal military diplomacy, including exchange of high-level visits and students; and organizing multilateral forums; 2) military—technological transfers and joint R&D projects; and 3) routinized military exercises. This article concentrates on the latter two items.

Sino-Russian Military cooperation is historically rooted and was the first item to be resumed when the two countries achieved rapprochement in 1989. China's top leaders then, e.g. Premier Li Peng and Admiral Liu Huaqing studied in Russia in the 1950s and were eager to restore Sino-Russian military relations. They set arms purchases from Russia as a priority after the West imposed an arms embargo on China in 1989.<sup>47</sup> Russia reciprocated the Chinese call with equal enthusiasm as its domestic orders dried up.<sup>48</sup> The successful deal of Su-27 served as the starter of the post-Cold-War military cooperation and generated tremendous momentum in deepening the strategic partnership in the next three decades. Indeed, the two sides' substantial mutual needs to conduct techno-military cooperation have geopolitically and functionally weakened each's concern of abandonment and entrapment as they are bound by mutual benefits. Moreover, what began as a business focus gradually evolved into a facilitator for Sino-Russian quasi-alliance building under the shared threat perception, even though the end result falls far short of the expectations of the two sides.

### Geopolitics and Functionality of Arms Sales

First, there was a geopolitical fallout from the arms sales. China brought Su-27s when the aircraft was not sold even to Soviet allies. Inadvertently, Moscow gained strategic influence over China through the means of arms trade. For instance, for a long time, the PLA Air Force had to plan the induction of its third and fourth-generation combat aircraft based on the availability of Russian jet engines. However, arms trade *per se* played a relatively minor role, if compared to the fact that it eventually drove the overall Sino-Russian partnership to a strategic height. Its geostrategic impact is far beyond the dollar terms. Russian arms have contributed to China's rise and facilitated global power transition.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup>Liu Huaqing (刘华清), *The memoirs of Liu Huaqing (刘华清回忆录)*, Beijing: The PLA Publishing House (解放军出版社), 2004, p. 594.

<sup>48</sup>Michael Chase, et al, *Russia-China Relations: Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines*, NBR Special Report, No. 66 July 2017, p. 12.

<sup>49</sup>You Ji, 'Friends in Needs or Comrades in Arms: Sino-Russo Military Cooperation', in *The Global Arms Trade*, ed. Andrew Tan (Routledge, 2010), pp. 52–64

Second, Russian arms were a quick fix for China to cope with its most urgent security challenges. The PLA was in a deep transitional vacuum in weapons modernization in the early 1990s. The purchase of Su-27s, Sovremenny destroyers and Kilo submarines readily narrowed the generational gap in weapons with its chief adversaries. Russian arms served several significant functions for PLA transformation: (a) overcoming its weakest links in war preparation against major high-technology powers, i.e. combat aircraft and modern warships; (b) enabling reverse engineering that helped China produce its own advanced weapon systems, such as J-16s and *Yuan* submarines; and (c) improving the combat readiness of its crack units to fight a limited regional war. The aforementioned functions explain China's consistent top-ranking status.<sup>50</sup> Table 1 provides an overview of the conventional arms sales between Russia and China, highlighting China's substantial reliance on Russian arms over an extended period. In 2013, for instance, China purchased 24 Su-35s and four Lada class submarines worth US\$ 4 billion.<sup>51</sup>

Third, the practical importance of Russian arms notwithstanding, the bilateral military cooperation has moved to joint R&D of military technology in sensitive areas, which serves as a symbol of deepening cooperation.<sup>52</sup> Major General Meng Xiangqing referred to the evolution from the one-way traffic of Russian arms to China to two-way arms trade and joint military R&D as the new age of bilateral cooperation with greater depth and breadth.<sup>53</sup>

Russia still leads in several key areas of weapon technologies that provide a shortcut for the PLA to modernize if the Chinese could acquire them through trading. The jet engine is one such item, with Russian technologies greatly contributing to the Chinese production of advanced combat aircraft and cargo planes, such as the J-20 and Y-20. China can now produce advanced engines, such as the WS-15 that empowers the J-20 aircraft.<sup>54</sup> However, the yield is inadequate to meet the demand and further quality improvement is needed to increase reliability. China still depends on Russian jet engine RD-33 to equip its export version of Xiaolong-Block III.<sup>55</sup> Rocket engines are another area in which Russia has helped China's space industries, especially for launching heavy satellites into high-altitude orbit. Russia also excels in building nuclear submarines, at which China lags far behind. The two militaries have collaborated on the new generation of SSBNs for quite some time.<sup>56</sup>

At the same time, China leads Russia in defense electronics development. By 2017, China had sold semiconductors and computer chips worth US\$1 billion to Russian consumers, including the military establishment.<sup>57</sup> China is the largest shipbuilder in the world and can help the recovery of the Russian navy. In recent years, Russian military delegations have repeatedly visited Chinese shipbuilding companies. For example, a Russian naval delegation specifically requested to inspect China's Type 055 cruisers in early 2023, and a such visit was arranged.<sup>58</sup> In June 2023 Russian naval chief Admiral Yevmenov expressed interest in acquiring certain types of major surface combatants during his China tour, e.g. Type 075 amphibious assault ships. This was an important topic in his meeting with Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu.<sup>59</sup> As part of Li Shangfu's Russia visit in August 2023, the Chinese defense industries exhibited hundreds of their high-tech and AI-aided

<sup>50</sup>Pieter D. Wezeman, Justine Gadon And Siemon T. Wezeman, Trends In International Arms Transfers, 2022, Sipri Fact Sheet, March 2023.

<sup>51</sup>Sino-Russian military cooperation enters a new phase (中俄军事合作进入新阶段), *People Digest* (人民文摘) (5), (2013), p. 45.

<sup>52</sup>Putin's remarks to Li Shangfu on April 16, 2023. *New China News Agency*, April 17, 2023. 'Sino-Russian military cooperation enters a new phase', *People Digest* (5), (2013), p. 45.

<sup>53</sup>The New Honey-Moon Period for Sino-Russian Arms Trade and Joint R&D of High-End Weapons Systems', *China News Week*, No. 3, 15 January 2012, p. 56. *China-Russia Information Net*, January 17, 2013. Accessed July 15, 2023 [www.chinaru.info](http://www.chinaru.info).

<sup>54</sup>Senior Colonel Shen Jijun, the PLA Air Force spokesman, announced this development at the 2022 Zhuhai Airshow. See *Global Times*, November 10, 2022, p. 7.

<sup>55</sup>Comments by Major general Fu Qianshao, Ret. To Dajiatan (Military Talk), *CCTV Military Channel*, December 5, 2023.

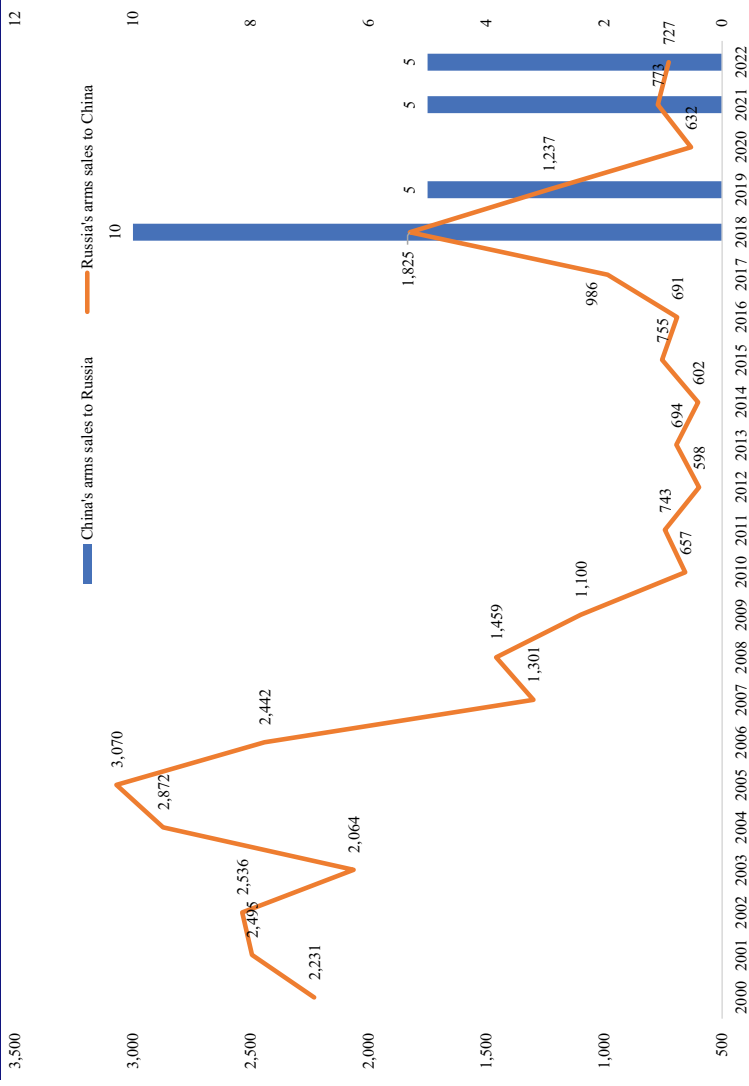
<sup>56</sup>'China-Russia in a Nuclear Sub Counter to AUKUS', *Asian Times*, October 23, 2023.

<sup>57</sup>'China Shows its Advanced Military Equipment in the Moscow Defense Industrial Fair (中国参展莫斯科国防工业博览会), *The Military Intelligence Live* (军情直播间), Shenzhen TV, July 30, 2017.

<sup>58</sup>Lima Guanhua, 'Li Shangfu's Russian Visit Shows that the Graver the Strategic Situation in the Region is, the Harder China and Russia Need to Cooperate', *Tenant News and Comments*, August 11, 2023.

<sup>59</sup>Wu Dahui, 'Sino-Russian Military Exercises Convey Peace Signal', *Global Times*, July 24, 2023, p. 8.

**Table 1.** Russia–China conventional arms sales Trend Indicator Values (TIV)



Data collected and compiled by authors, based on the resources from SIPRI (TIV: a unique pricing system developed by SIPRI to measure conventional arms sales).

military products at the Moscow Defense Equipment Show, including their top drones, spacecraft, and telecommunication facilities. The Chinese delegation heads repeatedly mentioned that these were areas of joint R&D projects.<sup>60</sup> In recent years, China and Russia have engaged in joint R&D of some key weapon systems. In the long list of these systems are the next generation of terminal guidance systems for intercontinental ballistic missiles, national and theatre missile defense systems, strategic early warning radar systems, and critical electronic warfare measures.<sup>61</sup>

### **The Challenges in Sino-Russian Military—Technological Cooperation**

Sino-Russian military—technological cooperation has never been business as usual, despite their shared geostrategic and functional needs. Even at the height of Russia's one-way arms sales to China, the two countries had to deal with a resilient clash of interests. For instance, there is a 'price war' in the processes of all arms negotiations, and from Russia's perspective, China is particularly good at bargaining.<sup>62</sup> Other problems are more serious and trouble the two sides: Russia is resentful of China's violations of intellectual property through reverse engineering of its technology. In addition, most arms deals have been seen as more beneficial to China than to Russia.<sup>63</sup> Complementarity in the joint R&D of military equipment has become thinner since the start of the Ukraine war, partly due to China's worries over America's secondary sanctions. Moreover, China increases arms sales in the world markets that are traditionally Russia's. The two countries have entered a course of competition.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, China's enhanced R&D capacities and sophisticated manufacturing industries have substantially altered the supply and demand relations in the Sino-Russian arms trade. A reverse asymmetric dependence may have emerged in favor of China, and this prospect has not been received well by Moscow.

Despite the shared need for joint R&D of military weapons systems, the two militaries have been slow in translating their common desire into action. The case of upgrading the Mi-26 heavy helicopter provides a case to prove this point. The PLA was greatly impressed by the Mi-26's contribution to China's 2008 Wenchuan earthquake rescue operations. Meanwhile, the heavy transport helicopter is still a blank in the PLA's inventory. For the Russian military, the Mi-26 was developed in the Cold War era and is now mechanically old and electronically obsolete. China could help financially in its upgrade in particular, given the lack of financial resources on the Russian side. However, mutual need is not always a recipe for smooth cooperation. From the very beginning, Moscow insisted that it would use the existing prototype as its investment share in exchange for the Chinese funds for the upgrade and that it would be solely responsible for the technological side of the project. The PLA, however, demanded that it joins the setting of technological standards in addition to its monetary contribution. This was important for the PLA in its own planning for future warfare, which was significantly different from Russia's. The negotiation soon ran into an impasse.<sup>65</sup> Russia simply wanted to copy its joint R&D of the BrahMos missile program with India in the Sino-Russian Mi-26 project, which mainly involved Russian technology and Indian money. This is unacceptable to the PLA.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, China was eager to absorb the technology of modern heavy

<sup>60</sup>The Expansion of Sino-Russian Cooperation on Military Technologies', *The Morning News*, Phoenix TV, August 16, 2023.

<sup>61</sup>Dmitry Gorenburg, *An Emerging Strategic Partnership: Trends in Russia-China Military Cooperation*, George Marshall European Centre for Security Studies, No. 54, April 2020.

<sup>62</sup>According to Senior Colonel Ma Qinghua, one of the Chinese negotiators, Russia demanded US\$50 million apiece as the aircraft was equivalent to the U.S. F-15s, which had a market price of US\$50 million. Through hard bargaining, the PLA won the lowest price that it originally planned. Ma Qinghua (马庆华), "20 Years of Sino-Russian Military-Technological Cooperation: Personal Experience (亲历中俄军事技术合作20年)", *Naval and Merchant Ships (舰船知识)* (1), (2014), p. 18.

<sup>63</sup>Paradorn Rangsimaporn, 'Russia's Debate on Military-Technological Cooperation with China: From Yeltsin to Putin', *Asian Survey* 46(3), (2006), p. 479.

<sup>64</sup>For instance, the Chinese MBT VT1A won Morocco's contract over Russia's T-90S in 2010. China Defense Blog. Accessed August 8, 2023. <https://china-defense.blogspot.com>.

<sup>65</sup>The Evolution of the Aviation Wing of the PLA Army', Chat on military affairs (茶话会), No. 71; Chinese online forum for professionals to discuss military matters, February 2, 2022.

<sup>66</sup>Senior Colonel Du Wenlong (杜文龙) comments, Military Intelligence Live (军情直播间), Shenzhen TV, July 30, 2017.

helicopters, which Russia guarded jealously. More structurally, the suspension of this joint R&D project simply reflected their lingering mistrust in sensitive arms deals. The above-mentioned problems have visibly weakened the potential of Russia–China military-technological cooperation.<sup>67</sup>

Sino–Russian arms business has been marred by the Ukraine war, which has blurred the line between normal peacetime arms deals and arms transfer to aid Russia’s war effort through trade. This changing nature of the Sino-Russian arms business brings the concern of abandonment and entrapment into an issue otherwise not so acutely perceived. Beijing particularly bears the impact lest its enormous trade with the West is adversely affected. For instance, in July 2023 Beijing suddenly banned the export of civilian automatic unmanned equipment to cut off channels for these products to be used in the Ukraine war. Both sides involved in the war had accessed the critical parts of the unmanned vehicles, such as engines, infra-red sensors, and AI-aided seekers, in world markets for their combat function. However, Russia may suffer more from the ban, given that Ukraine’s sources of supply are more diversified. China’s general approach is to suspend most arms sales to Russia for the time being, although Fu Cong, China’s Ambassador to the EU, insisted that Beijing had never promised not to sell arms to Russia during a war: ‘This is a bottom line as a sovereign state’.<sup>68</sup> China’s slippery attitude in this regard has injected uncertainty over the overall military cooperation. Its suspension of arms transfers can be perceived as an act of abandonment, as far as the Russian military is concerned. However, there is little both sides can do to restore the momentum of the two-way arms trade while the Ukraine war continues.

### **Third-Party Targeting: The Combat Driver of Sino–Russian Joint War Drills**

The key to understanding the nature and features of Sino–Russian military exercises, the primary item of bilateral cooperation, is to observe how each military expects the other to counter a common threat, and how deeply they demonstrate this expectation: through a symbolic gesture to show a common stance or one that is combat-intensive against a specific target in war preparation. The recent history of Sino–Russian military exercises reveals that it is the latter that has driven the two militaries to upgrade their war readiness through joint war drills. Under the ‘3-Nos’ constraints the PLA is quiet on the third-party targeting. Russia, in contrast, has been more candid in announcing its anti-West objectives in pursuing joint war games with China. Similarly, the US has never been shy in specifying a country as the target for its exercises with allies under its Indo-Pacific strategy. An interesting question is why Beijing is not straightforward on this, given that it is an open secret to the world. Avoiding complications of entanglement (entrapment) may be the reason.

### ***The Geostrategic Nature of Sino-Russian Military Exercises***

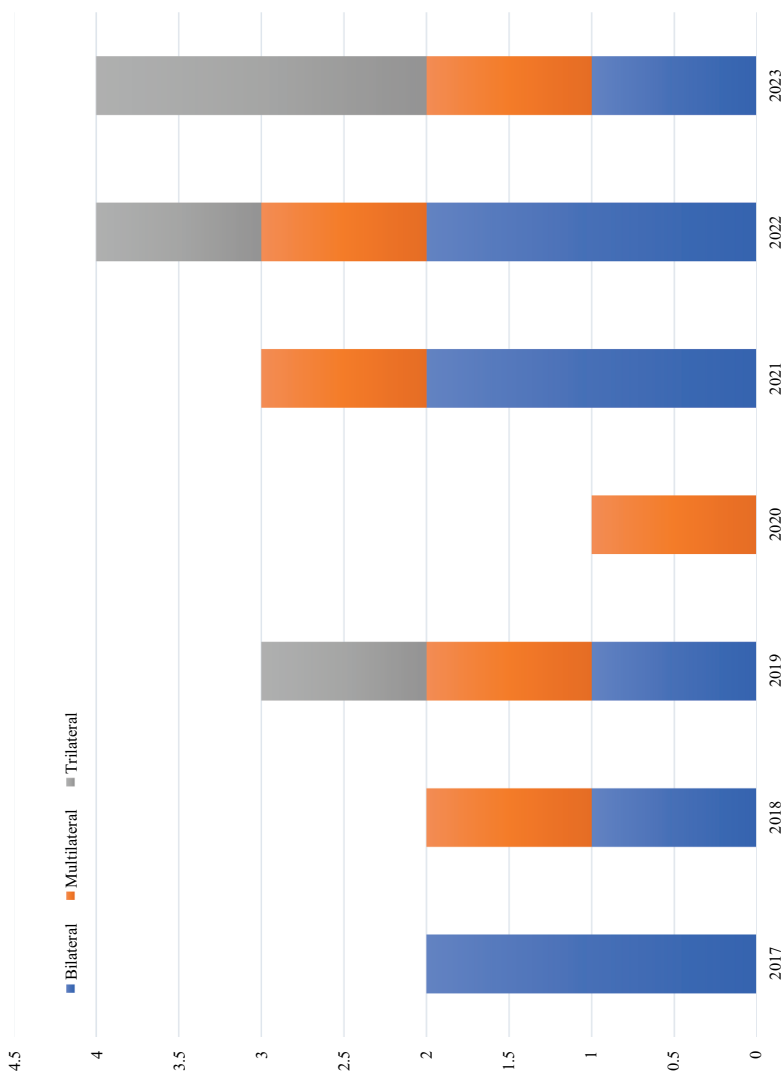
Tables 2 and 3 provide an overview of Sino-Russian war drills since 2017. Of the 19 joint military exercises, nine were bilateral, six were multilateral, and four were trilateral. Notably, joint naval exercises have topped the list of bilateral exercises. The data reconstructs the process in which their military cooperation has been uplifted from non-third-party targeting to focus on common adversaries. It also shows the transformed nature of their war games. When the two militaries began the *Peace Mission Joint Exercise* in 2005, their primary aim was confidence building between themselves. The bulk of their early military exercises were designed against non-traditional security threats, e.g. terrorist acts. They have moved to conduct more combat-oriented exercises since the first Ukraine war in 2014.<sup>69</sup> A momentum to strengthen operational interconnectivity between the two armed forces gathered force leading to current bilateral efforts of enhancing tactical collective operations,

<sup>67</sup>Dmitry Gorenburg, et al, 2023, p. 52.

<sup>68</sup>Fu’s media contacts during the Sino–EU business forum, Brussels, June 15, 2023; *The South China Morning Herald*, June 17, 2023.

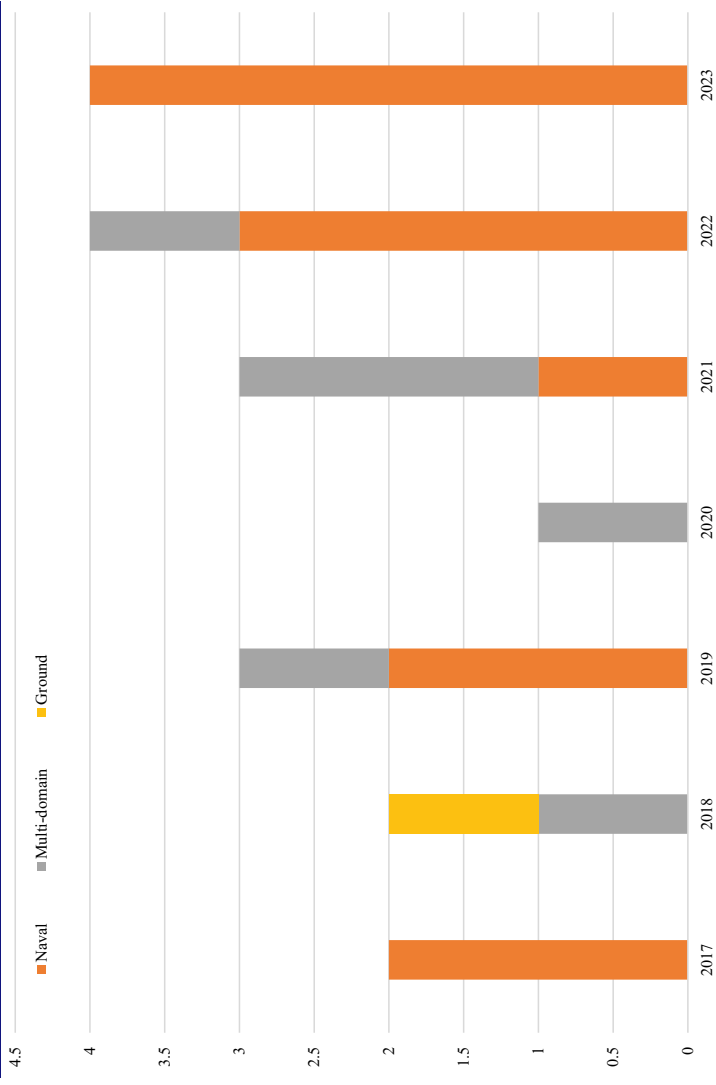
<sup>69</sup>Vasily Kashin, ‘Russia—China Cooperation: A Russian Perspective’, in *Sino-Russian Relations: Perspectives from Russia, China and Japan*, National Bureau of Asian Research, Special Report, No. 79, May 2019, pp. 17–27.

**Table 2.** China–Russia military exercises bilateral/multilateral



Data collected and compiled by authors, based on the resources from Chinese official websites, including the Ministry of National Defense.

**Table 3. China–Russia military exercises by exercise type**



Data collected and compiled by authors, based on the resources from Chinese official websites, including the Ministry of National Defense.



i.e. strategic joint patrols, against a third party. The escalated bloc confrontation has further sharpened the combat intensity of the exercises. Today, Sino-Russian war drills are no longer an issue that captures world attention. It is the upward spiral of combat sophistication of these drills that has transcended the normal military interactions between non-allies.<sup>70</sup> For instance, China also pursues joint military exercises with ASEAN countries, but short of a third-party target, these exercises are always categorized within the non-traditional security areas. Interestingly, the items of Sino-Russian war drills somewhat resemble those of US allies and were not performed when the two countries were allies in the 1950s.

Sino—Russian war games have been purposely staged in sensitive zones in international domains, such as maritime regions to which a third party attaches great importance to its national security. The upgrading of Sino—Russian military cooperation is also vividly reflected by their joint aerial and maritime combat patrols. Joint military exercises are short in duration, held for a fixed time, even if regularly, and have relatively narrow themes. Joint patrols, however, are more focused, combat-ready, and routine. Sino-Russian aerial patrols are carried out by strategic bombers, which is indicative of combat sophistication. Table 4 outlines their combat patrols since 2019, primarily concentrated in the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. Among eight patrols arranged since 2019, two were conducted in the Japan Sea in 2022/23. The two militaries implement these patrols in rotation: China was the host for the patrol of November 2022 and Russia for the one of July/August 2023. Each country's strategic bombers land in the other country to start the patrol. When two Tu-95s accompanied by two supporting Il-76s touched down at the Jianqiao Airport in Hangzhou on 30 November 2022, for the joint patrol of that year, it created a stir among Chinese netizens. The Airport was used by the Soviet Air Force against Japan's invading troops in 1937 in the Sino-Japanese War. That the Russian military aircraft returned to the airport demonstrated a signaling effect to China's neighbors.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, when the PLA's semi-strategic bomber H-6Ks and its heavy combat aircraft J-16s landed in Vladivostok in July 2023, international analysts were taken by surprise at how intimate the two countries had become in military cooperation. It is important to highlight that the exchange of troop visits involving strategic bombers would require extensive preparation, including special logistical arrangements and the exchange of sensitive military information, e.g. military communication signatures. Rarely these would happen among non-allies.

With a large contingent of 11 warships, the two navies also mounted two maritime patrols in the Japan Sea and waters close to the Aleutian Islands of the US in August 2023. Each exercised helicopter landing on the other's warships among other items in the drill. More strategically, they conducted their own freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in these key sea lines of communication (SLOCs) to jointly test the US response on its own FONOPs principles. As anticipated, the Pentagon's reaction was muted. Apart from sending four destroyers to overshadow the passage of the Chinese and Russian vessels, it merely stated that the Chinese and Russian warships were in international waters, although its threat perception was sharpened.<sup>72</sup>

To the PLA, the northward patrol was strategic by nature as part of China's northward expansion strategy. Its significance can be summarized in the following three points:

- (1) China regards the Aleutian Islands to be the northern head of the first island chain to block the PLA Navy's (PLAN) expedition in times of war.<sup>73</sup> The US Indo-Pacific strategy aims to militarize the chain as a key deterrence against China and Russia.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, testing waters around the

<sup>70</sup>Wang Zixian, 'The Frequency of China—Russia Exchanges is Proportional to the Level of Tensions in the Region', *Global Times*, August 15, 2023, p. 4.

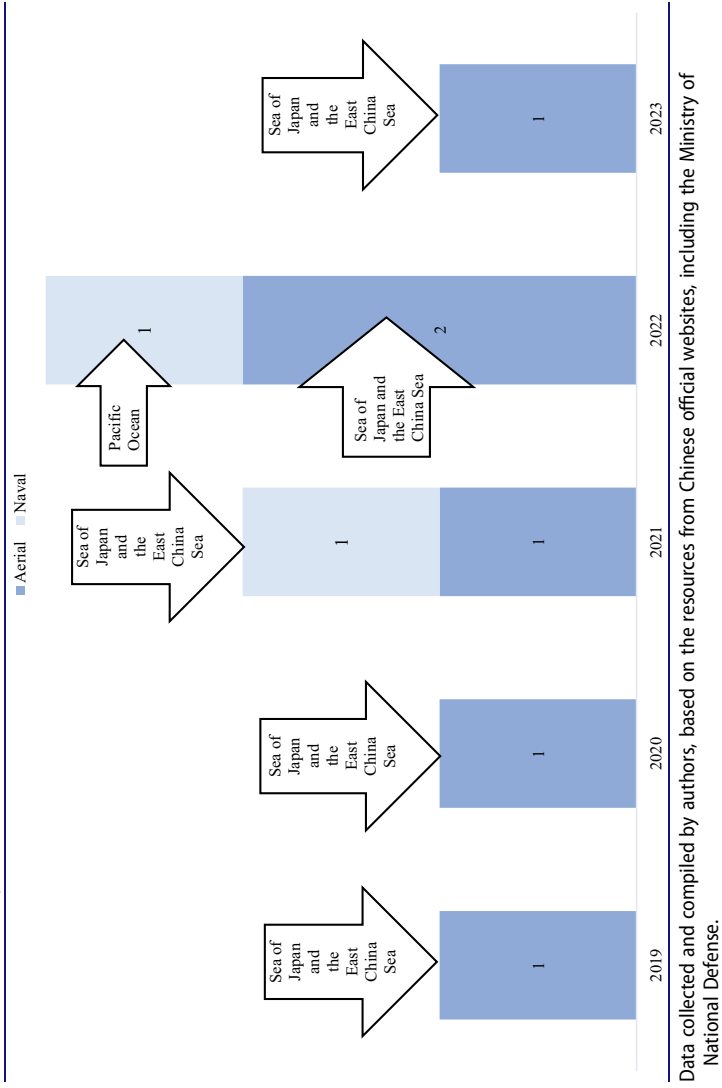
<sup>71</sup>Chat on military affairs (茶话会), No. 155, December 1, 2022.

<sup>72</sup>Michael Gardon and Nancy Yousseff, 'China and Russia Sent Large Naval Patrol Near Alaska', *Washington Post*, August 5, 2023.

<sup>73</sup>Li Jie and Liu Weixing (李杰, 刘卫星), 'The Strategic Status of the Island Chains and Their Impact (岛链的战略地位及影响)', *Journal of the PLA National Defence University* (12), (2000), p. 24.

<sup>74</sup>Matthew Ludlow, 'Losing the Initiative in the First Island Chain', *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 11(2), (2020).

**Table 4.** China–Russia joint patrols



Data collected and compiled by authors, based on the resources from Chinese official websites, including the Ministry of National Defense.

Aleutian Islands can be seen as part of China's war preparation against a US island-chain offensive.

- (2) The northern maritime route has become increasingly more important for China's economy, thanks to climate change. The benefits of China's ships being able to sail through the Arctic to Europe are enormous.<sup>75</sup> However, if such a route indeed becomes a critical global SLOC, the US will not make it easy for Chinese ships to use this passage. This highlights the need for the PLAN to prepare for SLOC warfare from a new angle.
- (3) The Western sanctions against Russia have propelled Moscow to open its key Siberia ports, such as Vladivostok, to Chinese shipment. This is a good opportunity for China's *Revitalizing the Northeast Program*, as its three northern provinces can gain new access to the sea and to the vast resources of the Russian Far East. Sino—Russian northward patrols serve the joint economic endeavors. Collaboration with the Russian Navy assists the PLA in its mission of protecting China's overseas development interests, e.g. the Belt-and-Road Initiative.<sup>76</sup>

Joint war drills convincingly measure the depth of an external military relationship. For instance, Australia's formal participation in the Exercise Malabar reflects the growing strength of Australian-India relations. The PLA no longer just regards Sino—Russian war drills as a symbol of military cooperation but rather as a sharpener for joint operations at the campaign level, again focusing on pre-determined war scenarios.<sup>77</sup> Sino—Russian military cooperation has reached a greater depth than bilateral cooperation in other categories. The two case studies below testify this point concretely.

### **Case One: Sino—Russian Joint Naval Exercise 2017**

The year 2017 may have been epoch-making in international geopolitics. Washington's official identification of China and Russia as its peer and strategic adversaries in its *National Defense Report* and *National Security Report* heralded Sino—US and US-Russian relations to enter an era of intensified militarization. In the same year, China and Russia substantially upgraded the combat sophistication of their annual *Joint Naval Exercise* with several significant firsts.

Hosted by Russia, *Joint Naval Exercise 2017* took place in two phases and each created precedents for the PLAN's reach to the high seas with Russian help. In the first phase, PLA warships sailed to the Baltic Sea to join the Russian fleets, the first time they ventured deeply into European maritime regions. In the second phase, the Russian navy arranged the exercise venue in the Sea of Okhotsk. To the Chinese, Russia's selection of the two locations for the drill was of strategic importance for several reasons. First, the venues were new for the PLAN and allowed PLAN sailors to familiarize themselves with the geographic and meteorological features of the two seas. Second, the Sea of Okhotsk has been the 'castle zone' for Soviet SSBNs to launch ICBMs in the Cold War years. A war game there was a valuable learning opportunity for the PLAN, as it also attempted to establish castle zones in the South China Sea for the same objective.<sup>78</sup> Third, to reach the Sea of Okhotsk the Chinese warships had to pass through sensitive choke-points in the Japan Sea, such as La Perouse Strait. In doing so, Beijing could kill two birds with one stone: showing defiance to Tokyo's hard advocacy of its Indo-Pacific ideas and conducting combat drills en route in an unfamiliar sea. The result was so impressive

<sup>75</sup>Camilla Sorensen, 'The Polar Regions as New Strategic Frontiers for China', *Asia on Tap*, The National Bureau of Asian Research, January 25, 2024, <https://strategic-space.nbr.org/the-polar-regions-as-new-strategic-frontiers-for-china/>; Humpert, *The Future of Arctic Shipping: A New Silk Road for China?* The Arctic Institute, 2013.

<sup>76</sup>China's concept of overseas development interests has now become a key mission of the PLA's external expansion to protect Xi's Belt-and-Road Initiative. Wu Xiangning and You Ji, 'The Geo-strategic and Military Drivers of China's Belt-and-Road Endeavour', *The China Review* 20(4), (2020), pp. 223–244.

<sup>77</sup>Yang Yifan (杨一帆), 'The Huge Strategic Significance of Sino-Russian Naval Exercises(中俄海上军演战略意义重大)' *Xinmin Evening Daily (新民晚报)*, July 23, 2023, p. 4.

<sup>78</sup>Chen Xi (陈曦), 'How should China Break U.S. Underwater Blockade (中国如何打破美国的水下封锁)', *Naval and Merchant Ships (舰船知识)*, (11), (2014), p. 23.

that Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo characterized this 2017 naval exercise as ‘a windfall from the sky for the PLAN’.<sup>79</sup> Subsequently, the Sea of Okhotsk has been set as a standard location for the two navies to conduct war drills, with the most recent one in June 2023.

Moreover, Anti-submarine warfare (ASW) was included in *The Joint Naval Exercise 2017*, the first time an ASW drill ever arranged in a Sino–Russian joint exercise. The drill was composed of two parts: submarine warfare and submarine rescue. An ASW exercise provides a sensitive measure to test the level of trust between any pairs of militaries. It generally takes place only between allied forces. In the *Joint Naval Exercise 2017*, the PLAN’s *Shijiazhuang* destroyer (Type 052D) and *Daqing* frigate (Type 054A) performed the role of submarine hunter. Again, a few important points can be drawn in analyzing this element of the exercise. First, the PLAN has traditionally been weak in ASW. In *Joint Naval Exercise 2017*, it seems to have hunted effectively. According to the Chinese report, the two PLA ships effectively searched for, located, and simulated an attack on Russia’s Kilo submarine (Type 877), a very quiet ship dubbed as ‘black role in the sea’.<sup>80</sup> Second, both sides had to share key military intelligence regarding sonar signatures, electronic warfare measures, communications channels, data on the marine environment, current pace and water temperature, and so on. They also had to reveal specific features of their submarines and anti-submarine weapons systems so that the combat outcome could be verified. Third, as both navies had experienced submarine disasters and failed rescue attempts, the drill was a good opportunity for them to learn from each other the special techniques and concrete methods for such operations. According to the rescue plan, the PLAN’s 867 *Changdao* submarine rescue ship (Type 926) would first locate the stuck submarine over 50 meters under sea with its inactive sonar facility and then dispatch an unmanned underwater vehicle to open the boat and rescue the personnel. The mission was relatively simple but it was a piece of combat simulation.<sup>81</sup> The ASW exercise was then a rare arrangement to prepare the two navies for future ASW in which they would face the most powerful submarine force in the world.<sup>82</sup> Since 2017 ASW exercises have become a standard component of the annual Sino–Russian naval drills.

*The Joint Naval Exercise 2017* was also an important opportunity for a real war simulation. When the exercise was unfolding in Europe and the West Pacific, NATO countries and Japan dispatched surveillance ships and combat aircraft to the scene of the action. This peacetime war game then absorbed some ‘hot war’ features of a combat engagement. It turned out to be particularly tense in the Japan Sea when the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier battle group came nearby. Although both China and Russia were familiar with such close-in monitoring, their response to US overshadowing on the spot acquired additional battlefield dimensions that enriched their joint operations.<sup>83</sup>

### Case Two: Sino–Russian Oriental Land–Air Exercise 2018

China and Russia again enhanced combat sophistication in their 2018 annual military exercises: *The Sino–Russian Oriental Land–Air Exercise 2018*, which also registered impressive firsts in their military cooperation.

Each year Russia organizes a national military exercise involving troops from all war zones, services, and internal security forces. This annual event is part of Russia’s war mobilization at the national level. Moscow had never invited foreign troops until 2018 when it made an exception by embedding *the Sino–Russian Oriental Land–Air Exercise 2018* into this all-force exercise. Therefore, the PLA was present for the first time in another country’s strategic war

<sup>79</sup>*News in Focus Today*, CCTV-4, September 15, 2017.

<sup>80</sup>Li Dapeng of the PLAN Engineering University, ‘Further, harder, and more comparative: the features of Sino-Russian *Joint Naval Exercise 2017*’, *The Chinese Youth Daily*, October 12, 2017, p. 6.

<sup>81</sup>The news brief by the spokesman of the Russian Pacific Fleet. *Sputnik* September 19, 2017. Accessed November 17, 2023 <https://sputniknews.cn/20231226/1055977377.html>; Wei Xiangjing and Hong Yiyi, ‘The Chinese and Russian Navies Conducted ASW for the First Time in the Sea of Okhotsk’, *Nanfang Daily*, September 19, 2017, p. A12.

<sup>82</sup>Chen Yanming (陈彦名), ‘On the Strategic Implications of Sino-Russian Joint Naval Exercise-2017 (对中俄海上联合-2017军演战略意涵的研究)’, *Naval Research Bi-Monthly (海军学术双月刊)* 53(3), (2019).

<sup>83</sup>Comment by Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo (尹卓), in *Focus Today(今日关注)*, CCTV-4, September 15, 2017.

exercise.<sup>84</sup> Meanwhile, it was also the first time that the PLA had dispatched an elite unit of an enhanced brigade (the 78 Group Army) from China's Northern War Theater to join the Russians. Previously, the PLA had only sent troops at the battalion level to participate in joint war drills on foreign land. A battalion is a tactical unit playing an insignificant role in warfare, whereas a brigade is a unit for campaign-level operations. Having a brigade on foreign land acquires greater political implications and military value,<sup>85</sup> thus revealing Beijing's willingness to deepen military ties with Russia. Similarly, Moscow's invitation for the PLA to attend this event also symbolized its unusual appreciation of bilateral defense cooperation.

An important part of Xi's 2015 military reform was to rebuild the army structure along the lines of a 'combined brigade' (Hechenglv). The goal was to trim PLA campaign units in size and to make them more maneuverable. Such streamlining partially followed the Russian model in the belief that future wars will be limited and short in duration.<sup>86</sup> The 2018 joint exercise in Russia provided a field test of this reform design and reflected the PLA's eagerness to learn from Russia's experience of military transformation at a strategic level: how a combined brigade fits in a massive campaign of wartime. In the exercise, the Chinese troops were embedded in Russia's B-Camp, composed of three groups of arms from the Northern Military Region against the A-Camp, consisting of three groups of arms from Russia's Central Military Theater. Being part of a huge military exercise involving 300,000 soldiers was certainly a rare opportunity for the PLA to learn in several areas, from planning, goal setting, troop deployment and movement, and logistical coordination to the assessment of the effects and defects of the whole endeavor. Major General Li Weiya, deputy commander of the dispatched troops, characterized the exercise as strategic, combat-oriented, large-scale, and highly joint. He disclosed that the PLA Joint Staff Department sent a team of senior officers to be embedded in the Russian top command in directing the exercise.<sup>87</sup>

Meanwhile, the exercise was non-scripted and confrontational. The PLA units had to respond promptly to orders from the joint Sino—Russian command. This was a serious challenge to the PLA, which had traditionally confined its combat drills to its own troops and within its own borders. In addition, the PLA brought over 1,000 combat vehicles and 30 combat aircraft to Zabakalsky Krai, the venue of the exercise. This long-distance deployment involved 28 echelons of train transportation and three batches of aerial transportation, an unprecedented level of mobilization, logistical supply, and camping of troops beyond the national borders.<sup>88</sup> The event was valuable to the PLA as it resembled a large-scale expeditionary mission overseas. The PLA had long planned this type of war game but had no opportunity to practice it. Like the Navy and Air Force, the Army values long-range power projection in the process of its transformation.<sup>89</sup>

### ***The takeaways from the above empirical case studies***

Several interesting questions arise from the analysis of the two case studies. First, their combat sophistication resembled tactical collective defense measures adopted by allied military exercises. This raises a puzzle in the study of overall Sino-Russian relations: Sino-Russian military cooperation seems to have been promoted to the height that deviates other aspects of bilateral interaction where the structural conflict of interests works to weaken the cohesion of the partnership. A common-sense interpretation

<sup>84</sup>Behind Russia's largest post-Cold War military drills and China's participation of 3000 soldiers', *BBC*, August 29, 2018.

<sup>85</sup>The Dictionary of PLA Terminologies (《中国军语辞典》), Beijing: The PLA Publishing House (解放军出版社), p. 256.

<sup>86</sup>The second Ukraine war has exposed the flaws of such a model and presented the PLA with an opportunity to rethink not only the suitability of the brigade-battalion army structure in a major war but also the nature of any future war it may fight: it may be an all-out war that requires a heavier army structure. Du Haibo (杜海波), 'More on the Debate on Suitability of Division or Brigade Army Structure (再论师旅之争)', *Global Military Affairs* (世界军事) (10), (2023), p. 46.

<sup>87</sup>Wen Min (闻敏), 'The Oriental-2018 Enters Climax (东方-2018战略演习进入高潮)', The PLA Website (中国军网), September 14, 2018. Accessed November 20, 2023. [www.81.cn](http://www.81.cn).

<sup>88</sup>Fan Yongqian, 'The Sino—Russian Oriental Land—Air Exercise 2018 Starts', *The Xinhua News Agency*, 11 September, 2018, p. 11.

<sup>89</sup>Major General Ou Jianping (欧建平), *Building an Elite PLA: Reconstructing China's Modern Military System* (精锐之师: 构建现代军事力量体系), Beijing: The Long Watch Publishing House(长征出版社), 2014, p. 121.

may be that the two militaries are operationally hedging against a worst-case scenario of being separately dragged into a war by the same opponent. Russia is at war with NATO and China is 'destined' to enter a war with America.<sup>90</sup> Such a war projection may have served as the bottom line for their quasi-alliance building. Second, the two war drills activated the transition from exercising against non-traditional threats to battlefield preparation for a top-power war and further evolved into regular combat patrols in sensitive zones of strategic importance. Thirdly, the confidence-building disclosed by the two exercises indicated the bilateral efforts to ease the long-held suspicion between them. For instance, one battalion of the PLA's 78 Group Army that participated in the 2018 joint exercise fought a bloody battle with the Soviet army in Zhenbao Island in March 1969. Now it was in the Russian territory exercising with Russian soldiers together. This historical change was derived from the enhanced mutual trust that tactically helped tackle the problem of abandonment and entrapment. Fourthly, the most critical revelation of the two cases is their third-party targeting that dominated the two militaries' design of war games, as shown by the selection of exercise venues and contents of the war drills. The increasingly more combat nature of the routinized exercises reflects the worsening bloc competition in the Indo-Pacific region.

## Conclusion

A strategic depiction of the Sino-Russo relations can somewhat parallel the standard characterization of the Sino-US relationship: most important but most complicated. One may wonder why a relationship of convenience is so enduring, as three decades without breaking down is remarkable. Three factors are propping it up: first, the commonly perceived external threats are enduring and worsening<sup>91</sup>; second, the partnership is mutually beneficial and each party will maintain it as long as it gains from it; and third, the leadership factor with Xi and Putin having forged close personal ties. The word 'strategic' is at the core of the bilateral relationship, substantiated by a semi-disguised quasi-alliance building, although still far away from that end.<sup>92</sup> By analyzing the combat orientation of their joint war drills, this article demonstrates the level of trust between the two militaries against the odds of conflict of interests in the overall bilateral interaction.

Another reason for the two sides to stick together is that they have so far managed the challenges of abandonment and entrapment. This has proven the logic of 'not an ally but better than an ally' in that both sides have supported each other in peacetime military cooperation without suffering the systematic constraints inherent in an allied relationship. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has changed the peacetime context for Beijing to manage its military interaction with Russia and added grave stress for it to cope with abandonment/entrapment dynamics. Today China is the party more mindful of the Russian attempt at entrapment, even an indirect one. For instance, Beijing cannot totally disregard Russia's requests for dual-use civil-military equipment and parts critical to its war effort.<sup>93</sup> Yet whatever material assistance it offers to Russia has to be under a firm state policy of maintaining a working relationship with Washington and averting Western economic sanctions. It is walking on a very tightrope. So far Beijing has had Moscow accept the expediency of 'agree to disagree' to its neutrality on the Ukraine war, which the former uses as a countermeasure against entrapment. Yet as the Ukraine war intensifies, the room for expediency increasingly shrinks. On the other hand, Beijing's support to Russia, diplomatic,

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<sup>90</sup>Graham Allison, *Destined to War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017. Russia is at war with possibility of direct NATO involvement.

<sup>91</sup>Brandon Yoder, 'Power Shift, Third-Party Threats, and Credible Signals: Explaining China's Successful Reassurance of Russia', *International Politics* 57, (2020), pp. 885–917.

<sup>92</sup>Alexander Korolev, 'On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China–Russia Military Cooperation', *Asian Security* 15(3), (2019), pp. 233–252.

<sup>93</sup>For instance, despite state restrictions, the world's largest UVA firm DJI (Dajiang) continues to sell products to the world market accessed by Russia. It is hard to think that the government would not know about it. Information also sourced through the interview by the author in Shenzhen, December 2023.

moral or material, helps disperse worsening US pressure on itself.<sup>94</sup> Its bottom line toward the bilateral partnership is maintained in the calculation that Russia should not fall, the precondition for preventing abandonment. The intensified confrontation in the Taiwan Strait following the incident of ship collision in February 2024 has further magnified the prospects of armed conflict in the Strait with possible US involvement. Beijing's worst-scenario calculation of China and Russia being dragged into two separate combat situations at the same time edges a bit closer to probability, which underlines Beijing's determination against abandonment. Sticking together with an enemy's enemy serves as a viable strategy for regime survival, even if a subtle balance between abandonment and entrapment becomes harder to retain. Beijing's neutrality claim towards the Ukraine war erodes bilateral trust but it has tried to rectify the negative fallout through enhanced military ties and continued business transactions. Sino—Russian strategic partnership does, therefore, have both structural limits, as each guards against entrapment vigilantly, and strong incentives for them to be bound together.

Sino-Russian military cooperation is basically a peacetime arrangement, although it is increasingly pursued to deter common adversaries in combat terms. Given the regular Xi-Putin summits and frequent exchange of visits by leaders of the two armed forces since the Ukraine war, it is logical to assume that Beijing and Moscow have achieved some acquiescence regarding each other's position on the war. Nonetheless, Beijing's search for strategic autonomy towards the war has somewhat proved one Western characterization of Sino-Russian relations as an 'axis of convenience', although the contents of such a concept have been substantiated with the evolution of major power confrontation.<sup>95</sup> The basic assumption in IR theory is that such relationships are fragile, as the perceived common interests are elusive, change constantly, and can suddenly dissolve.<sup>96</sup> Another cause of possible change in the bilateral relationship is a change of leadership in either capital. At present, both China and Russia are striving to maintain their strategic partnership for mutual benefit. Therefore, they will continue to prioritize military coalition over bilateral differences amid rising US pressure. Nevertheless, both Beijing and Moscow handle the partnership primarily based on their own national interests. After all, there is no eternal friend, nor enemy, as national interests change eternally.

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<sup>94</sup>China has increased its import of Russian energy products by 40% over 2021 levels, providing a great financial boost to the war-time Russia. *Xinhua News Agency*, October 25, 2022.

<sup>95</sup>Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and New Geopolitics*, Brookings, 2008.

<sup>96</sup>Yoriko Watanabe, 'The Future of the Asia-Pacific Region', *Asia-Pacific Review* 20(2), (2013), pp. 116–121.