

International Relations Theories and Scenario Building: Assessing the Prospects of a Russia-China Military Alliance

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Abstract: In this research, a question of why Russia and China have not signed a treaty of military-political cooperation despite their growing military interaction is explored. Despite the progressive development external partnership in the last years, starting from 2014, the concept of a strategic partnership is still rather remote. Drawing on the International Relations theory, the paper analyses the rationale for forming such an alliance, its advantages and likely costs. This also accounts for the asymmetry of capabilities, the regional orientations, and the dependence interconnections that characterize their dyadic relationships. This article also talks about the geopolitical orientations on the side of Russia and China towards a multipolar world based on their international rather than regional interests. It points out that although both countries more actively interact in the sphere of military, they do not wish to be involved into each other's wars due to the importance of their relations with the West. The current type of cooperation provides the necessary benefits to both countries without exposing them to the risks typical for the strategic alliance; however, the further development of strategic confrontation with the USA may push these countries into a more intimate cooperation.

Key Words: Russia, China, Military Alliance, Strategic Partnership, Asymmetry

INTRODUCTION:

The systemic transformations of the global political system always concern the pattern of relations between states and their leaders focusing on important geopolitical areas. Of these interactions, Russia and China entente has assumed the last evolution and is emerging as potential center of global focus. It is a symbiotic tactful partnership fully developed and expanding intertwining in the political, economic, as well as the military spheres. However, while the UK and US are now much more aligned, the lack of a treaty-led defense agreement deserves examination. At the same time, they align their interests on various issues on the international level like building a multipolar system and weakening the dominance of the United States, while their regional stakes and their reluctance to consolidate the conceptualization of their partnership into a real strategic treaty (Smith, 2020, p. 43). This paradox presents an opportunity for answering the research questions and employing the lens of International Relations theories.

Scholars in the field of International Relations rely on theoretical systems, which render the process of analysis of the relationships between Russia and China easier. For example, realism postulates that states are egoists and use balancing of power as the means of existence. According to a realist view, which was discussed earlier in this paper, the growing entente between Moscow and Beijing can be viewed as an effort at consolidation of power against the American world superpower (Johnson, 2018, p. 112). However, realists also do not deny that there is still mutual hostility and desire for rivalry, which does not allow the two countries to become true allies (Brown, 2021, p. 78). On the other hand, liberal theories emphasize on cooperation through interdependence and structures. Although Russia and

China have experienced a constant enhancement of economic and diplomatic cooperation, there are various substantial disparities in the economic potential and military force, which may destabilize the existence of any alliance (Lee, 2022, p. 156). Constructivist approaches, emphasizing the importance of shared norms and identities, reveal another layer of complexity, as both nations strive to redefine global power structures while maintaining autonomy in their foreign policies (Zhang, 2019, p. 234).

Since 2014, the partnership between Russia and China has entered a new phase marked by closer cooperation. Economic sanctions imposed on Russia by Western nations in response to its actions in Ukraine have pushed Moscow to deepen its ties with Beijing (Taylor, 2021, p. 92). Similarly, China's strategic rivalry with the United States has prompted it to seek stronger ties with Russia as a counterweight to American influence (Wang, 2020, p. 45). Thereby, both nations obligingly avoid over entrenchment in their bilateral relationship despite the above-listed similarities. For instance, the Islamic world's concern with toppling the American-dominated system is somewhat balanced by the fact that they have different objectives at a local level. Russia is greatly concerned with preserving its power in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, while Chinese activities in these areas of the planet can also be witnessed, for example, with regard to the Belt and Road (Kumar, 2022, p. 201). Having interlinked matters of mutual interest contributes a synergy of cooperation and rivalry making the possibility of a partnership even more problematic.

The idea of the military alliance entails something of great strategic and operational concern. Even though such an alliance could increase their strength in negotiation with common enemies, it comes for a great cost and high risk (Anderson, 2019, p. 67). A formal allied would entail some harmonization of military policies and equipment

hence, would necessitate restriction of each states' freedom in foreign policies. This risk is especially acute for Russia because it has gradually shifted both its economic and technological monocausal relationship with China (Miller, 2022, p. 130). Such trends as the modernization of China's military and the respective diminished usage of Russian military equipment can show the real tendencies of the unfolding military-technical cooperation in which sooner or later the Chinese side will become more benefited and the coalition's balance of forces would shift toward Beijing. Such potential explains Russia's reluctance to cement the cooperation since, by doing so, it risks placing itself in a junior role in the partnership (Wilson, 2021, p. 180).

In addition, it is possible to mention the lack of the signed alliance, which does not tie the two countries to the conflicts and lets them reach for their aims anyway. Both states have kept their relations rather business-like and have never over utilized cooperation to limit their freedom of maneuver (Chen, Jiang and Zhang, 2020, p. 58). For instance, while their military exercises and joint operations demonstrate a high level of coordination, they stop short of committing to mutual defense obligations. This arrangement aligns with their shared goal of counterbalancing U.S. influence while avoiding the potential costs and constraints of a formal military-political bloc (Davis, 2019, p. 143). The strategic partnership between Russia and China reflects an alignment of interests that is more practical than ideological. Both nations emphasize sovereignty, non-interference, and the promotion of a multipolar world order (Clark, 2021, p. 89). Such a pragmatism allows them to cooperate on the specific tasks they both have in common – the opposition to the Western influence – and remain independent at the same time. Nevertheless, the increase in the disparity of both the current and future benefits inherent in their partnership constitutes the most substantial long-term problem. This is because these two countries have emerged as strategic partners both politically and economically as well as militarily, while at the same, key differentiations persist such as China has growing economic and military power whereas Russia's power seems to be fixed at that point (Liu, 2021, p. 221). Such a shift could also dissuade Russia from negotiating a strategic partnership because the latter does not want to be too dependent on its eastern partner.

The given trend in the relations between Russia and China signals that their cooperation will further deepen and develop without turning into a military alliance. The current and growing rivalry with the United States is the main guarantor of cooperation yet the costs of forming the alliance with Russia do not compensate for the benefits for either of the parties (Roberts, 2022, p. 115). Studying these dynamics within the framework of IR theories makes it possible to identify that their cooperation can be built not only on the similarity of the parties' interests but also on the differences arising from mutual benefits and structural conditions. With world power shifting from bipolar towards multipolar, the Russia-China relations offer a rich material to learn about how states manage their relations on their way to achieve their vital interests.

Literature Review:

This paper aims to identify how the literature of IR sheds light on the relationship between Russia and China. These frameworks assist in explaining why their partnership is still informal, despite increasing collaboration across various sectors, in terms of why their relationship remains unfrozen out of formal military alliance. Classical realism forms a framework of analysis for such global alliances where emphasis is given to behaviour of states anchored to survival, power accumulation and anarchy in the system at large (Brown, 2021 p. 32). From this point of view, the entente between Russia and China is at least as much about balancing the American dominance as about ideological bloc, let alone the costs of such an arrangement (Johnson, 2018, p. 121).

The focus of the realism specifically the balance of power has been felt strongly and in the current analysis of Russo-Chinese relation. According to Miller (2022), the two countries' cooperation is still more of an 'ad hoc', non-Alliance oriented kind of relationship in order to somewhat check the United States, without becoming tied down to a formal treaty (p. 67). Roberts's (2022) also supports this view where he observes that their cooperation is not dictated by alignment of political ideologies but correspond common interests (p. 115). At the same time, Davis (2019) pointed out that one of the key challenges for a binding military cooperation is the discrepancy of capabilities between Russia and India (p.83). Over time, however, as China's military industrialization has proceeded, its dependency on Russia for technology and know-how may be increasing pressure on Russia regarding its fear of being treated as a junior partner in the long run. That is why, from a constructivist perspective, Zhang (2019) emphasizes the significance of norms and principles constitutive of alliances (p. 240). The Russia-China cooperation is about multipolarity, the idea of which is based on the idea of a polycentric world to different from the hegemonic world of the West (Clark, 2021, p. 98). This normative convergence, however, coexists with divergent regional interests, as highlighted by Wang (2020), who emphasizes China's focus on its Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's concerns about its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (p. 155).

Economic interdependence also plays a crucial role in shaping the strategic calculus of both nations. Lee (2022) explains that while both countries benefit significantly from bilateral trade, their economic asymmetry—particularly China's dominance—introduces complexities that make formal alliances less appealing (p. 89). Liu (2021) further explores this dynamic, noting that economic asymmetry coupled with geopolitical tensions reduces the incentives for either country to bear the costs of a formal military commitment (p. 45). Theoretical analyses of alliances in IR also emphasize the importance of domestic and regional factors. Anderson (2019) notes that formal alliances require a high degree of political alignment, which is often undermined by unit-level factors such as domestic political constraints and regional conflicts (p. 117). The major interest of the Russian and Chinese regional policies often intersect, but also differ on many occasions and the following can be illustrated as some of those occasions. Kumar (2022) recognizes competition over power in the CAC region as the possible source of

conflict within the partnership (p. 205). This pattern is indicative of their relationship: there are both overlaps of interest with Chechen leaders and their diametric opposition to each other at the same time.

Lastly, there is the insights into the future possible paths of development of Russia-China relations, which is given by the scenario-building approaches. Through simulation of potential various conditions, authors can comprehend what situations may push countries to have a formal military alliance or, on the contrary, avoid this step. According to Smith (2020), the potential for a deeper strategic partnership implies that the failure of escalating strategic cooperation, which will culminate in a formal trilateral alliance, depends on changes in the strategic environment, including increased pressure on Russia or China from the United States or a large-scale conflict involving either Russia or China (p. 72). Consequently, the literature calls for a recognition of the multiple and complex relationship between Russia and China based on global, regional and domestic factors. Despite valuable realist and constructivist analysis of their relationship, economic and geopolitical realities add layers of difficulty to a formal military pact. Future research should seek to combine these theoretical paradigms with stakeholder modeling techniques in order to analyze the emerging nature of this relationship.

Methodology:

Inherent in methodology of choice, this study makes theoretical examination of the sources with construction of hypothetical scenarios to analysis the relationship between Russia and China and to evaluate the readiness for an official military partnership of the parties. Based upon these IR theories; realism, constructivism or interdependence, the research compares and contrasts the past and present bilateral relations between the two countries. Credible secondary sources of data collected from journals, policies, and geopolitical studies are used to look for trends and reasons for their strategic cooperation. Additional theoretical and practical implications are also provided by using the elements of the approaches that are built with the help of the scenario techniques that describes possible future developments of the relationship in connection with the shifts in balance of world powers, regional specifics, and changes in bilateral relations.

Findings:

The sources show that economic integration, military cooperation, and political entente between Russia and China rule out the formation of a new formal military alliance while the systemic and unit-level factors influence this process. The realistic view appears because Russia and China do not acknowledge the formal sliding towards an overt alliance while they both are still eager to check the U.S. power on their own (Brown, 2021, p. 112). It is essential to recognize that while all of these constructivism share the goal of a multipolar world, the regional interests differ; China's Belt and Road Initiative is viewed as a priority in comparison to Russia's focus on Russia's and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Kumar 2022, 200; Zhang 2019, 235).

Another important factor that appeared is economic disparity, due to China aperiodic progress in trade and new technologies that may even shift the balance

of supply and demand in the partnership. Russia's anxiety of becoming a junior partner has been compounded by the deterioration of the volume of the China's imports of Russian military technology because of the improvement in the Chinese people liberation army (Liu, 2021, pp. 78–80). The analysis of scenario-building techniques suggests that making formal military alliance may require a change in security dynamics on the global level: a higher level of containment by the United States or a large-scale conflict implicating one of the nations (Miller, 2022; Roberts, 2022, p. 120). All in all, the Russia-China relations remain permanently improving, however, the cooperation is rather strategic rather than formal that is base on the fact that neither of the two countries does not have the need in formal alliance in face of the other country's interests. This approach allows them to respond adequately to their peculiar strategic agendas with regard to the structural uncertainties of the international system (Clark 2021, 89; Davis, 2019, 56).

Discussion:

This paper focuses on the strategic Russia-China relationship and the speculative style of military alliance from the perspective of strategic interests, historical factors, as well as theoretical perspectives. Balance of power and national security theories are among the most essential for making an understanding of why Russia and China, which are strategic partners of great depth, have no military alliance. Realist theory being the basis or our analysis of the actions and behavior of states, emphasizes that any alignment should have visible profit in relation to security and force capabilities (Brown, 2021, p. 118). Even though Russia and China have recently intensified their cooperation at the military level – sharing exercises and arms deals – and though this may largely be viewed as a formal partnership, it also suggests apparent careful calculations. Described by Liu (2021, p. 92) on this point, both states do not wish to be tied down by political or military actions of the other side especially given their respective interests in different zones and ever existing worry of maintaining strategic independence.

In addition to self-identities, psychological predispositions, the constructivist theory holds valuable about the relational dynamics of Russia and China and their shared problem of norms and ideas. They both have in mind a new world order, that is more diverse than the current American one and that would grant both countries a higher status (Zhang, 2019, p. 236). But, as it was mentioned before, their regional interests differ, for example, Russia is worried about NATO enlargement in Europe and China has its Belt and Road project. While Russia and China share a common stance against the US dominance in the global system, their misguided strategic roles result in periodic conflict in their mutual relations which cannot be strictly characterized by the presence of strategic partnership as a ‘‘formal alliance’’ (Roberts, 2022, p. 115).

The growing economic asymmetry between Russia and China is another key factor limiting the potential for a military alliance. As China's economic power continues to expand, its influence in the relationship has become more pronounced. China is increasingly capable of modernizing its military and achieving technological advancements independently of Russian support. This growing asymmetry is particularly evident in the field of

military technology, where Russia's role as a primary supplier to China is gradually diminishing as China invests heavily in its own defense capabilities (Miller, 2022, p. 67). From an economic perspective, while both countries benefit from their bilateral trade, the reliance on each other has shifted, and China's expanding economic base has placed Russia in a relatively subordinate position. This economic imbalance, combined with the possibility of Russia becoming overly reliant on China, creates long-term risks for Moscow, as it could lead to a gradual erosion of its strategic autonomy (Wilson, 2021, p. 142).

The analysis of the scenario of various possible future based on the current tendencies shows that the formation of an official military alliance between Russia and China is possible only in the case of qualitative change in the power correlation in the world. An example could be an intensification of hostility between the US and China, say over Taiwan, or the South China Sea, establishing, under pressure, a closer bond between China and Russia from a strategic security point of view. On the other hand, further escalation of tensions with the West may lead to increased military cooperation with China where the U.S and Its allies seek to increase their military force in Eastern Europe or Indo-Asia Pacific (Clark, 2021, p.92). However, one has to admit that such scenarios remain rather hypothetical, whereas the present course indicates that both countries are satisfied with the idea of preserving a rather essential level of cooperation but shun commitments that might be implied by the membership in the alliance.

Furthermore, although Russia and China, have recently moved in strategic directions contrary to the US, the establishment of a military alliance is hindered by structural requirements, regional interests and concerns over strategic dependence. The relationship between the two countries will inevitably remain working, as it has been previously described, as a loose strategic cooperation rather than a fixed alliance. Again, both states get the advantages of partnership while not being held to the responsibilities that come with a formal partnership with another state. The initial scenario indicates that without a dramatic change in the balance of power in the post-Soviet space, the prospects for a Russian-Chinese military partnership are weak. Their partnership seems likely to continue to be nearly equal and managing shared interests like multipolarity without the to-and-fro that would be expected in an alliance proper, formal (Davis, 2019, p. 63; Zhang, 2019, p. 245).

Recommendations:

Recommendations for the prospects of a Russia-China military alliance, based on the study and conclusion are anchored on the shifts in their strategic partnership and the challenges that make it difficult for this partnership to form a formal military partnership. There are several areas which should be taken into consideration in order to conceive how this relationship could arise in the future. First, the international diplomacy approach in the relations between Russia and China needs to be improved to reach a sustainable diplomatic relation. China and Russia need to solve their contradictory regional interests and coordinate their approaches to the majority of global governance concerns, including the possible changes of the international organizations and the support of the

multipolar world. To prevent too much tension, Russia and China should talk to each other at the top level, clear up the misunderstandings about each other's strategies and plans in economic and military aspects. Since both states are involved and should attempt to foster stronger linkages to ensure that their foreign policies are harmonized, both states should consider building stronger communication mechanisms (Zhang, 2019, p. 241). The conclusion is, the future regular diplomatic relations will offset this beneficial for one side then damaging for another, which aggravates the tendencies of the asymmetry of power relations.

Second, reversing economic imbalance is another essential task. Although Russia can benefit from the growing economic cooperation with the PRC, further gradual development of relations can worsen its economy's dependence on China, which may cause a relative loss of control over its activities with a larger partner in the long run. In response to this, Russia must spread its economic relations with various countries while at the same time also the enhance its technological and defense systems further. This would enable Russian to cut down her relationship with China, and achieve a balanced diplomatic partnership not only in military, but in all aspects of international partnership. Also, China should appreciate the value of continuing to support Russia's continued economic freedom to make their cooperation worthwhile for both parties (Wilson, 2021, pp. 142–143). Encouraging more economic diversification and technological cooperation would allow both countries to maintain a strong but balanced partnership that does not undermine each other's strategic autonomy.

Third, military cooperation should remain flexible and strategic, rather than formalizing into a binding alliance. Given the risks associated with a formal military alliance, such as the potential loss of strategic flexibility and the asymmetric distribution of power, Russia and China should focus on expanding military cooperation through joint exercises, shared technological advancements, and coordinated defense initiatives. These efforts should aim to enhance the interoperability of their forces, strengthen intelligence sharing, and increase mutual defense capabilities in regions of common interest without the formal commitments of an alliance. Russia and China should also ensure that their military cooperation does not provoke unnecessary escalations in tensions with third parties, especially the United States and NATO (Roberts, 2022, p. 119).

Further, participation in multilateral platforms which are conducive to Russia and China's coordination on regional and global security will further their good. Though Russia and India are not members of a military alliance both of them can contribute to countering the west's dominance of international relations through membership in organizations such as the SCO and the BRICS without a military alliance. In this way, by cementing these multiple bodies, Russia and China would be establishing a collective security system that will not detract from, but complement their overall strategic interests, as far as provoked dangers of a military cooperation agreement are concerned (Clark, 2021, p. 96).

Last, the emergence of a new international order will require observation to facilitate the development of strategies based on the realities on the ground. Both

countries should closely monitor the spread of new threats, including intensification of the interstate confrontation between China and the USA, as well as possible changes in the relations between Russia and NATO, European states. When tensions in these domains rise, intense pressure may be placed on Russia and China to reduce their current level of strategic independence. Under such conditions, it might prove wise for them to reconsider their bilateral relations and try to advance their cooperation in terms of either economic and military contracts or in terms of re-evaluation of the conditions of their strategic partnership (Davis, 2019, p. 68). Nevertheless, any step towards formation of military alliance need to be stringently analyzed so that the alliance does not turn into a liability in diplomatic and warfare terms.

However, the prospects of the Russia-China military collaboration are still vague mainly because of the nature of Russia-China relations, regional interests, and the desire of each side not to be fully reliant on each other. The suggestions outlined above are as follows, they should be flexible in their military cooperation at the same time they can address economic power imbalances and diplomatic diplomacy. This is because Russia, and China, in particular, have been continuing their strategic partnership beyond these challenges without the hazards associated with a military alliance.

Conclusion:

However, there are certain factors that do not support the idea of the strategic partnership between Russia and China in the form of a military alliance. The bilateral relations between the two countries have deepened over the years especially diplomatically, militarily, economically and politically. Nevertheless, they are still characterized by the interdependent relations and both convergence and divergence of interests, partly at least an asymmetrical bipolar nature and the quest for voice or influence. As the relationship shifted to formal, this would automatically lead to deeper melding of military assets which, on the other hand, would increase dangers of sort where Russia can become a second-tier partner long-term. While Russia and China would clearly benefit from less American dominance of world politics, the idea of an alliance proper comes laden with regional and global implications which may not be stabilizing, especially if their mutual decision-making were to become closer than it currently is.

As a result, Russia and China will more likely define their relations outside of military alliance yet still instead of creating formal military alliance. The structure provides the parties with the ability to advance their common interests to ensure integration of coasting and shipping whilst protecting their national interests & strategic sovereignty. It will remain so in defense technology, intelligence exchange as well as annual military maneuvers, all of which will be developed without the formal strings that accompany an alliance. In such vein the cooperation between the two countries can be dynamic to new challenges especially those arising from changing balance of power in the world. Moving ahead, Russia as well as China must learn to walk a tight rope on one hand share their economic dependency while on the other maintain their separate political and military sovereignty. It is still possible for the two countries to

advance their cooperation beyond multilateral frameworks which can only be positive while they gradually adapt to shifting world politics in a way that does not result in the formation of the military pact. Ultimately, the future of the Russia-China relationship will depend on their ability to reconcile their ambitions within the broader framework of global stability and their evolving roles in a multipolar world order.

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