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# Why Russia's alliance with China is improbable, but not impossible

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## Abstract

This article seeks to answer a question key to understanding the configurations of the emerging global order: are Russia and China already in a de facto military alliance (against the U.S.), or may they soon enter one? The article starts with a review of academic literature on alignments in general and alliances in particular. The author then infers criteria, which an alignment needs to meet to be described as an alliance, and sets out to ascertain whether the relationship between Russia and China either presently meets these criteria or may do so in the near future.

## Introduction\*

The relationship between China and Russia is getting stronger by the hour. To ascertain that this is the case, one needs to look no further than Xi Jinping's and Vladimir Putin's calendar of visits. China was the first country that Putin visited after being inaugurated for a third presidential term in May 2012; Xi returned the favour in 2013. The two have met about 30 times and show no sign of developing fatigue from seeing each other. Putin has referred to Xi as "my dear friend" and "my good long-time friend." Xi is even more complimentary. "*He is my best and bosom friend. I cherish dearly our deep friendship,*" Xi said of Putin in June 2019. The Covid-19 pandemic has forced the two leaders to adjust their schedule of bilateral meetings, but as of July 2020 Xi and Putin still planned to meet on at least three occasions in the second half of 2020: during the summits of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and of BRICS in Russia and during Putin's official visit to China. A recent poll conducted for China's *Global Times* showed that one-third of the Chinese viewed Russia as the country that is first in terms of influencing China, while polls conducted in Russia consistently show that a clear majority of Russians have a favourable view of China. In addition to strengthening political ties, Russia and China have also been expanding their military and security cooperation to include joint air patrols and joint naval war games in the Mediterranean.

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\* This article is based on the author's conference [Towards a China-Russia Alliance?](#) hosted by Fondation pour la recherche stratégique on June 26, 2019. The author would like to thank Professor Steven Walt, Professor Adrian Hyde-Price, Arthur Martirosyan and Nabi Abdullaev for their feedback on individual sections of earlier drafts of this article. The author would also like to thank Angelina Flood for assistance in visualizing the foreign trade data and proofreading this article.

This strengthening of Russian-Chinese ties has made many (see Table 1), not only in Moscow and Beijing, but also Washington, Paris and other European capitals, wonder whether Moscow and Beijing are either already in a *de facto* military alliance (against the U.S.), or may soon enter one in what will undoubtedly have a significant impact on the changing global world order.

**Table 1: How Russia, Chinese and Western policy-makers and experts describe Russian-Chinese relationship**

It is an alliance already	Sergei Karaganov (2007), <sup>1</sup> Vasily Kashin (2014) <sup>2</sup> , former senior Russian national security official (quoted in 2018) <sup>3</sup>
It is not an alliance yet, but is likely to become one in the future	Yevgeny Buzhinsky (2016, hopefully), <sup>4</sup> Yan Xuetong (2016, though not necessarily formal), <sup>5</sup> Zhang Wenmu (2016) <sup>6</sup>
It is not an alliance	Russian-Chinese statement of June 2019 <sup>7</sup>
It is not an alliance and it is unlikely to become one in the future	Fiona Hill and Bobo Lo, (2013, <sup>8</sup> and Lo <sup>9</sup> again in 2017), Sergei Ivanov (2014), <sup>10</sup> Fu Ying (2016), <sup>11</sup> Chao Xie (2016), <sup>12</sup> Alexander Lukin (unlikely, but not impossible 2018), <sup>13</sup> Jim Mattis (2018), <sup>14</sup> Graham Allison (unlikely, but not impossible, 2019), <sup>15</sup> Mikhail Korostikov (2019), <sup>16</sup> Dmitri Trenin (hope faded for alliance, 2019) <sup>17</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sergei Karaganov, "[From the Pivot to the East to Greater Eurasia](#)," website of the Russian Federation's embassy to the United Kingdom, April 24, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Vasily Kashin, "[Russia's Rapprochement with China Runs Deep](#)," *Moscow Times*, May 27, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> "[Expert Round-Up: How Likely Is a China-Russia Military Alliance?](#)," *Russia Matters*, June 14, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> "[Russkiy s kitaytsem — brat'ya ne po oruzhiyu](#)," *Kommersant*, June 1, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> "[Ne ponimayu, pochemu Rossiya ne nastaiavayet na formirovanii al'yansa s Kitayem](#)," *Kommersant*, March 17, 2017; Yan Xuetong, "The Age of Uneasy Peace: Chinese Power in a Divided World," *Foreign Affairs*, 98 (2019): 40.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Chao Xie, "[Yǔ zhōngguó jiéméng ma?](#)," *Contemporary Asia Pacific*, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> "[Sovmestnoye zavayavleniye Rossiyskoy Federatsii i Kitayskoy Narodnoy Respubliki o razvitii otnosheniy vseob'yemlyushchego partnerstva i strategicheskogo vzaimodeystviya, vstupayushchikh v novuyu epokhu](#)," website of the President of the Russian Federation, June 5, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Fiona Hill, and Bobo Lo, "[Putin's Pivot: Why Russia is Looking East](#)," *Foreign Affairs* 31 (2013).

<sup>9</sup> Bobo Lo, "[A Wary Embrace: Response to Stephen Blank](#)," Lowy Institute, May 8, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> "[Sergey Ivanov: Rossiya i Kitay ne vidyat smysla v sozdanii voyennogo soyuza](#)," *Kommersant*, July 10, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Fu Ying, "[How China Sees Russia: Beijing and Moscow are Close, but not Allies](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, 95 (2016): 96.

<sup>12</sup> Chao Xie, "Yǔ zhōngguó jiéméng ma?," *Contemporary Asia Pacific*, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> [Alexander Lukin, \*China and Russia: The New Rapprochement\*, John Wiley & Sons, 2018.](#)

<sup>14</sup> "[Russia Starts Biggest War Games since Soviet Fall near China](#)," Reuters, September 11, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Graham Allison, "[China and Russia: A Strategic Alliance in the Making](#)," *National Interest*, December 14, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Mikhail Korostikov, "[Druzhba na rasstoyanii ruki: kak Moskva i Pekin opredelili granitsy dopustimogo](#)," *Kommersant*, May 31, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Dmitri Trenin, "[It's Time to Rethink Russia's Foreign Policy Strategy](#)," Carnegie Moscow Centre, April 25, 2019.

It is a partnership	Russian leaders <sup>18</sup> and documents <sup>19</sup> (“comprehensive”), Chinese leaders <sup>20</sup> and documents (“comprehensive strategic”), <sup>21</sup> Trenin (“close”, in 2018), Lukin (“strategic” in 2018), Feng and Huang (“strategic” in 2014)
<b>It is an alignment</b>	Daniel Coats (2019), <sup>22</sup> Graham Allison (2019) <sup>23</sup>
<b>Other definitions</b>	Korostikov: friendship at arm's length (2019), <sup>24</sup> Trenin: entente (2018) <sup>25</sup>

## 1. Literature review and theoretical framework

### 1.1. What constitutes an alliance?

Intellectuals have been grappling with the question of why states enter alliances since the times of Thucydides and Polybius, if not earlier, but this literature review focuses on major works produced on the subject in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, such as volumes written by Hans J. Morgenthau, George Liska, Stephen Walt, Kenneth Waltz and other authors. When it comes to the definition of alliance, these volumes can be broadly divided into two categories. One group defines an alliance as a formal association while the other group, which is less numerous than the first, does not view a formal treaty as a necessary condition for the formation and existence of an alliance. George Liska, Bitman Potter, Robert Osgood, Glenn Snyder, Jesse Johnson, Brett Ashley Leeds, Ole Holsti, Terrence Hopmann, John Sullivan, Paul Shroeder, Stefan Bergsmann all belong to the first group while Hans Morgenthau, Stephen Walt and Edwin Fedder belong to the second group (*see Table 2*).

<sup>18</sup> See for instance [“Shoigu: Relations between Russia and China have Reached an Unprecedentedly High Level.”](#) TASS, April 3, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance [Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 1, 2016 (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> See for instance [“Meeting with Participants of Second Russian-Chinese Energy Business Forum,”](#) official website of the President of the Russian Federation, June 7, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance [White Paper 2014](#), Ministry of National Defence of the People's Republic of China, July 13, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> “Testimony by Intelligence Chiefs on Global Threats Highlights Differences with President,” *Washington Post*, January 29, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Graham Allison, [“China and Russia: A Strategic Alliance in the Making,”](#) *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Mikhail Korostikov, [“Druzhba na rasstoyanii ruki: kak Moskva i Pekin opredelili granitsy dopustimogo,”](#) *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Dmitri Trenin, [“Entente is what Drives Sino-Russian Ties,”](#) *China Daily*, September 12, 2018.

**Table 2: Definitions of alliance**

Author	Definitions that imply the existence of a formal commitment (treaty, etc.)
George Liska <sup>26</sup>	A formal association between two or more states against the threat of a third
Robert Osgood and John H. Badgley <sup>27</sup>	Formal agreement that pledges states to cooperate in using their military resources against a specific state or states and requires the signatories to use force against that specific state under certain circumstances
Jesse Johnson and Brett Ashley Leeds <sup>28</sup>	Formal agreements among states to cooperate militarily in the event of a conflict
Ole Holsti, Terrence Hopmann and John Sullivan <sup>29</sup>	A formal agreement between two or more nations to collaborate on national security issues
Paul Shroeder <sup>30</sup>	A treaty binding two or more independent states to come to each other's aid with armed force under circumstances specified in the <i>casus foederis</i> article of the treaty
Stefan Bergsmann <sup>31</sup>	An explicit agreement among states in the realm of national security in which the partners promise mutual assistance in the form of a substantial contribution of resources in the case of a certain contingency the arising of which is uncertain
Glenn Snyder <sup>32</sup>	A formal association of states for the use (or non-use) of military force, intended for either the security or the aggrandizement of their members, against specific other states, whether or not these others are explicitly identified
Bruce Russet <sup>33</sup>	A formal agreement among a number of countries concerning the conditions under which they will or will not employ military force
Hans Morgenthau <sup>34</sup>	Some sort of a guarantee that A and B will come to each other's assistance in the event of an attack upon either or both from a common enemy
Stephen Walt <sup>35</sup>	A formal or informal arrangement for security cooperation between two or more sovereign states (notes that many contemporary states are reluctant to sign formal treaties with their allies)
Edwin Fedder <sup>36</sup>	A limited set of states acting in concert at X time regarding the mutual enhancement of the military security of the members

<sup>26</sup> Liska's definition of the alliance is summarized in Stefan Bergsmann. "The Concept of Military Alliance," in Heinz Gärtner, Erich Reiter (ed.), *Small States and Alliances*, Physica, Heidelberg, 2001, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> Robert E. Osgood, John H. Badgley, *Japan and the US in Asia*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968, p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> Jesse C. Johnson, Brett Ashley Leeds. "Defence Pacts: A Prescription for Peace? 1," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7, no. 1 (2011): 45-65.

<sup>29</sup> Ole R. Holsti, P. Terrence Hopmann, John D. Sullivan. *Unity and Disintegration in International Alliances: Comparative Studies*. John Wiley & Sons, 1973, p.4. Cited in Stefan Bergsmann. "The Concept of Military Alliance," *op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> Paul W. Schroeder, "Alliances, 1815–1945: Weapons of Power and Tools of Management." in *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft: Essays on the International History of Modern Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004, pp. 195-222.

<sup>31</sup> Stefan Bergsmann. "The Concept of Military Alliance," *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> Glenn Snyder, "Alliance Theory: A Neorealist First Cut," *Journal of International Affairs* (1990): 103-123.

<sup>33</sup> Bruce M. Russett, "An Empirical Typology of International Military Alliances," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* (1971): 262-289.

<sup>34</sup> Edwin H. Fedder, "The Concept of Alliance," *International Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1968): 65-86.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell University Press (Cornell Studies in Security Affairs). Kindle Edition.

<sup>36</sup> Edwin H. Fedder, "The Concept of Alliance," *op. cit.*

## 1.2. What kind of alliances are possible?

In addition to defining what constitutes an alliance, some of the aforementioned scholars have also developed a typology of alliances. Hans Morgenthau was one of the prominent scholars of alliances in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to have done so, but he was not alone in doing so (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Typology of alliances**

Author	Typology of Alliances
Hans Morgenthau <sup>37</sup>	Mutual and one-sided, general and limited, temporary and permanent, operative and inoperative alliances
Melvin Small and David Singer <sup>38</sup>	Defence pacts, neutrality and non-aggression pacts and ententes
Stephen Walt <sup>39</sup>	Alignment (to balance threat) or bandwagoning (with source of threat)
Glenn Snyder <sup>40</sup>	Ad hoc or permanent, bilateral or multilateral, with unilateral guarantees or mutual commitments, defensive and offensive, peacetime and wartime, with the latter called coalitions

Importantly, Snyder has reminded us that alliances constitute only one subset of the broader and more basic phenomenon “alignments.” Snyder has defined alignment “*as a set of mutual expectations between two or more states that they will have each other’s support in disputes or wars with particular other states.*” In his turn, Thomas Wilkins has defined alignment as “*expectations of states about whether they will be supported or opposed by other states in future interactions*” and as a “*state of shared agreement or accord on one or more significant issues,*” arguing that it is a “*superior and more accurate descriptor*” than the term “*alliance.*”<sup>41</sup> Wilkins and Snyder distinguished the following types of alignments: alliances, coalitions of the willing, security communities and strategic partnerships, entente, concert and non-aggression pact.

## 1.3. What explains alliances?

What explains the formation of alliances? One classic explanation is offered by the “balance of power” theory, whose origins are traced to the writings of Thucydides, Polybius, Francis

<sup>37</sup> Hans Joachim Morgenthau. *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. Third Edition. New York:Knopf, 1960.

<sup>38</sup> Bruce M. Russett, “An Empirical Typology of International Military Alliances,” *op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985): 3-43.

<sup>40</sup> Glenn Snyder, “Alliance Theory: A Neorealist First Cut,” *op. cit.*

<sup>41</sup> Thomas S. Wilkins, “‘Alignment’, not ‘Alliance’— the Shifting Paradigm of International Security Cooperation: toward a Conceptual Taxonomy of Alignment,” *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 1 (2012): 53-76.

Bacon, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but which was ultimately formulated by David Hume,<sup>42</sup> Hans Morgenthau<sup>43</sup> and Kenneth Waltz,<sup>44</sup> among others. In particular, Hans Morgenthau wrote that nations competing with each other have three choices to maintain and improve their relative power positions: (1) they can increase their own power, (2) they can add to their own power the power of other nations, or (3) they can withhold the power of other nations from the adversary. The theory of balance of power has been popular, but not universally accepted, however. For instance, Walt has posited that nations ally with each other to balance against threats posed by other nations<sup>45</sup> rather than just because these other nations' power exceeds theirs.<sup>46</sup> (Indeed, more recently, the balance of power theory, in its simplest interpretation, does not quite explain why Russia did not forge an alliance with China to balance the United States and its allies in the 1990s. Moreover, Moscow gave serious consideration to joining U.S.-led NATO with Putin inquiring about membership first with Bill Clinton and then with Lord Robertson in 2001.<sup>47</sup>) It also follows from his theory that when a state's potential allies are roughly equal in power, then that state "*will ally with the side it believes is least dangerous.*"<sup>48</sup> Therefore, it is not only the capability to threaten, but also the intent to do so that matters.

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<sup>42</sup> David Hume, "Of the Balance of Power," *Balance of Power* (1752): 32-36.

<sup>43</sup> Hans Morgenthau. *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. *op.cit.*

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War. Faced with Unbalanced Power, Some States Try to Increase their Own Strength or they Ally with Others to Bring the International Distribution of Power into Balance," *International security* 25, no. 1 (2000): 28.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. *op. cit.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> "Putin Says He Discussed Russia's Possible NATO Membership with Bill Clinton," *RFE/RL*, June 3, 2017; Simon Saradzhyan, "Alternative History: Would Russia in NATO and EU be Game Changer in West's Rivalry with China?," *Russia Matters*, November 20, 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, *op. cit.*



**Table 4: What drives alliances?**

Author	Theory behind formation of alliances
David Hume, <sup>49</sup> Hans Morgenthau, <sup>50</sup> Kenneth Waltz, <sup>51</sup> others	Balance of Power Theory
Stephen Walt	Balance of Threat Theory
Hans Morgenthau, <sup>52</sup> Glenn Snyder, <sup>53</sup> George Liska <sup>54</sup>	Convergence of national interests, such as defending their independence and increasing national security
Glenn Snyder <sup>55</sup>	Convergence of values

#### **1.4. *Synthesizing key definitions from the literature and formulating propositions***

The author has inferred the following key propositions from the literature above that he thinks are relevant for examining the Russian-Chinese relationship in the context of rivalry of great powers and their allies further down. First, synthesizing theories of balance of power and balance of threat, the author posits that states enter alliances either (1) to reduce imminent grave threats to (a) their vital national interests, such as interest in preserving territorial integrity, or to (b) the vital interests of their ruling elites, such as interest in preventing (externally induced) regime changes; or (2) to hedge against threats that have not yet materialized but that these states' leadership thinks have sufficient grounds to expect to emerge in the future. Second, when deliberating whether to enter its state into an alliance, the leadership of that state has to (1) be confident that its government cannot achieve a sufficient net reduction in one or both of the two types of threats (a and b) on its own, and (2) have reasonable hope that membership in the alliance will lead to a net reduction in that threat (benefits exceeding potential external and internal costs). Third, to achieve a reduction in those threats to national interests, states can enter alliances either with other states against the source of the threat (aligning to balance the threat, per Walt's terminology), or with the source of that threat (if it is a state), which constitutes defensive

<sup>49</sup> David Hume, "Of the Balance of Power," *op. cit.*

<sup>50</sup> Hans Morgenthau. *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace. op. cit.*

<sup>51</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War. Faced with Unbalanced Power, Some States Try to Increase their Own Strength or they Ally with Others to Bring the International Distribution of Power into Balance," *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>52</sup> Hans Morgenthau. *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace. op. cit.*

<sup>53</sup> Glenn Snyder, "Alliance Theory: A Neorealist First Cut," *op. cit.*

<sup>54</sup> George Liska, *Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence*. Johns Hopkins Press, 1962.

<sup>55</sup> Glenn Snyder, "Alliance Theory: A Neorealist First Cut," *op. cit.*

bandwagoning, per Walt's terminology. Fourth, net gains, such as a net reduction in threats to vital interests that leaders of states can hope to extract from their country's participation in alliances, can change with time in ways that may be difficult for them to predict. Therefore, fifth, alliances can fall apart with time and the leaders of the lesser powers prefer to enter their states into alignments (per Walt's dichotomy of alignments and bandwagoning) rather than to bandwagon with greater powers as the former often lack confidence that the latter's intentions *vis-à-vis* them won't change rapidly and soon. Sixth, as Walt has observed, such bandwagoning can be not only defensive (to pre-empt a threatening greater power from aggression or coercion), but also offensive (*e.g.* joining a winning coalition led by a great power to get a share in the spoils of victory). Eventually, however, this bandwagoning can turn from offensive to defensive with time, if only to hedge against threats that the greater power can attempt coercion (or, ultimately, aggression) against some of the smaller members of its victorious alliance (especially if those have joined it toward the latter phase of conflict when its victory has been all but assured). Seventh, when it comes to hedging against future threats, greater powers can too see utility in lesser powers aligning or bandwagoning with them, if they think that these lesser powers can make a net contribution to their ability to act against other greater powers, which may threaten their vital interests in the not-so-distant future.

In addition to inferring key propositions for this study from the aforementioned literature, the author has also relied on works by Walt and Osgood to synthesize the following definition of alliance for the purposes of this article: alliance is a formal or informal arrangement in accordance with which states commit (1) to refrain from aggression against each other and (2) to render military and security assistance to each other in case of aggression by a third country (or alliance) against one or both of them. The author will now apply this definition and these propositions to answer the two questions he has posed. Question 1: Can the current bilateral relationship between Russia and China be described as an alliance and why? Question 2: If not, is such an alliance possible in the future?

## **2. Can the current bilateral relationship between Russia and China be described as an alliance and why?**

As stated above, one of this article's two key propositions is that the alliances entered into by states that feel threatened do not have to be formal, but they typically do require their members to commit to render military assistance to each other if the threat of aggression materializes. As Walt has found, nations can be in an alliance with each other even if that commitment is informal, but it has to be credible, as is the case with the U.S. and Israel. It has to be credible not only in the eyes of the allied powers, but also other states, including those that are threatening one or more members of that alliance. For instance, in the case of

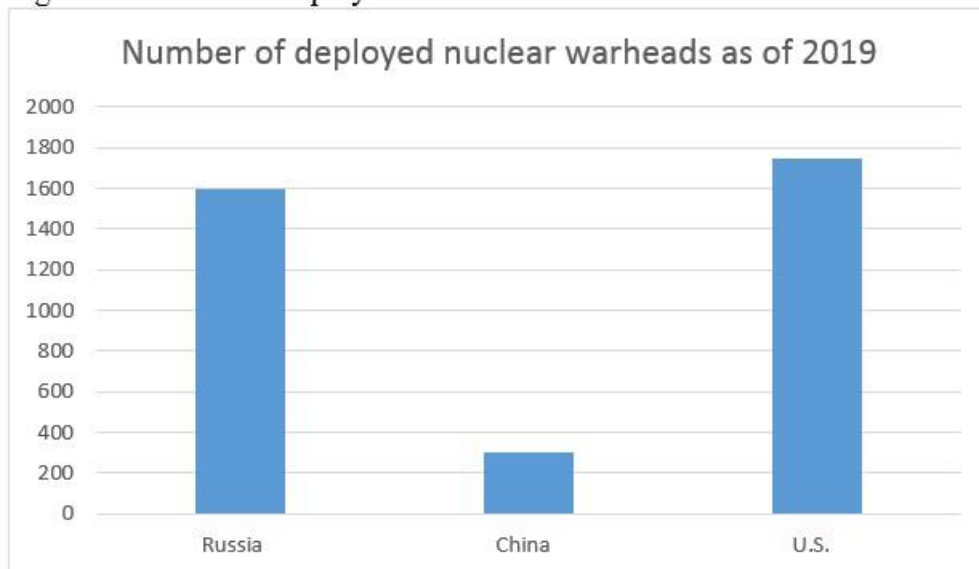
the U.S. and Israel, there is hardly any doubt in either these or other countries that Washington and Tel-Aviv will come to each other's aid in case of aggression. Therefore, theirs is, to borrow the unnamed former Russian security official's contestable language on Russian-Chinese relations, a functional military alliance. In contrast, while one might say with some degree of confidence that Russia and China are in a *de facto* non-aggression pact, which is one of the conditions of this article's definition of an alliance, one cannot be sure when it comes to the second condition, which is that Russia and China will render military and security assistance to each other in case of an aggression by a third country (or alliance) against either or both of them. Therefore, their relations fall short of this article's criterion for an alliance.

## 2.1. Reasons behind the absence of a Russian-Chinese alliance at present

### 2.1.1. Absence of undeterrable threats

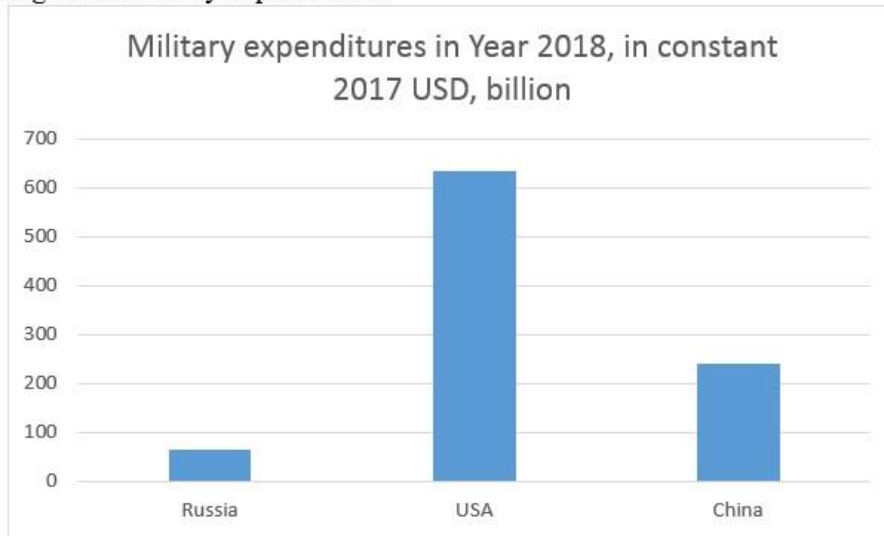
The primary reason for the absence of alliance an between Russia and China is, in the author's view, that both countries' leaders feel they can cope with threats to their security and ruling elites on their own, at least in the short term. Both countries have robust means of nuclear deterrence (*see graphs below*) and are working to expand their means of non-nuclear deterrence to prevent the U.S. from imposing its will upon them through military pressure, not to mention overt aggression by the U.S. and its allies.

Figure 1: Number of deployed nuclear warheads:



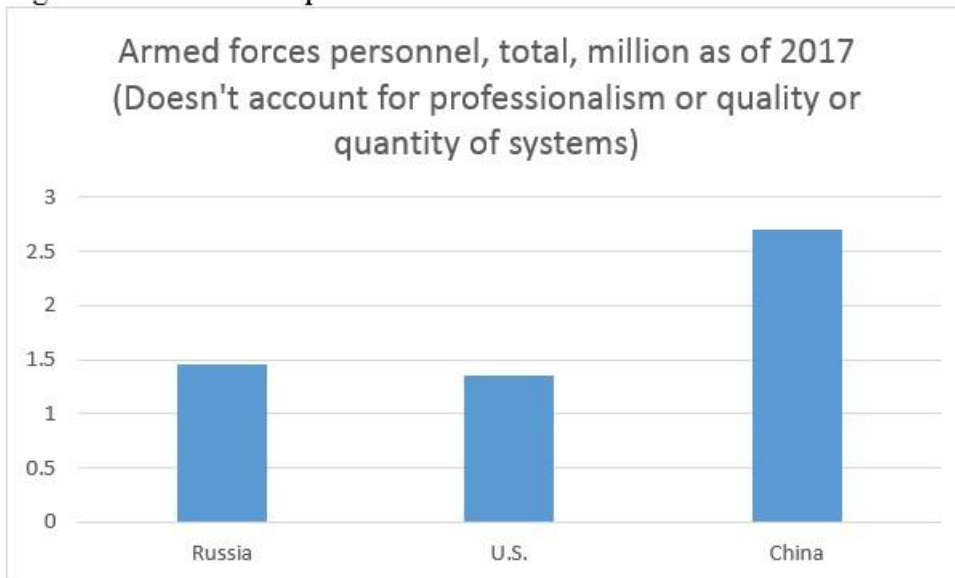
Source: Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, "Status of World Nuclear Forces," Federation of American Scientists, May 2019

Figure 2: Military expenditures:



Source: "[Military expenditure by country](#)," SIPRI, 2019

Figure 3 Armed forces personnel:

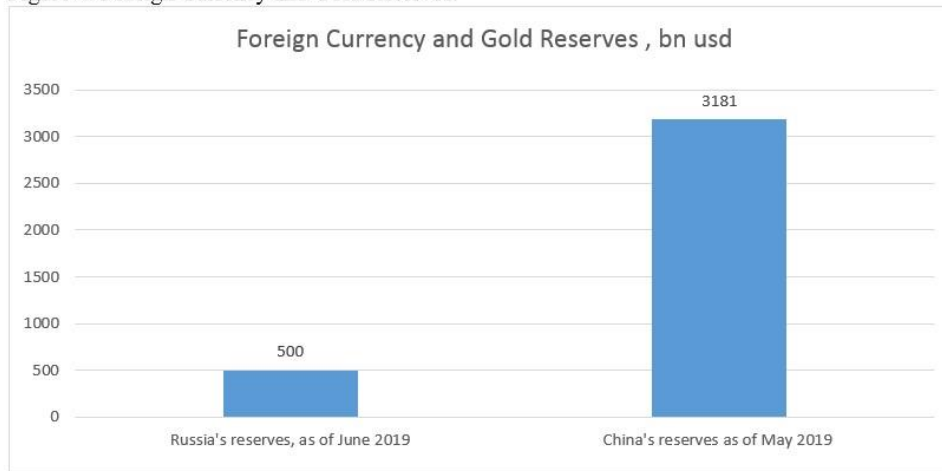


Source: [World Bank database](#), u.d.

Both countries have also weathered eruptions of colour revolutions in various nearby parts of Eurasia, with Russia's and China's ruling elites remaining firmly in control of their own countries. Moreover, so far, they feel confident that they can withstand these threats in the future, at least in the short term, given relative firmness of Russian and Chinese ruling elites' grip on power and the resources at their disposal to apply both sticks and carrots at home. While Xi's domestic popularity is not measured in opinion polls, Putin's approval rating, as measured by Russia's leading independent pollster, Levada Centre, remained at 60 % in July 2020 (though it has been declining recently, as has the Russians' confidence in him.)<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup> [Approval Ratings](#), Levada Centre, u.d.

Figure 4. Foreign Currency and Gold Reserves:



Source: World Bank's database [World Development Indicators](#)

Yes, in theory, aligning against the U.S. would allow both Russia and China to spend less on deterring that threat in the short term, but this benefit may be ultimately outweighed by costs, including not only restrictions on their freedom of maneuverability but also economic, financial (sanctions and restrictions) and military responses (increasing military power) that the U.S. may come up with. Therefore, rather than result in a net advancement of national interests, which I list below, such an alliance can advance some national interests and set back others, all for the sake of deterring a threat the countries can already deter on their own, as the charts below help to demonstrate, though they are not portraying the full picture. While detaining the ability to deter threats on their own constitutes the primary reason why Russia and China are neither in an alliance nor nearing one, there are additional factors that have further reduced the probability of such an alliance emerging. First, there is the lack of certainty that one side will continue to positively impact the other side's efforts to advance its vital national interests in the future (concerns that costs of even closer relationship may exceed benefits). This constitutes one factor why Russia (and China) would probably remain in what then-Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov has recently described as "strategic solitude." The second factor is the economic, demographic and other disparities between China and Russia coupled with Russia's unwillingness to be a junior partner (bandwagon with China). I will explore these two factors in the following sections.

### **2.1.2 Uncertainty that China and Russia will continue to positively impact each other's interests in the future**

#### **China's Impact on Russia's Vital National Interests**

When it comes to Russia's vital interests, China's impact on those is mixed and may change with time.

One of Russia's vital interests that China is currently impacting positively is the prevention of armed aggression against Russia. As stated above, the two countries have a robust military-to-military relationship, from which Russia benefits by not only ensuring that China remains cooperative, but also by using it in deterrence signalling to the U.S. As stated above, Russian-Chinese military and security cooperation keeps growing stronger every year. China has taken part in Russia's Vostok-2018 war games, which was the first time the People's Liberation Army (PLA) participated in the Russian army's annual strategic war games. Earlier, the two countries' navies pioneered holding joint manoeuvres in the Mediterranean in 2015 and in the Baltic in 2017. Moreover, Russia agreed to have its warships practice "island seizing" with the Chinese in the South China Sea in 2016,<sup>57</sup> where China has vast claims. More recently, Russian and Chinese bombers have participated in an unprecedented joint patrol, drawing accusations of violating South Korea's airspace from Seoul in July 2019. In addition to having their infantry, sailors and airmen train together on an annual basis, Russian and Chinese commanders also plan to expand bilateral educational venues by having their military academies exchange professors.<sup>58</sup> Finally, the two countries' military-political leadership and their chief military strategists have been holding regular top-level consultations on a range of common threats that Russia and China face, including threats that they think their countries face from the U.S. and its allies, while their defence industries engage in joint research and development.<sup>59</sup> That said, as in other countries, Russian generals have to plan for worst-case scenarios, and some of these future-oriented scenarios entail a potential conflict somewhere along the 2,500-miles Russian-Chinese border once described by Henry Kissinger as a "strategic nightmare" for Moscow.<sup>60</sup> For instance, in 2009, a reporter for the Defence Ministry's *Krasnaya Zvezda* newspaper pointed out to Russia's then Chief of the General Staff General Nikolai Makarov that a slide in the commander's presentation showed NATO and China to be "*the most dangerous of our geopolitical rivals.*"<sup>61</sup> Makarov did not mention China in his answer. However, earlier at the same conference, he did point out that "*in terms of China we are conducting a very balanced, well-*

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<sup>57</sup> Sam LaGrone, "[China, Russia Kick Off Joint South China Sea Naval Exercise; Includes 'Island Seizing' Drill.](#)" USNI News, September 12, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> "[Voennye vuzy RF i KNR gotovyat programmu obmena prepodavatelayami.](#)" Interfax, August 28, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> "[Rossiya i Kitay podpisali protokol o sovместnoy razrabotke raketnykh dvigateley.](#)" RT, November 8, 2018.

<sup>60</sup> Simon Saradzhyan, "Russia Needs to Develop Eastern Provinces as China Rises," RIA Novosti, March 5, 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Simon Saradzhyan, "Russia's Red Herring," *International Relations and Security Network* 25 (2010).

*thought out policy.*" However, based on the author's experience working as a defence and security journalist in Russia for fifteen years, *Krasnaya Zvezda* reporters typically seek pre-approval for the questions they ask top commanders, so the reference to China as a "strongest geopolitical rival" is no accident. Two months later, Chief of the Ground Forces Staff Lt. Gen. Sergei Skokov made what leading Russian military expert Alexander Khramchikhin described as an "epochal statement." When describing what kind of warfare the national armed forces should prepare for, Skokov said the following in September 2009: "If we talk about the east, then it could be a multi-million-man army with a traditional approach to conducting combat operations: straightforward, with large concentrations of personnel and firepower along individual operational directions."<sup>62</sup> Writing in *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, Khramchikhin noted that "for the first time since the early days of Gorbachev, a high-ranking national commander has de facto acknowledged officially that the People's Republic of China is our potential enemy." Interestingly, the Russian public also believes a war with China is possible, though not probable. When asked in 2015 (so post-Crimea) by the Levada Centre whether there can be an armed clash between Russian and Chinese armed forces in the next ten years, 13 % answered in the affirmative referring to a conflict outside Russia and 11 % to a conflict inside Russia or at its border.

**Table 5: Poll on possibility of armed clash**

Can there be an armed clash between Russian and Chinese armed forces in the next ten years?	Yes	No	Difficult to say
Outside Russia	13	69	19
At Russia's borders or on the territory of Russia	11	72	17

Can there be an armed clash between Russian armed forces and NATO in the next ten years?	Yes	No	Difficult to say
Outside Russia	28	46	26
At Russia's borders or on the territory of Russia	19	55	26

Source: "['Vozmozhnost' voyennykh stolkoveniy Rossii s NATO i Kitayem, vospriyatiye stran ES,](#)" Levada Centre, November 21, 2015

While Russia's officials and active-duty commanders have largely avoided explicit, public references to China as a potential foe, former Russian officials and experts do point to possible threats posed by the conventional superiority of the People's Liberation Army.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

Alexei Arbatov (Carnegie Moscow Centre), for instance, has written of *“Russian reliance on nuclear weapons to compensate for its growing inferiority, relative to China, in conventional forces in Siberia and the Far East.”*<sup>63</sup> More recently, the former head of the Russian Defence Ministry's analytical centre and deputy director of the Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies (Russian Academy of Sciences), Pavel Zolotarev, noted, when explaining in a January 2019 brief why Russia should not extend from Europe to Asia a moratorium on the development and deployment of short- and intermediate-range missiles, that *“it would be logical for the Russian leadership to refrain from extending such a moratorium to the eastern part of the country.”* *“This would be expedient not out of any need to demonstrate to the United States the possibility of posing a threat to the U.S. homeland with medium-range missiles, but because it would have an impact on China,”* he wrote in reference to the moratorium which he suggested that Russia declared in case the INF Treaty falls apart, which it did.<sup>64</sup> While the steps Russia has taken, including demarcation of the border, have greatly reduced the probability of an overt armed conflict with China, they have not eliminated the possibility entirely. After all, many in China still remember which country used to control the lands now making up Russia's Far Eastern province, though before considering any conflict with Russia, China will probably want to regain Taiwan and establish its dominance in Southeast Asia.

Preventing the secession of territories from Russia and preventing sustained campaigns of political violence in Russia constitute two more of this country's vital interests. These interests have been undermined by the Islamist insurgency that has grown roots in Russia's North Caucasus. Yet, China has been unable to stop the trickle of Islamist fighters from its Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region to the North Caucasus, though, of course, that trickle did not have a significant impact as locals account for 90 % or more of the North Caucasus-based insurgents.<sup>65</sup> It should also be noted that Chinese and Russian generals routinely list counterterrorism among the objectives of the war games regularly held by their militaries, as well as those of other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Going forward, there has been some concern expressed in Russia that the threat to the first interest (preventing secession) may eventually come from China itself – in the form of “soft annexation” of the underdeveloped, sparsely populated Russian territories bordering China. Back in 1998, then director of the Federal Border Service, Nikolai Bordyuzha, warned that Russia might lose swathes of land in its Far East if the steady flow of illegal immigrants from China is not stopped.<sup>66</sup> He was echoed by General Ivan Fedotov, chief of the service's immigration directorate: *“Another 20 to 30 years of such expansion and the Chinese will become the majority. This may lead to [territorial] losses.”*<sup>67</sup> More recently, in August 2012, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev warned that the Far East *“is located far away and,*

<sup>63</sup> Alexei Arbatov, “Engaging China in Nuclear Arms Control,” *Eurasia Outlook*, October 9, 2014.

<sup>64</sup> William Tobey, Pavel S. Zolotarev, Ulrich Kühn, [“The INF Quandary: Preventing a Nuclear Arms Race in Europe. Perspectives from the US, Russia and Germany.”](#) Policy Brief, Russia Matters, January 24, 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Simon Saradzhyan, Ali Wyne, “Sino-Russian Relations: Same Bed, Different Dreams?,” in *Power Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, Routledge, 2017, pp. 90-111.

<sup>66</sup> Simon Saradzhyan, “Border Chief Warns Russia May Lose Land,” *Moscow Times*, May 27, 1998.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*



unfortunately, we don't have many people there and must protect it from the excessive expansion of people from neighbouring countries," while in 2015, Putin's chief of staff at the time, Sergei Ivanov, explained why the Russian government had banned "foreign investment in a narrow strip of border zone" near China by saying: "Our population in the Far East is scarce, we don't have enough [people]." More recently, Russia's efforts to integrate Crimea, which it has taken from Ukraine, have failed to win support from China, with the latter abstaining during a key vote at the United Nations General Assembly on "Territorial integrity of Ukraine" in March 2014. Not just Russia's top federal officials, but also the general public, are concerned that disparities across the Sino-Russian border may lead to encroachments. In 2015, Russian politicians reacted nervously to plans by the government of Russia's Zabaikalsky Krai to lease 1,000 square kilometres of land to a Chinese company for 49 years. Igor Lebedev, a deputy speaker of the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, warned that it "poses huge political risks, particularly to Russia's territorial integrity. ... They will bring in scores of Chinese. Then 20 or 30 years from now the Chinese government will demand those lands be given to China because all those Chinese people live there," Lebedev said of the plan.<sup>68</sup> One Siberian official told the *Financial Times* how Chinese tour groups made a point of telling visitors that the Baikal Lake was part of China during the Tang and Han dynasties.<sup>69</sup> Gu Xiaomei, a manager of China National Electric Engineering who worked at a construction site in Birobidzhan, a Russian city near the Chinese border, separately told the newspaper: "We know that we should not talk about this now, we are not strong enough yet, but when the time comes, these lands have to be given back [to China]."<sup>70</sup> Should considerable numbers of Chinese nationals settle in Russia's Far East, it cannot be ruled out that Beijing may one day seek deeper inroads there using the same rationale described by Russian politicians as "defending compatriots wherever they live" and used by Putin to take Crimea from Ukraine. So far, however, such massive settlement has not occurred in the Far East and it remains unlikely in the near future. Moreover, more than half of Chinese migrants, according to recent research, are in the European part of Russia, where the labour market is more attractive than in the east.<sup>71</sup>

Another set of vital Russian interests, in my view, comprises ensuring productive relations with such key global players as China, ensuring the viability and stability of major markets for major flows of Russian exports and imports and ensuring steady development and diversification of the Russian economy, as well as its integration into the global economy. Here China has had a positive impact. Beijing has responded positively to Moscow's overtures to improve the relationship, signing a border treaty and pursuing a special partnership between the countries. The two countries' coordination of votes at the United Nations Security Council is a testament to the constructive nature of the bilateral

<sup>68</sup> Kathrin Hille, "Outcry in Russia over China Land Lease," *Financial Times*, June 26, 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Charles Clover, "[China Land Grab on Lake Baikal Raises Russian Ire](#)," *Financial Times*, January 4, 2018.

<sup>70</sup> Kathrin Hille, "Russia and China: Friends with Benefits," *Financial Times*, February 5, 2016.

<sup>71</sup> Alexander Gabuev, Maria Repnikova, "[Why Forecasts of a Chinese Takeover of the Russian Far East are just a Dramatic Myth](#)," *South China Morning Post*, July 14, 2017.

relationship as are the two leaders' statements. "We are ready to go hand in hand with you," Chinese President Xi Jinping told Russian President Vladimir Putin during his visit to Russia in June 2019. Xi then noted that he hoped his visit would "serve as an incentive for the development of Chinese-Russian relations, comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction in a new era." Putin reciprocated: "This is a truly comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction," he said, adding that the RF-PRC relationship has attained an "unprecedentedly high" level. As stated above, Xi and Putin have met about 30 times in total and called each other "dear" and "best" friends. While the author could not find any annual measurements of whether the Chinese public is favourable toward the Russian public, references can be found to the aforementioned annual polling conducted for China's *Global Times* on the importance of the Russian-Chinese relationship that indicates that the Chinese have been feeling that their country's relationship with Russia is increasingly important. When asked in 2018 by GT pollsters which foreign relations have the biggest influence on China, 63.5 % of the Chinese respondents pointed to the U.S., and 37.6 % pointed to Russia.<sup>72</sup> In contrast, when asked the same question in 2016, 79.8 % of the respondents pointed to the U.S., and 37.2 % pointed to Russia.<sup>73</sup> "Polls suggest that the Chinese approval rating of Russia is among the highest of all countries interviewed," this paper opined in 2018.<sup>74</sup> Russians are also favourable toward China, according to the Levada Centre pollster.<sup>75</sup> The share of Russians who have favourable views of China has remained above 50 % since at least 2007. In a 32-country Pew survey released in September 2019, more respondents in Russia than in any other country had a favourable view of China (71 %).<sup>76</sup>

As important, the increasingly positive rhetoric of the leaders and the favourable views of the public have been followed by a strengthening of economic ties. In fact, in recent years China has helped offset some of the losses incurred by Russia as a result of Western sanctions, and its role in Russia's foreign trade has generally grown. Russia has already sidelined Saudi Arabia to become China's top oil supplier.<sup>77</sup> China has overtaken Germany as key trading partner for Russia as the graphs below show.

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<sup>72</sup> When asked as part of the same poll which country they wanted to visit most, only 3.5 % picked Russia, making that country the 8<sup>th</sup> most desired destination (Liu Xin, Bai Yunyi, "[Most Chinese Feel West's Growing Containment of China, but Optimistic about Future: Poll](#)," December 28, 2018).

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

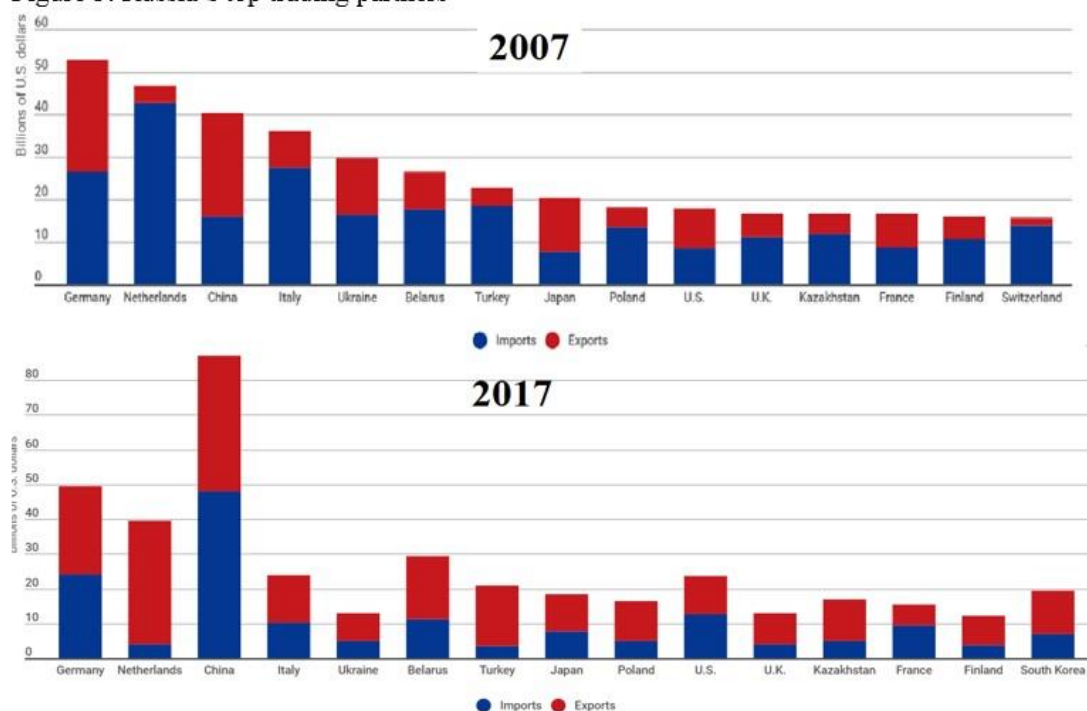
<sup>74</sup> "[Mainstream View Supports Sino-Russian Ties](#)," *Global Times*, February 7, 2018.

<sup>75</sup> "[Otnoshenie k stranam](#)," Levada Centre, u.d.

<sup>76</sup> "[People around the Globe are Divided in their Opinions of China](#)," Pew Research Centre, September 30, 2019.

<sup>77</sup> "Russia Takes over as Top Oil Supplier to China," *Financial Times*, June 23, 2015.

Figure 5: Russia's top trading partners



Source: Database of the [Federal Customs Service](#) of the Russian Federation

Table 6: Russia's top trading partners

Russia's top 10 trading partners in 2009	Volume of trade in mln USD	% of total volume of trade in 2019	Russia's top 10 trading partners in 2019	Volume of trade in mln USD	% of total volume of trade
Germany	39942	8.5	China	110919	31.8
Netherlands	39873.5	8.5	Germany	53161	8.6
China	39509	8.4	Netherlands	48766	8.0
Italy	32944.7	7	Belarus	33346	7.3
Belarus	23431	5	United States	26237	4.6
Ukraine	22900.9	4.9	Turkey	26034	3.9
Turkey	19599.9	4.2	Italy	25241	3.9
United States	18392.7	3.9	South Korea	24359	3.7
France	17147.6	3.7	Japan	20313	3.0
Poland	16711.6	3.6	Kazakhstan	19622	2.9

As these numbers show, Russia had economic reasons to pivot to China in particular and Asia in general even if the crisis over Crimea had not occurred. In fact, this pivot was taking place even before 2014 as Russia sought to capitalize on economic growth in the region. China has made major investments in Russian natural gas projects and will become an

important market for this fuel: a May 2014 deal provided for Russia to supply at least 38 billion cubic meters a year to China, and Gazprom began deliveries in December 2019. The two countries are also cooperating in the field of nuclear energy with Russia building six VVER reactors for China's Taiwan nuclear power plant.<sup>78</sup> China is likewise an important market for Russian arms, with the first delivery of S-400 air-defence systems reportedly completed in May 2018.<sup>79</sup> China accounted for about 12 % of the \$15 billion worth of arms that Russia exported in 2017, according to the Russian Defence Ministry.<sup>80</sup> That put China among the top 3 importers of Russian arms that year, according to Russia's Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies.<sup>81</sup> China cannot fully compensate for Russia's losses from trade-related restrictions imposed by the U.S. and the European Union (EU). Though the United States was only 5<sup>th</sup> on the list of Russia's top trading partners in 2019, it was third on the list of sources of imports for Russia in 2018. The U.S. and its allies remain an important source of technology for Russia's industries. Europe's technological contributions to the development of Russia's economy are even more important. Up to 90 % of electronics used in Russian defence systems are imported from the West, according to one Russian defence industry estimate,<sup>82</sup> and China, despite its impressive strides in many technological fields, cannot make up for Russia's loss of access to these Western technologies or others, like for deep drilling in the energy sector.<sup>83</sup>

Another of Russia's vital interests is ensuring the survival of Russian allies and their active cooperation with Russia and ensuring Russia is surrounded with friendly states among which it can play a leading role and in cooperation with which it can thrive. And, here, China's support has proved to be instrumental for Moscow's efforts to prevent regime change in countries friendly to Russia, such as Syria<sup>84</sup> and Belarus.<sup>85</sup> Further down, however, some Russian watchers of China are concerned that this interest can be threatened by China's expanding influence in Central Asia. So far Russia and China have managed to reconcile their differences in that region with Moscow tacitly agreeing to Beijing's greater economic role, while Moscow continues to act as the main guarantor of security. Such a division of responsibility may eventually prove to be untenable, however. As Carnegie's Dmitri Trenin

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<sup>78</sup> Linda Jakobson, Paul Holtom, Dean Knox and Jingchao Peng, "China's Energy and Security Relations with Russia: Hopes, Frustrations, and Uncertainties," *SIPRI Policy Paper* 29, September 2011.

<sup>79</sup> "[Russia Completes Delivery of First Regimental Set of S-400 to China – Source](#)," TASS, May 10, 2018.

<sup>80</sup> Aleksey Nikol'skiy, "[Kitay okazalsya odnim iz glavnykh importerov rossiyskogo oruzhiya](#)," *Vedomosti*, July 12, 2018.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> "Scientist Zuev: Western Electronics Constitute the Main Component of Russian Federation's Arms," *Profil Forex*, November 1, 2014.

<sup>83</sup> Simon Saradzhyan, "Stand-off in Crimea: Cui Bono?," *Power and Policy*, March 12, 2014.

<sup>84</sup> In late February 2017, China and Russia jointly vetoed a UNSC resolution "to sanction 21 Syrian individuals, companies and organizations for using chemical weapons in Syria and to tighten export controls on components of chemical weapons." (Stacy Closson, "[Putin and Xi Combine to Outsmart Trump](#)," *Newsweek*, March 19, 2017.

<sup>85</sup> China's Xi Jinping has displayed his support for Alexander Lukashenko's regime by not only fostering bilateral trade (China was Belarus' third-largest trading partner in 2018 after Russia and Ukraine), but also becoming the first foreign leader to congratulate the Belarusian president with his "re-election" in August 2020 even as both opposition and external powers, such as the EU and the US, contested the results as fraudulent.

has warned: *"In Central Asia ... there is some potential for Sino-Russian friction, even conflict."*<sup>86</sup> It is not impossible that China's growing economic, military and political might could eventually prompt some of Russia's allies to reorient their foreign policies from north to southeast, seeking deeper economic ties and new security alliances with Beijing. This would amount to a net loss for their former imperial master, and the probability of such "defections" will increase if China and Russia stop trying to accommodate each other's interests through projects like the SCO and start treating their interactions in the region as a zero-sum game.

Finally, China is instrumental for Russia's interest in preventing neighbouring nations from acquiring nuclear arms and long-range delivery systems and in securing nuclear weapons and materials. For instance, both coordinated their efforts at the UNSC to encourage Iran to reach a deal on its nuclear program and continue to stand for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, at least publicly, though both oppose what they see as excessive pressure on the DPRK by the United States. As Linda Jakobson and her co-authors have observed, both Russia and China *"view non-proliferation efforts as important, but China and Russia do not share what they perceive as 'Westerners' obsession' with non-proliferation."*<sup>87</sup> China's participation in international non-proliferation regimes and its efforts to ensure that none of its nuclear materials, weapons or ballistic missile technologies are stolen are key to ensuring that more of Russia's neighbours do not acquire nuclear weapons or long-range delivery systems.

**Table 7: Russia's vital national interests**

Russia's vital national interests, which China has and/or will have impact on	China's impact at present	China's impact in future
Prevention of armed aggression against Russia	Positive	Unclear
Preventing of secession of territories from Russia and preventing sustained campaigns of political violence in Russia	No significant impact	Might become negative
Ensuring productive relations with such key global players as China	Positive	Likely to remain positive
Ensuring the viability and stability of major markets for major flows of Russian exports and imports, and ensuring steady development and diversification of the Russian economy (through arms imports, industrial cooperation among others)	Positive	Likely to remain positive
Ensuring the survival of Russian allies and their active cooperation with Russia and ensuring Russia is surrounded with friendly states among which it can play a leading role and in cooperation with which it can thrive	Positive	Might become negative

<sup>86</sup> Dmitri Trenin, ["From Greater Europe to Greater Asia? The Sino-Russian Entente,"](#) Carnegie Moscow Centre, April 2015.

<sup>87</sup> Jakobson *et al.*, "China's Energy and Security Relations with Russia: Hopes, Frustrations, and Uncertainties," *op. cit.*

## Russia's impact on China's vital national interests

When it comes to Russia's impact on China's vital interests, the record is also mixed, and Russia does not have significant influence upon all of these interests even though, as stated above, when asked in 2018 by Global Times pollsters which foreign relations have the biggest influence on China, 37.6 % of respondents pointed to Russia.<sup>88</sup>

One set of China's vital interests includes preserving territorial integrity, maintaining sovereignty over such regions as Tibet and Xinjiang and reducing manifestations of separatism there, while also establishing control over Taiwan under the "one state, two systems" formula and securing its claims in the South China Sea.<sup>89</sup> Russia's impact on this set is mixed, though overall positive. Russia's efforts to defeat insurgency in the North Caucasus have also contributed to reduction in the number of Uighur fighters that can return from this region to Xinjiang. More importantly, Russia has been traditionally rendering diplomatic support to China on Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan. Moreover, in a more recent development, Russia has also criticized a 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague rejecting China's claim over much of the South China Sea. At the same time, however, Russia maintains strong ties with countries with which China has territorial disputes, selling advanced weaponry systems to Vietnam, Malaysia and South Korea, and offering such systems to the Philippines. As noted by political scientist Huiyun Feng: "*Russia's 2012 energy deal with Vietnam in the South China Sea, where China has claimed its undisputed sovereignty, was seen as a 'stab in the back' by some Chinese analysts.*"<sup>90</sup> Also, Russia's recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have expanded the number of unpleasant precedents for China in its efforts to integrate Taiwan, as has the Russian-supported referendum in Crimea that formally led to the republic's official split from Ukraine.

Another of China's key security interests is the "*disappearance of a direct military threat to China and the enhancement of China's national strength,*" according to Yan, who underscores that for China "*development is more important than peace.*" It follows from Yan's thoughtful review of his country's key interests that this threat can disappear at least in part through building a lean and strong military force.<sup>91</sup> Here, Russia's impact is positive too. As stated above, Russia has played an important role in supplying the Chinese with advanced weaponry systems, such as multi-role Sukhoi fighters and S-400 air defence systems, that help Beijing's efforts to build a modern military force. In spite of instances of reverse engineering in the past, Russia has even agreed to engage in some defence R&D with

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<sup>88</sup> Liu Xin, Bai Yunyi, "[Most Chinese Feel West's Growing Containment of China, but Optimistic about Future: Poll,](#)" *op. cit.*

<sup>89</sup> Derived from Yan Xuetong, "[An Analysis of China's National Interests.](#)" East Asia Peace & Security Initiative, 2018 (published in English in 2002).

<sup>90</sup> Huiyun Feng, "China and Russia vs. the United States?," *Diplomat*, March 2, 2015.

<sup>91</sup> Yan Xuetong, "[An Analysis of China's National Interests.](#)" *op. cit.*

China, jointly developing rocket engines. Moreover, more recently, Russian President Vladimir Putin revealed in October 2019 that Russia is helping China to develop its own early warning system.<sup>92</sup> Also, like Russia, China is interested in preventing nuclear proliferation<sup>93</sup> and both sides have cooperated fruitfully to advance this mutual interest, as described in the section on Russian interests above.

Chinese intellectuals also point to such key security interests of their country as establishing a collective system of cooperative security and maintaining stability in the region.<sup>94</sup> Russia has had an overall positive impact on the advancement of these interests, participating in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Along with other participants, Russia has taken part in joint “Peace Mission anti-terrorism military exercise” as well as Coalition, Rubezh and other ground exercises.<sup>95</sup> These games have added a security dimension to the organization, which calls itself a “permanent intergovernmental international organization.”<sup>96</sup> However, while committing the participants to non-aggression against each other, the organization’s charter contains no clauses on collective defence or mutual military assistance in case of an external aggression. In addition, while Russian journalists and Pakistani columnists have referred to SCO members as allies,<sup>97</sup> Putin has avoided using this term even when asked to comment on the goals of SCO “allies.”<sup>98</sup> Moreover, some watchers of Russian-Chinese relations have concluded that Russia seeks to dilute China’s leadership in the SCO by taking such steps as bringing its rival India into the organization.<sup>99</sup> Russia and China also see eye to eye on the need to stabilize Afghanistan. In addition, Russia has been playing an important role in maintaining stability in post-Soviet Central Asia, both through bilateral military and security cooperation with most of the individual post-Soviet republics in that region and through multilateral vehicles such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

While aspiring for securing territories it considers its own, China nevertheless also has a key interest in avoiding confrontation with America in general and avoiding a military clash over such territories as Taiwan in particular, according to Yan.<sup>100</sup> Russia itself does not wish to have such a military clash with the U.S. either, but its efforts to secure greater support from

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<sup>92</sup> [“The World Order Seen From the East. Plenary Session of the 16th Annual Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club.”](#) Valdai Club, October 3, 2019.

<sup>93</sup> Derived from “Yan Xuetong, [“An Analysis of China’s National Interests.”](#) *op. cit.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Marcel De Haas, “War Games of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Drills on the Move!,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 29:3, 378-406.

<sup>96</sup> See SCO’s website: [http://eng.sectsco.org/about\\_sco/](http://eng.sectsco.org/about_sco/)

<sup>97</sup> Tatyana Zamakhina, [“Ot Vostoka na Zapad.”](#) *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, June 13, 2019; Saleem Qamar Butt, [“SCO is World’s Greatest Regional Alliance.”](#) *Daily Times*, June 17, 2019.

<sup>98</sup> [“Intervyu Vladimira Putina Mezhgosudarstvennoy teleradiokompanii ‘Mir’,”](#) Kremlin, June 13, 2019.

<sup>99</sup> Linda Maduz. [Flexibility by Design: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Future of Eurasian Cooperation.](#) ETH Zurich, 2018.

<sup>100</sup> Derived from “Yan Xuetong, [“An Analysis of China’s National Interests.”](#) *op. cit.*

China on issues in which Russia and the U.S. are locked in a confrontational mode can perhaps have some negative impact on China's wish to reduce chances of confrontation with the U.S.

Another set of China's vital interests deals with economy. It includes ensuring steady development of the Chinese economy and ensuring unhindered flow of exports and imports of capitals, resources, goods and technologies.<sup>101</sup> Here, Russia's impact is positive, but not very significant. On one hand, Russia is the top supplier of oil to China and an important source of weapons, as stated above. However, overall, Russia is far from being a top trading partner of China, as the tables below show. Nor is the post-Soviet region, in which Moscow is pursuing economic integration projects, a top partner of China - although its relative importance is to grow somewhat as the region's southern countries increasingly participate in China's Belt and Road Initiative (in contrast to such countries as Kazakhstan, Russia is not very enthusiastic about the project and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov even skipped China's Belt and Road Forum in June 2020<sup>102</sup>).

**Table 8: China's largest trading partners**

Year 2018		Mainland China's Imports, USD millions	% of total		Mainland China's exports, million USD	% of total	
European Union		273,570.66	13 %	European Union	411,943.39	16 %	
Emerging & Dev. Asia		266,869.21	13 %	Emerging & Dev. Asia	378,064.73	15 %	
Middle East, N. Africa, Pakistan		163,200.21	8 %	Western Hemisphere	147,523.41	6 %	
Western Hemisphere		157,163.53	7 %	Middle East	101,498.02	4 %	
Africa		90,546.97	4 %	Africa	91,872.79	4 %	
CIS		81,689.71	4 %	CIS	80,900.68	3 %	
Rank	Year 2018	Mainland China's Imports, CIF from countries, USD millions	% of total	Rank		Mainland China's exports, FOB to countries, million USD	% of total
1	Korea, Republic of	202,995.45	10 %	1	United States	480,688.67	19 %
2	Japan	180,478.66	8 %	2	China, P.R.: Hong Kong	303,724.55	12 %

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Kathrin Hille, Katrina Manson, Henry Foy, Christian Shepherd, "US Urged to Exploit Cracks in Russia-China Relationship," *Financial Times*, July 25, 2020.



3	Taiwan Prov. of China	177,130.12	8 %	3	Japan	147,564.61	6 %
4	United States	156,259.14	7 %	4	Korea, Republic of	109,524.34	4 %
5	Germany	106,213.68	5 %	5	Vietnam	84,222.79	3 %
6	Australia	105,140.90	5 %	6	Germany	78,154.62	3 %
7	Brazil	76,866.72	4 %	7	India	77,023.16	3 %
8	Vietnam	64,154.00	3 %	8	Netherlands	73,288.72	3 %
9	Malaysia	63,492.55	3 %	9	United Kingdom	57,291.29	2 %
10	Russian Federation	58,579.84	3 %	10	Singapore	50,089.79	2 %
11	Saudi Arabia	45,941.92	2 %	11	Taiwan Prov. of China	48,650.32	2 %
12	Thailand	44,992.75	2 %	12	Russian Federation	48,073.66	2 %

Source: [IMF](#)

**Table 9: China's vital national interests**

China's vital national interests that Russia has and/or will have impact on	Russia's impact at present	Russia's impact in future
Preserving territorial integrity, maintaining sovereignty over such regions as Tibet and Xinjiang, while also establishing control over Taiwan and securing its claims in the South China Sea	Mixed though overall positive	Not clear
Disappearance of a direct military threat to China and the enhancement of China's national strength	Positive	Likely to remain positive
Establishing a collective system of cooperative security and maintaining stability in the region	Positive	Might become negative
Avoiding confrontation with America in general and avoiding a military clash over such territories as Taiwan in particular	Somewhat negative	Not clear
Ensuring steady development of the Chinese economy and ensuring unhindered flow of exports and imports of capitals, resources, goods and technologies	Positive, but not very significant	Likely to remain positive

Overall, the impact the two countries have had on each other's vital interests is mixed and China's impact, due to a combination of factors, including its economic and demographic might, is greater than Russia's, which helps to explain why some in Russia's ruling elite, and public, are concerned about deepening what they see as an unequal partnership, to say less of entering an alliance. Moreover, as demonstrated above, there is concern, particularly on the Russian side, that the impact of the other side on its vital interests may change from positive to negative with time.

### 2.1.3 Disparities between Russia and China

As stated above, another factor that has contributed to the absence of an alliance between Russia and China is disparities in key components of national power, such as economy and demographics, that makes it difficult for Russia to be anything but a junior partner in such an alliance, which is something that Moscow remains averse to given its desire to continue to play what its foreign policy doctrine describes as the “*unique role Russia has played for centuries as a counterbalance in international affairs.*”<sup>103</sup> Per that doctrine, Russia strives to be an indispensable nation which can not only play an important role in countering emergent global hegemony, but without which no major global issue is resolved. As indicated in the sections on national interest above, the disparities in such key components of national power as economy and demography are striking. For the first time in centuries, China is developing more rapidly than Russia, a change that manifests itself in disparities between the two countries' provinces along their shared borders. In 2014, the regional domestic products of the three Russian federal districts east of the Ural Mountains – called the Urals, Siberian and Far Eastern districts – have accounted for less than half of the combined regional gross products (RGPs) of the four Chinese provinces that border Russia.<sup>104</sup> Demographic comparisons also favour China: the combined population of the 27 Russian provinces comprising the above-mentioned three districts totalled 37.8 million as of 2016 – less than in just one of China's four borderland provinces, Heilongjiang, which had 37.9 million people.<sup>105</sup> While recent estimates of the number of Chinese in Russia vary from 300,000 to 500,000 nationwide,<sup>106</sup> this number may grow if the population in Russia's Far East decreases – which is not impossible, given that the United Nations expects Russia's population to shrink from 144 million to 132.7 million by 2050.<sup>107</sup> Recent calculations by the author and Nabi Abdullaev show that four different models for measuring national power place China above Russia in absolute terms, while three of them also show Chinese power growing much more rapidly than Russia's in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>103</sup> [Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 1, 2016 (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016).

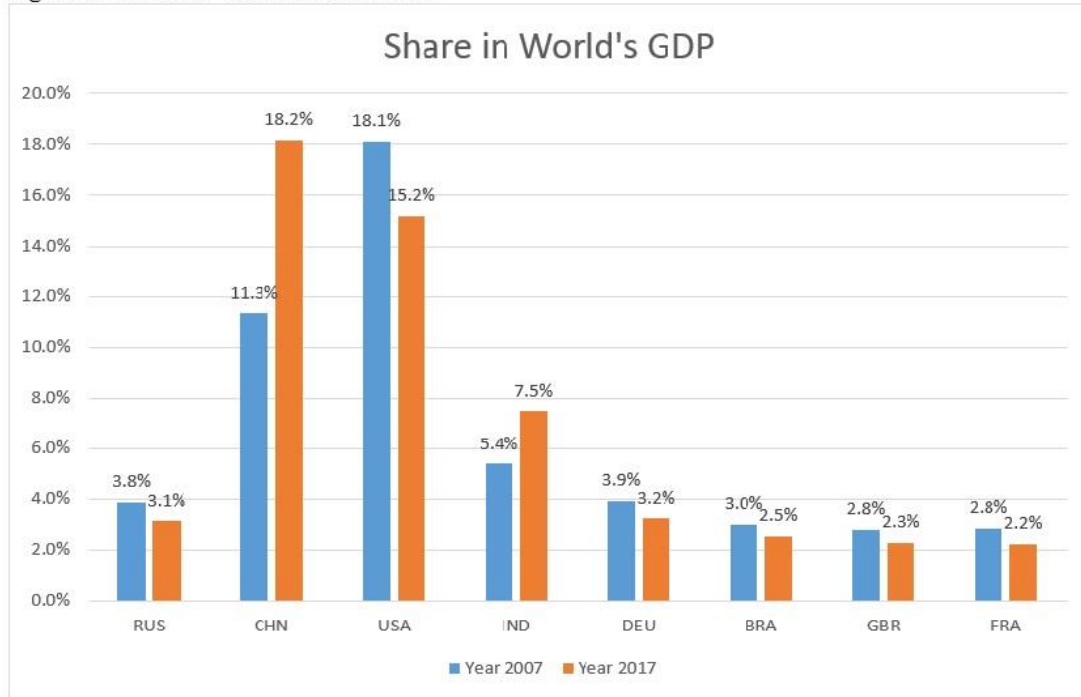
<sup>104</sup> GDP calculated at IMF exchange rates for December 31, 2014. “[Regiony Rossii: Social'no-ekonomicheskie pokazateli.](#)” Federal Service of State Statistics of the Russian Federation. 2016; “[National Data.](#)” National Bureau of Statistics.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Ivan Tselichtchev, “[Chinese in the Russian Far East: a Geopolitical Time Bomb?](#),” *South China Morning Post*, July 10, 2017.

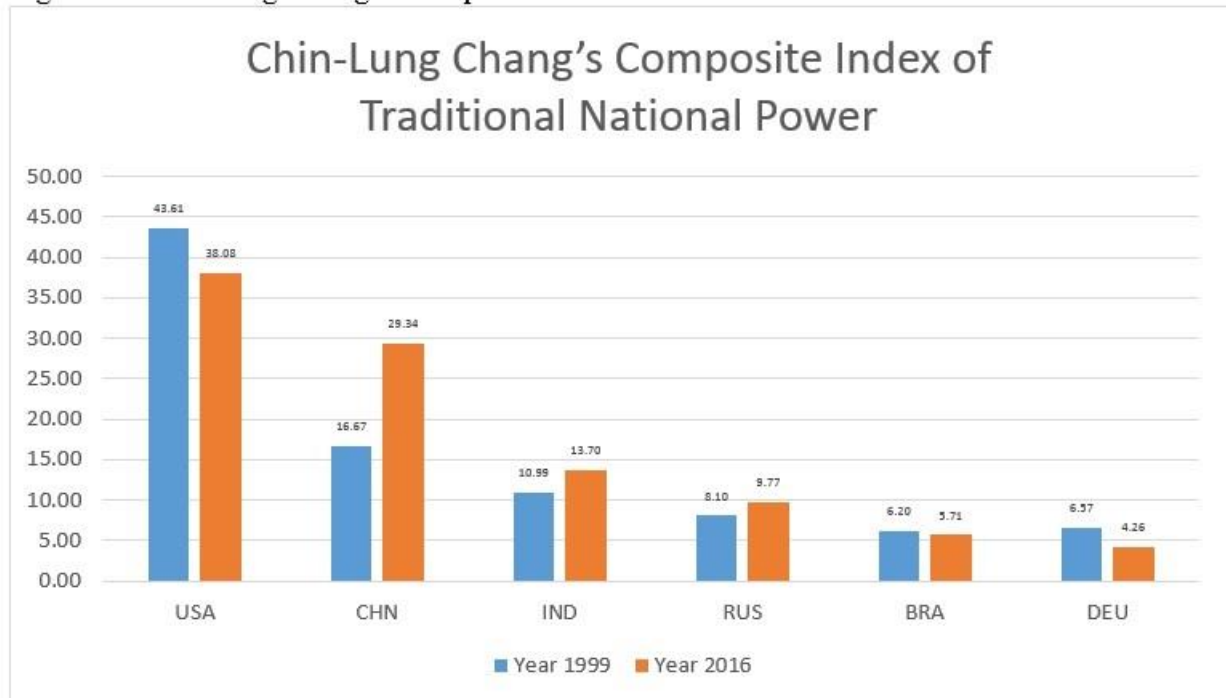
<sup>107</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2013). “World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision. File POP/1-1: Total population (both sexes combined) by major area, region and country, annually for 1950-2100 (thousands). Medium fertility, 2010-2100.”

Figure 6: Countries' share in world's GDP



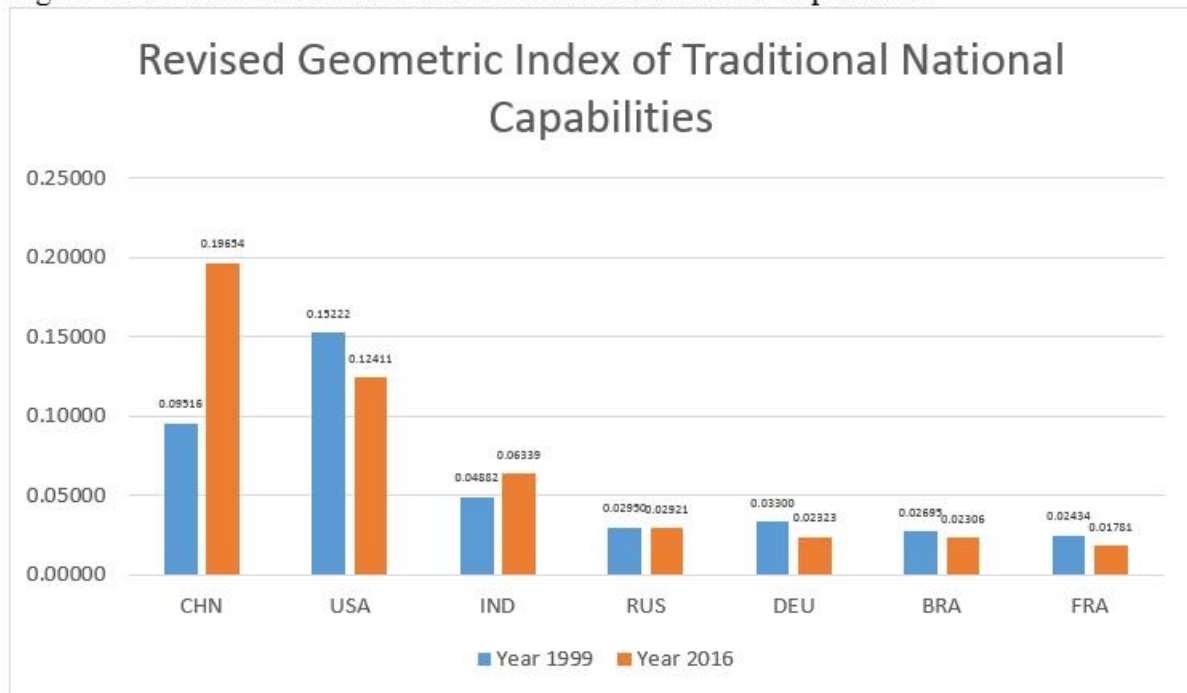
Source: The author's calculations based on estimates of GDP in PPP, constant dollars, available at World Bank's database [World Development Indicators](#)

Figure 7: Chin-Lung Chang's Composite Index of Traditional National Power



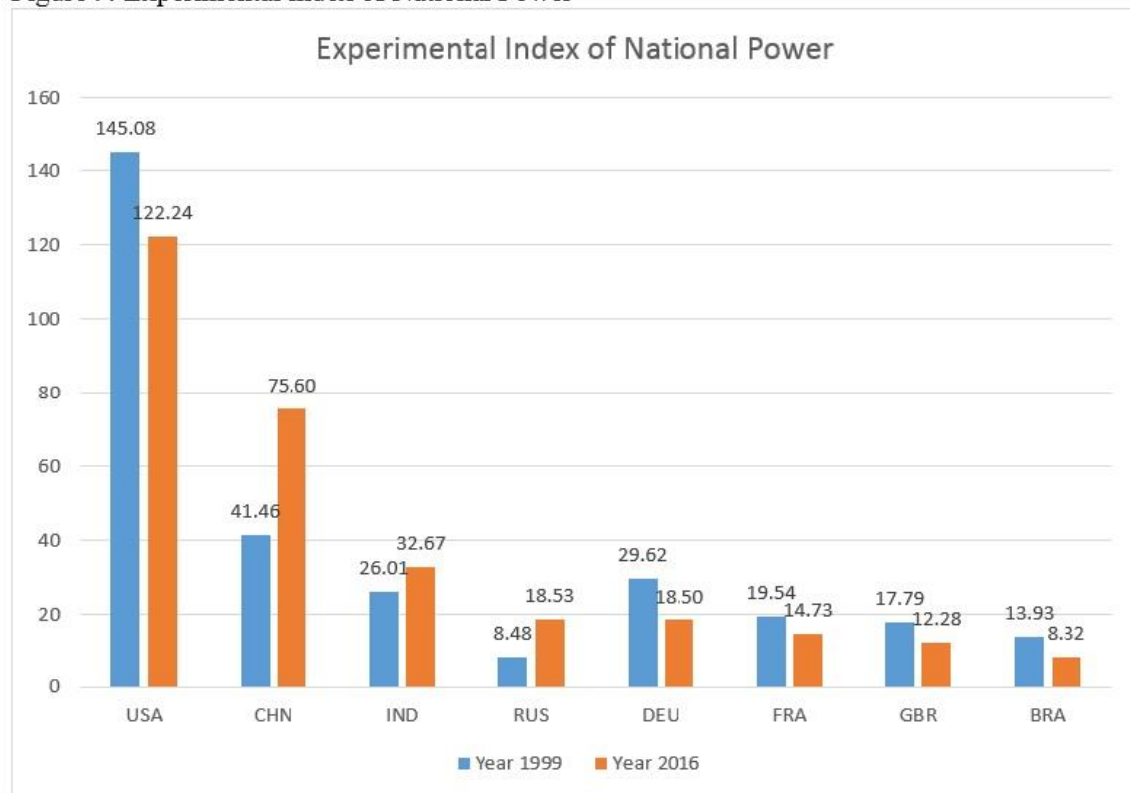
Source: Calculations by the author based on data available at World Bank's database [World Development Indicators](#)

Figure 8: Revised Geometric Index of Traditional National Capabilities



Source: Simon Saradzhyan, Nabi Abdullaev. [“Measuring National Power: Is Vladimir Putin’s Russia in Decline?”](#) Russia Matters, May 4, 2018

Figure 9: Experimental Index of National Power



Source: Simon Saradzhyan, Nabi Abdullaev. [“Measuring National Power: Is Vladimir Putin’s Russia in Decline?”](#) Russia Matters, May 4, 2018

Moreover, if forecasts by such respected organizations as the United Nations and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) materialize, some of the aforementioned disparities will only widen with time. Though forecasts should generally be taken with a grain of salt, as they often presuppose the continuation of existing trends, they can still be useful in gauging how some of the disparities between Russia and China may change over time. Forecasts by the PwC consultancy and the U.N. show that Russia's shares in global economic output and population will decline and remain far below that of China and the U.S. by 2050, while China will command a lead over the U.S. and Russia both economically and demographically.<sup>108</sup>

**Table 10: Shares in world's population and GDP**

Share in world's population (UN)	Year 2016	Year 2050	% change	Share in world's GDP, PPP (PWC)	Year 2016	Year 2050	% change
IND	17.85 %	20.95 %	17.34 %	CHN	18.00 %	20.30 %	12.76 %
CHN	18.60 %	16.56 %	-10.97 %	USA	15.71 %	11.83 %	-24.68 %
NGA	2.52 %	4.89 %	94.56 %	IND	7.38 %	15.31 %	107.45 %
USA	4.36 %	4.78 %	9.53 %	RUS	3.17 %	2.47 %	-21.93 %
BRA	2.82 %	2.93 %	3.80 %	BRA	2.65 %	2.62 %	-1.39 %
RUS	1.93 %	1.58 %	-18.15 %	DEU	3.37 %	2.13 %	-36.76 %
IRN	1.08 %	1.13 %	5.18 %	GBR	2.36 %	1.86 %	-21.05 %
GBR	0.88 %	0.93 %	5.66 %	FRA	2.32 %	1.63 %	-29.52 %
DEU	1.09 %	0.92 %	-15.69 %	ITA	1.88 %	1.08 %	-42.50 %
FRA	0.87 %	0.87 %	0.42 %	SAU	1.46 %	1.63 %	11.18 %
ZAF	0.74 %	0.80 %	8.83 %	IRN	1.23 %	1.35 %	9.59 %
ITA	0.80 %	0.69 %	-13.73 %	NGA	0.92 %	1.51 %	63.69 %
SAU	0.43 %	0.57 %	30.76 %	ZAF	0.62 %	0.89 %	43.16 %

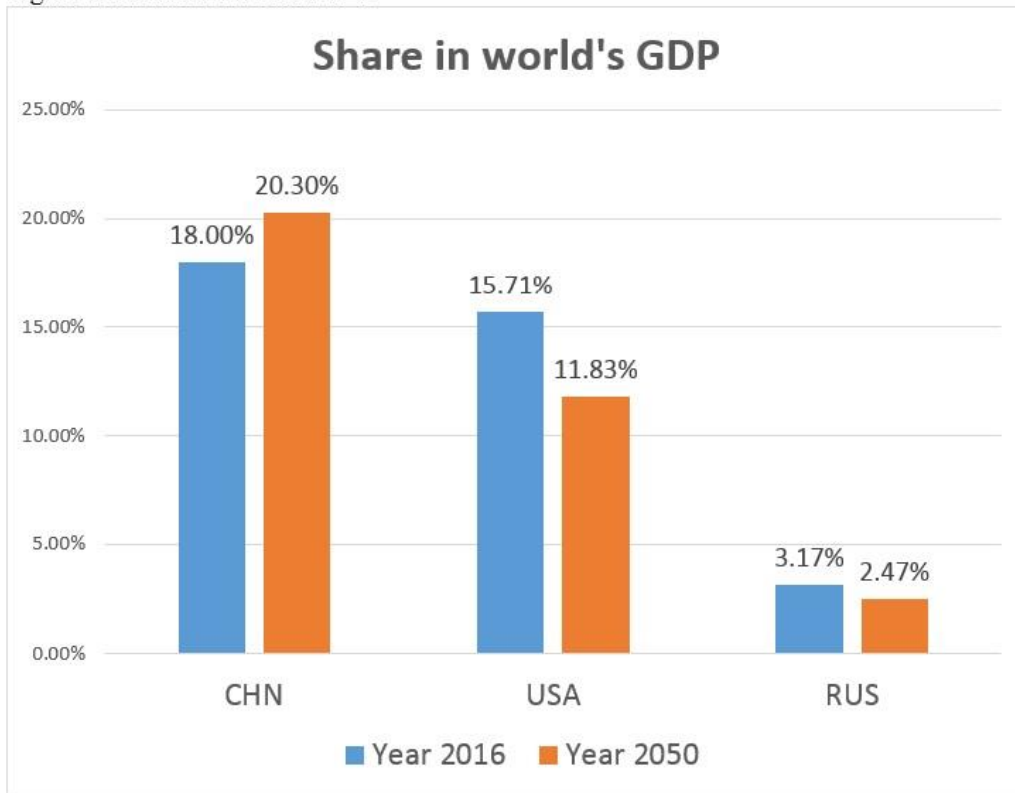
### 3. Can a Sino-Russian alliance emerge in the future?

If the aforementioned prognoses of changes in two key components of the relative national power of Russia, China and the U.S. materialize in 2050, then Russia (1) would be weaker economically vis-à-vis China than it is now, (2) would lessen somewhat the gap between its economic output and that of the U.S. but would continue to be significantly weaker than the U.S and China economically. In the meantime, China, in terms of its economy, would have grown ever more compared to the U.S. and Russia, widening the gap between itself and these two countries, becoming almost twice as strong as the U.S. economically. The U.S., in

<sup>108</sup> Simon Saradzhyan, Nabi Abdullaev. "[Measuring National Power: Is Vladimir Putin's Russia in Decline?](#)," Russia Matters, May 4, 2018.

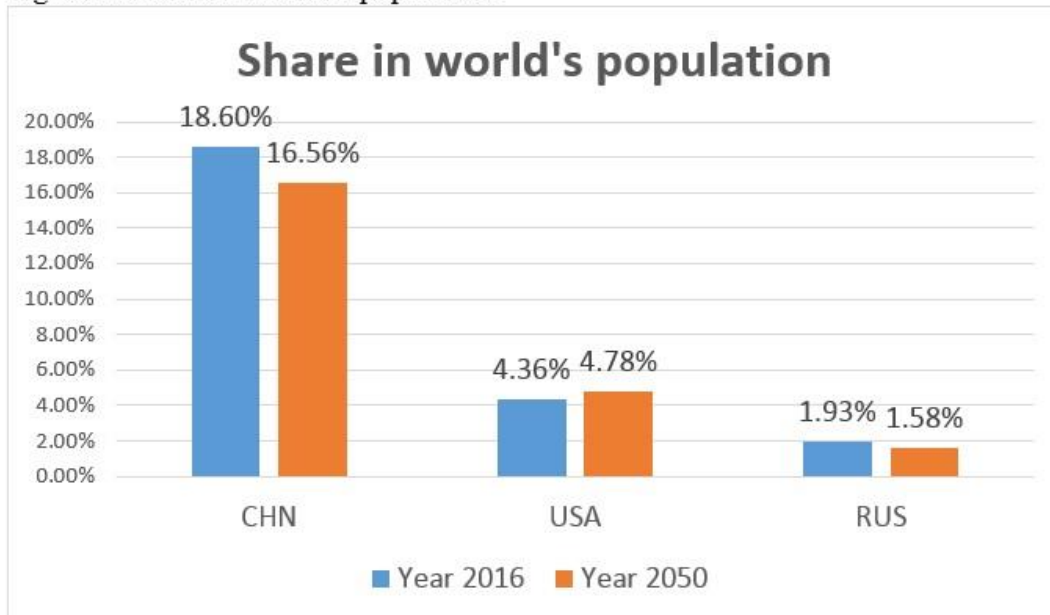
turn, would have seen China expand its economic lead and Russia manage to narrow its economic gap with the U.S. somewhat. In terms of demography, we would see China remain by far the most populous of the three, but the U.S. would narrow its gap with China somewhat and expand the gap between itself and Russia.

Figure 10: Share in world's GDP



**Source:** Calculations by the author based on estimates of the size of GDP in [“The Long View: How will the Global Economic Order Change by 2050,”](#) PWC, February 2017.

Figure 11: Share in world's population



**Source:** The author's calculations based on forecast available at United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division. [World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision, Key Findings and Advance Tables](#).

Therefore, China would be the strongest of the three in these two key components of national power, the U.S. would be the second strongest and Russia would be third. Importantly, Russia will remain significantly weaker both demographically and economically than either China or the U.S., whereas China's economic superiority to the U.S. would be less than U.S. superiority to the Soviet Union had been during the Cold War, in which the Soviet Union nonetheless managed to compete with the U.S. globally for quite a few decades. Therefore, if the balance-of-power theory, in its simplest interpretation, holds water and these forecasts materialize, Russia may eventually feel the need to repair relations with the U.S. and ally either with the U.S. or with India (if alliance with the U.S. is not an option) to balance China. However, since this article is based on the proposition that states enter into alliances to balance imminent or probable threats rather than power, then other scenarios are possible. Even if we constrain the range of scenarios by (a) limiting the interaction to the RF-PRC-U.S. triad as well as by assuming that (b) states can promptly normalize relations with other states, if threatened, and (c) that when two nuclear states threaten each other, a condition of mutually assured destruction (and, therefore, mutual deterrence) is achieved, dozens of combinations are possible.<sup>109</sup>

For the scenario in which Russia and China align to balance a U.S. threat to materialize, two conditions need to be present. First, Russia's ability to single-handedly deter the U.S./NATO would have to come into doubt, while its relations with the West would have to remain as

<sup>109</sup> If we assume that variables (e.g. U.S. threat to PRC, PRC threat to RF, etc.) do not depend on each other, then 64 combinations are possible.

bad as today or become even more adversarial. Second, China's ability to single-handedly deter the U.S./NATO would have to come into doubt, while its relations with the West would have to become adversarial. For scenario 2 to materialize, and, therefore, for Russia to bandwagon with China, two conditions would need to be present. First, Russia would need to feel threatened both by the U.S. and China (but less by China than by the U.S) so much that it would abandon its position that it will not be a junior partner in any alliance. Second, China would have to abandon its opposition to forming alliances and accept the costs which it will incur as a result of allowing Russia to bandwagon with it. Emergence of either of these two sets of conditions is unlikely, but not impossible in the near future. Therefore, the formation of an alliance between Russia and China in the future is also improbable, at least in the short-to-medium term, but not impossible.

*Les opinions exprimées ici n'engagent que la responsabilité de leur auteur.*



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