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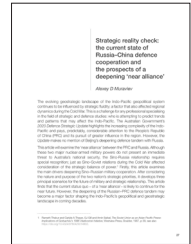
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Strategic reality check: the current state of Russia–China defence cooperation and the prospects of a deepening ‘near alliance’

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Strategic reality check: the current state of Russia–China defence cooperation and the prospects of a deepening ‘near alliance’

Alexey D Muraviev

The evolving geostrategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific geopolitical system continues to be influenced by strategic fluidity; a factor that also affected regional dynamics during the Cold War. This is a challenge for any professional specialising in the field of strategic and defence studies: who is attempting to predict trends and patterns that may affect the Indo-Pacific. The Australian Government’s *2020 Defence Strategic Update* highlights the increasing complexity of the Indo-Pacific and pays, predictably, considerable attention to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and its pursuit of greater influence in the region. However, the *Update* makes no mention of Beijing’s deepening defence tandem with Russia.

This article will examine the ‘near alliance’ between the PRC and Russia. Although these two major nuclear-armed military powers do not present an immediate threat to Australia’s national security, the Sino-Russia relationship requires special recognition; just as Sino–Soviet relations during the Cold War affected consideration of the strategic balance of power.¹ Firstly, this article examines the main drivers deepening Sino–Russian military cooperation. After considering the nature and purpose of the two nation’s strategic priorities, it develops three principal scenarios for the future of military and strategic relationship. This article finds that the current status quo – of a ‘near alliance’– is likely to continue for the near future. However, the deepening of the Russian–PRC defence tandem may become a major factor shaping the Indo-Pacific’s geopolitical and geostrategic landscape in coming decades.

¹ Rameth Thakur and Carlyle A Thayer, GJ Gill and Amin Saikal, *The Soviet Union as an Asian Pacific Power. Implications of Gorbachev’s 1986 Vladivostok Initiative*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1987, p 39, see also <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429314902>.

From confidence building to a deepened defence interaction in the era of a ‘comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination’

The year 2021 will mark 20 years since Russia and the PRC signed the 2001 Strategic Partnership Agreement. In light of growing debates about the future of Russian–PRC relations, the question of whether the current strategic tandem will transform into a security and defence alliance is of particular concern.² Over the past few years, senior Russian and Chinese officials have occasionally signalled the possibility of transforming a ‘comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination’ into an alliance.³ For example, on 23 October 2020, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin noted, ‘So far, we have not set that goal for ourselves. But, in principle, we are not going to rule it out, either.’⁴

On 1 March 2021, a senior spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of National Defence stated, ‘Completely different from the military alliances between some countries, China and Russia uphold a principle of non-alliance and non-confrontation that targets no third party.’⁵

These and other declarations fuel ongoing debates on whether Russia and the PRC are ready, and able, to form a functional security and defence alliance. An examination of the current state of military-to-military (mil-to-mil) relations (on a par with the political dialogue); their common agendas; as well as shortfalls and problems that existed or exist between the prospective allies, together form a set of determinants of their readiness for an alliance.

Achieving maximum coordination and interoperability at all three principal levels of interaction (strategic, operational, and tactical) and standardising approaches (towards planning, logistics, weapons and systems employment) between friendly militaries are the core determinants of respective militaries’ readiness for either integrated coalition or longer lasting allied-type activities and operations. With respect to PRC–Russia defence cooperation, the following factors need to be taken into consideration: a) mil-to-mil systematic dialogue; b) military-technical

2 Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, ‘Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership’, Center for a New American Security, 14 January 2021, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/navigating-the-deepening-russia-china-partnership>.

3 Back in June 2019, Putin and President of the PRC Xi Jinping - declared a “new starting point” in bilateral relations, in which they will be upgraded to bring about a ‘comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era’. See Liangyu, ‘China, Russia Agree to Upgrade Relations for a New Era’, *Xinhuanet.com*, 6 June 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/06/c_138119879.htm

4 Jun Mai, ‘Beijing Gives Cautious Welcome to Vladimir Putin’s Hint over Russia-China Military Alliance’, *South China Morning Post*, 26 October 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3107027/beijing-gives-cautious-welcome-vladimir-putins-hint-over>.

5 ‘Military ties support China-Russia strategic cooperation: ministry’, *People’s Daily*, 2 March 2021 09:33, <https://en.people.cn/n3/2021/0302/c90000-9823649.html>.

compatibility; c) approaches to operational and strategic thinking, planning, education and training; d) joint exercise and operational activity.

The tensions that marred bilateral relations throughout the 1970s and 1980s were diffused by the gradual warming of bilateral relations in the second half of the 1980s and the effective removal of the Soviet strategic threat to China at the turn of the 1990s.⁶ A comprehensive set of confidence building measures (CBMs), introduced throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, allowed for wide-ranging consultation and partner dialogue in the sensitive spheres of security and defence.⁷ This strategic dialogue has intensified and deepened in the second decade of the twenty-first century as exemplified by the strategic leadership dialogue that has been taking place between Putin and Xi Jinping.⁸

Similarly, mil-to-mil contacts include annual high-level consultations involving defence ministers, chiefs of general staff and other senior level military personnel. In the case of the latter, between 2012 and 2020, Russia and the PRC staged eight rounds of bilateral strategic consultations involving senior defence personnel.⁹

Russia and China’s core doctrinal documents highlight the importance of deepening strategic relations with each other, as does the 2019 Chinese Defence white paper, *China’s National Defense in the New Era*.¹⁰ Russia’s National Security Strategy demonstrates the importance of an ‘all-embracing partnership and strategic cooperation with the Chinese People’s Republic’.¹¹ Similarly, the 2015 edition of Russia’s Maritime Doctrine identified developing relations with China

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- 6 Lieutenant-General (ret’d) Anatoliy Klimenko, ‘Evolutsiya Voennoi Politiki i Voennoi Doktriny Kitaya’ [The Evolution of China’s Military Policy and the Military Doctrine], *Voennaya Mysl’*, N 4, 2005, p 6.
 - 7 Among others, a set of CBMs included nuclear retargeting; mutual force reductions in Russia–China border regions; establishing a 200 km security zone; and a set of sub-agreements linked to operational and exercise activity and training. Alexey D Muraviev, ‘Comrades in Arms: The Military-Strategic Aspects of China-Russia Relations’, *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 2014, 1(2):169–71.
 - 8 Between 2013 and late 2020 Putin and Xi had 35 arranged engagements (five meetings annually on average).
 - 9 Vladimir Vinokurov, ‘Global’noe Sovmestnoe Patrulirovanie’ [Global Joint Patrol], *Voenna-Promyshlenny Kurier*, 38 (801), 1–7 October 2019, p. 2; ‘Konsul’tatsii RF i KNR po Voprosam Strategicheskoi Strtaegicheskoi Stabil’nosti Zavershilis’ v Shangkhaye’ [Consultations between the Russian Federation and the PRC on questions of strategic stability concluded in Shanghai], *TASS*, 4 December 2019, <https://tass.ru/politika/7259811>.
 - 10 The *China’s National Defense in the New Era* highlighted the deepening nature of bilateral defence cooperation: ‘the military relationship between China and Russia continues to develop at a high level, enriching the China–Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era and playing a significant role in maintaining global strategic stability. The Chinese and Russian militaries have continued the sound development of exchange mechanisms at all levels, expanded cooperation in high-level exchanges, military training, equipment, technology and counter-terrorism, and realized positive interaction and coordination on international and multilateral occasions’. See Lu Hui, ‘China’s National Defense in the New Era’, *Xinhuanet*, 24 July 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm; Further, the white paper mentions Russia 24 times, compared to just two references in its 2015 edition.
 - 11 *The National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation* (translation), December 2015, <http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>.

and its People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) as an 'important component of the National Maritime Policy in the Pacific Ocean'.¹²

The established framework is of equal value to Russia and China. For China, this is illustrated by General Wei Fenghe, the PRC Defence Minister, travelled to Russia twice in 2020 to meet with his counterpart General Sergei Shoigu, despite COVID-19 restrictions.¹³ The PRC's strong interest can be explained by Russia's ongoing impact on the PLA progression into a world-class global force.

Three principal phases of Russian–PRC security and defence cooperation during which Moscow has acted as a major, or principal contributor, to Chinese military enhancements can be identified:

- Soviet military aid to China (1937–41)¹⁴
- Comprehensive military assistance (1949–69)¹⁵
- Comprehensive defence and military-technological cooperation (MTC) since 1992.¹⁶

The MTC has seen the proportion of Russian military technology in the PLA's inventory reach 64 per cent in 2016.¹⁷ This has increased even further in recent years, allowing the two militaries to achieve a level of technological compatibility not seen since the early 1950s.

12 *The 2015 Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (English translation), US Naval War College, Russia Maritime Studies Institute Research, p 3, https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=rmsi_research.

13 Visits to Russia were the only confirmed foreign visits for Wei in 2020. 'China Calls for Unity, Cooperation at SCO Defense Ministers' Meeting', *CGTN*, 7 September 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-09-06/China-calls-for-unity-cooperation-at-SCO-defense-ministers-meeting-TyxHQnSgXS/index.html>; 'Shoigu Poblagodaryl Kitai za Voенno-Tekhnicheskoe Sotrudnichestvo' [Shoigu thanked China for a military-technological cooperation], *EurAsia Daily*, 6 September 2020, <https://easdaily.com/ru/news/2020/09/06/shoigu-poblagodaryl-kitay-za-voенno-tehnicheskoe-sotrudnichestvo>.

14 During that period, the USSR supplied China with 1,285 aircraft, 1,600 artillery systems, 1,850 heavy vehicles, 82 T-26 light tanks, some 14,000 machine guns. Over 5,000 Soviet personnel, including 300 military advisors, supported Chinese operations against Japan. Interview with former Chief of the Russian Air Force General of Army Pyotr Deinekin, 'Stalinskie Sokoly v Kitaiskom Nebe' [Stalin's falcons in the Chinese sky], *Voенno-Promyshlenny Kurier*, 28 (692), 26 July–1 August 2017, p 10.

15 In particular, Soviet assistance in building military infrastructure for the Chinese reached US\$439.3 mln (1950s prices); the USSR transferred to China some 650 licences to manufacture military hardware; over 5,300 Soviet military advisors, designers and engineers worked in China. Ruslan Polonchuk, 'Tovarishchstvo poka na Doverii' [Trusted for now Comradery], *Voенno-Promyshlenny Kurier*, N 6 (869), 16–22 February 2021, p 4.

16 In the 1990s, the PRC accounted for some 25 per cent of all Russian military sales. Moscow supplied Beijing with ready-off-the-shelf platforms and systems such as fixed-wing and rotary aircraft, major surface combatants and conventional submarines, air defence systems, airborne and ship-borne cruise missiles, aircraft radars and engines, multi-rocket launchers, spare parts and many more.

17 Artem Novikov, 'BRICS – Delo Blagorodnoe' [BRICS is an honourable business], *Voенno-Promyshlenny Kurier*, N 12 (676), 29 March – 4 April 2017, p 8; Nikolai Surkov, 'Voенnoe Sotrudnichestvo RF i Kitaya Napugalo Vashington' [Military cooperation between the Russian Federation and China has scared Washington], *Izvestia* (online version), 3 April 2017, <https://iz.ru/news/675362>.

Despite obvious progress in becoming a world-class defence force, including reducing its dependence on the MTC with Moscow, the PLA reliance on the Russian military remains high. While Russian defence exports to China fell from 25 per cent down to 12 per cent by 2018,¹⁸ China remains dependent on Russia in some core fields of defence research and manufacturing. For example, during Russia’s ARMY-2020 international defence exposition it was revealed that Russian and Chinese specialists were cooperating on the development of the next generation (fifth) conventional attack submarine.¹⁹ While doubts have been raised on whether this cooperation will come to actual fruition,²⁰ joint research and development in such a sensitive area as submarine design and construction shows not just mutual willingness to expand the MTC but also China’s keen interest in accessing Russia’s advanced military technologies.

Russia has retained strong influence on China’s school of military thought. Since the 1940s, Chinese military thinking and defence planning has been heavily influenced by the Soviet strategic school of thought as well as Soviet operational art. Between 1949 and 1969, over 1,600 future PLA commanders and defence civilians were trained in the USSR; over 5,300 Soviet military advisers, designers and engineers assisted the maturing of the PLA.²¹ The impact was so comprehensive that even Soviet military folklore left a footprint in the PLA military culture. For example, the Katiusha song became a popular and well-recognised song in China – translated into Mandarin as Ka Qiusha – and is often performed by the PLA military.²²

In the 1990s and 2000s, Russia once again became a major source of contemporary military knowledge and expertise for the Chinese.²³ Russia’s current strategic and operational thinking and planning continues to shape the

18 Vadim Ivanov, ‘Shoigu Rasskazal ob Eksporte Rossiiskogo Oruzhiya v Kitai’ [Shoigu told about Russian arms exports to China], *Zvezda*, 11 July 2018, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/forces/content/201807110929-imit.htm>.

19 ‘Rossiya i Kitay Proektiruiut Neatomnuiu Podvodnuiu Lodku Novogo Pokoleniya’ [Russia and China design a next-generation conventional submarine], *RIA Novosti*, 25 August 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200825/bezopasnost-1576269235.html>.

20 HI Sutton, ‘China and Russia in Mysterious New Submarine Project’, *Forbes*, 27 August 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/08/27/china-and-russia-in-mysterious-new-submarine-project/#230c61971629>

21 Ruslan Polonchuk, ‘Tovarishchestvo Tovarishchestvo poka na Doverii’ [Trusted for now Comradery], *Voенно-Promyshlenny Kurier*, N 6 (869), 16–22 February 2021, p 4.

22 ‘Russian Song Brings Nostalgia in China’, *Global Times*, 11 May 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/921001.shtml>.

23 There is no up-to-date open source data that can illustrate the numbers of PLA military cadres educated and trained in Russia. According to *China’s National Defense in the New Era* between 2012 and 2019 the PLA sent over 1,700 to study in over 50 countries (http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm). That means that the Chinese were sending over 240 of its military cadres to study abroad each year (on average). Back in 2009 alone, it was reported that over 140 PLA personnel were studying in Russian educational military establishments, including General Staff Academy; Col-Gen Leonid Ivashov (ret’d), *Ya Gord, chto Russkiy General* [I am proud that I am a Russian general], Moskva, Knizhny Mir, 2013, p 327.

views of PLA commanders at all levels; demonstrated through the intensified joint training and operational activity.

Growing operational and tactical interoperability through exercises and operations

Over the past decade, Russian and Chinese militaries have achieved a qualitative leap in operational and tactical interoperability by regularising their joint exercise and operational activities across Eurasia, the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Between 2003 and early 2021, Russia and China staged at least 28 confirmed joint military exercises, 14 of which were bilateral (Tables 1 and 4).²⁴

Since joint training began back in 2003, the two militaries have progressed from limited objective scenarios, focused on establishing basic coordination, to joint operations across a range of contingencies, ranging from low to medium level threats (regional terrorism and insurgency across Eurasia) to readying forces for high-tempo large-scale integrated combined-arms operations against a formidable conventional adversary or hostile coalition. The growing operational and tactical interaction between the two militaries has been demonstrated during Russia's largest strategic manoeuvres: *Vostok-2018* (East-2018), *Tsentr-2019* (Centre-2019), and the *Kavkaz-2020* (Caucasus-2020) (Table 2).²⁵ For example, during the *Kavkaz-2020*, the PLA's units were fully integrated in Russia's battle setting; PLA personnel operated Russian-supplied equipment and armaments, and staged operations in mixed tactical formations, practicing much deeper levels of tactical interoperability.²⁶

From 2009, both nations' militaries intensified their exercise activity, engaging on average in two to three major exercises a year.²⁷ Now, more emphasis is being given to deeper coordinated operations planning; operations in mixed formations; systems integration; and the logistical enabler: all major bearings of readiness for allied-type operations.

24 Back in August 2003, members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) carried out their first joint military exercise *Souz 2003* (Union 2003), which marked the start of regular joint military training (*Peace Mission* exercises). This involved elements of the Russian armed forces, the PLA and, periodically, either SCO-member states or other select nations with which Russia and China have developed closer strategic ties.

25 It is worth noting the level of PLA command representation at the *Vostok* and *Tsentr* exercises. During both manoeuvres the PLA set up operational and command structures at brigade-division-army corps levels.

26 'Kavkaz-2020 Strategic Exercise: Chinese Troops Adapt to Russian Equipment, Highlighting Bilateral Friendship', *China Military Online*, 17 September 2020, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2020-09/17/content_4871352.htm; 'Kavkaz-2020 Strategic Exercise Wraps up', *China Military Online*, 27 September 2020, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2020-09/27/content_4871958.htm.

27 If special bilateral counter-terrorism exercises and joint special forces training are taken into account then the average number of annual combined exercise activities could be as high as four.

Table 1: Peace Mission Russian–PRC bilateral exercises, 2005–2013

Exercise	Exercise area	Forces involved, total	Russian forces involved	PLA forces involved
Peace Mission 2005, 18–25 August 2005	Shandun peninsula, Yellow Sea	10,000 personnel, 65 warships and auxiliaries, over 70 aircraft, over 100 armoured vehicles	1,800 personnel, 5 warships and auxiliaries, over 20 aircraft, airborne and naval infantry units	Some 8,000 personnel, 60 warships and auxiliaries, 51 aircraft, up 100 armoured vehicles
Peace Mission 2009, 22–27 June 2009	Khabarovsk, Russia Taonan Training Ground, PRC	2,600 personnel, about 300 items of heavy equipment, over 45 aircraft	1,300 personnel	1,300 personnel
Peace Mission 2013, 27 July–15 August 2013	Chebarkul' Training Ground, Russia	3,000 personnel, about 250 items of heavy equipment, including 40 aircraft	Over 900 personnel, some 200 items of heavy equipment	About 2,000 personnel, 47 items of heavy equipment

Sources: *Krasnaya Zvezda* (issues 2005 to 2014); *TASS* (issues 2005 to 2014); *RIA Novosti* (issues 2005 to 2014); *Izvestia* (issues 2005 to 2014); data was collected by the author.

Rapidly deepening bilateral naval cooperation is another sign of how mature Russian–PRC mil-to-mil relations have become over the past decade. Reported Russian Federation Navy and PLA-N operations involve increasingly globalised exercise activity. Russia and China have also demonstrated a sporadic, opportunity-driven approach to joint operations. For example, in 2009 the two navies launched joint operations as part of the international response to the rising threat of maritime piracy near the Horn of Africa.²⁸ And, in January and February 2014, elements of the Russian Navy and PLA-N participated in what was described as their first joint combat operation, escorting special convoys transporting Syrian chemical warfare munitions to European ports for disposal.

28 'Ucheniya po Antipiratskoi Tematike' [Counter-piracy exercises], *Voенно-Promyshlennyyi Kurier*, 23–29 September 2009, 37 (303), p 1.

Table 2: Peace Mission, *Vostok*, *Tsentr*, and *Kavkaz* multinational exercises, 2007–2020

Exercise	Countries involved	Exercise area	Forces involved, total	Russian forces involved	PLA forces involved
Peace Mission 2007, 9–17 August, 2007	PRC, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan	Chebarkul' Training Ground, Russia	Over 7,500 personnel, over 1,200 items of heavy equipment, 82 aircraft	About 4,700 personnel, 500 items of heavy equipment, 36 aircraft	1,700 personnel, some 500 items of heavy equipment, 46 aircraft
Peace Mission 2010, 8–14 June 2010	PRC, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan	Matybulak Training Ground, Kazakhstan	Over 5,000 personnel, over 300 items of heavy equipment, over 50 aircraft	Over 1,000 personnel, over 100 items of heavy equipment, 10 aircraft	1,000 personnel, 6 aircraft
Peace Mission 2012, 8–14 June 2012	PRC, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan	Chorukh-Dairon Training Ground, Tajikistan	2,000 personnel, over 500 items of heavy equipment, including aircraft	Over 350 personnel, over 50 items of heavy equipment	Some 5,000 personnel, 23 aircraft
Peace Mission 2014, 24–29 August 2014	PRC, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan	Zhurihe Training Ground, PRC	Over 7,000 personnel, over 500 items of heavy equipment, including aircraft	Over 1,000 personnel, over 140 items of heavy equipment, 14 aircraft	Some 5,000 personnel, 23 aircraft
Peace Mission 2016, 15–21 September 2016	PRC, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan	Edelveis Training Ground, Kyrgyzstan	About 2,000 personnel, some 300 items of heavy equipment, 40 aircraft	About 500 personnel	About 300 personnel, 50 items of heavy equipment
Peace Mission 2018, 22–28 August 2018	PRC, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan	Chebarkul' Training Ground, Russia	Approximately 3,000 personnel, over 500 items of heavy equipment	Over 1,300 personnel, approximately 330 items of heavy equipment, 37 aircraft	700–750 personnel, 22 aircraft
Vostok 2018, 20–25 August and 11–17 September	PRC, Mongolia, Russia	Five major training grounds in eastern Siberia and the Far East; two naval training areas in the Pacific Ocean, Russia	Over 300,000 personnel, some 37,000 items of heavy equipment, over 1,000 aircraft, about 80 warships and auxiliaries	297,000 personnel, 36 items of heavy equipment, over 1,000 aircraft, approximately 80 warships and auxiliaries	3,500 personnel, 900 armoured vehicles, 30 aircraft

Table 2 continued

Exercise	Countries involved	Exercise area	Forces involved, total	Russian forces involved	PLA forces involved
Tsentr 2019, 16–21 September 2019	PRC, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan	Six combined-arms training grounds in the Urals, central Russia and the Transcaucasia; naval training areas in the Caspian Sea, Russia	Over 300,000 personnel, approximately 37,000 items of heavy equipment, over 1,000 aircraft, about 80 warships and auxiliaries	128,000 personnel, 20,000 items of heavy equipment, about 600 aircraft, approximately 15 warships and auxiliaries	Over 1,600 personnel, 900 armoured vehicles, 30 aircraft
Kavkaz 2020, 21–26 September 2020	Armenia, Belarus, PRC, Iran, Myanmar, Pakistan	Eight major training grounds in southern Russia and the Transcaucasia; naval training areas in the Black and Caspian seas, Russia	Over 80,000 personnel, some 1,700 items of heavy equipment, over 170 aircraft, approximately 90 warships and auxiliaries	Approximately 79,500 personnel, some 1,700 items of heavy equipment, over 170 aircraft, approximately 90 warships and auxiliaries	Over 100 personnel, armoured vehicles, 3 aircraft

Sources: *Krasnaya Zvezda* (issues 2007 to 2020); TASS (issues 2007 to 2020); RIA Novosti (issues 2007 to 2020); *Izvestia* (issues 2007 to 2020); data is collected by the author.

When it comes to joint naval training, the two militaries demonstrate a more systematic approach, which is particularly evident when analysing the series of large-scale naval exercises *Maritime Interaction*. The first such exercise was held in late April 2012, and they have been staged annually ever since (with the exception of 2018). In 2015 and 2017, Russian and Chinese navies carried out a two-part *Maritime Interaction* exercise staged in the Mediterranean and Baltic maritime theatres, in addition to the Pacific theatre (Table 3). The status and conduct of most of the *Maritime Interaction* exercises demonstrates that the Russian and Chinese naval forces have departed from a standard non-allied foreign naval forces exercise routine involving communications and search-and-rescue. As the Russian Pacific Fleet (RUSPAC’s) Commander Admiral Sergei Avakyants has noted, both navies used various *Maritime Interaction* exercises to test their capacity to operate as a joint force and assess their combined strike and amphibious potentials, as well as their capacity to engage in high-tempo, full-scale naval operations.²⁹

The size of the forces committed by both sides, the composition of joint task groups, and the scenarios practiced between 2012 and 2019, suggest that the Russian Navy and PLA-N are readying themselves for coalition-type operations

29 Sergei Avakyants, ‘Uchastie Sil (Voisk) Tikhookeanskogo Flota v SovmestnykhSovmestnyh Rossiisko-Kitaiskikh Voenno-Morskikh UchenyakhMorskikh Uchenyah “Morskoie Vzaimodeistvie” [The Participation of the Pacific Fleet forces in Russia-China joint naval exercises Maritime Interaction], *Morskoi Sbornik*, N 2 2018, p 48.

across all spheres of the maritime domain, with the intention of promoting common security agendas in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Between 2009 and late 2020, the Russian and Chinese navies took part in 12 confirmed bilateral and 2 trilateral naval exercises (Tables 1 and 3). The 2015 edition of *The Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation* highlighted the importance to Russia of developing ties with the PLA-N similar to those of coalition-partners. It lists such closer ties as one of its priorities for national naval power development in the Pacific maritime theatre.³⁰ Furthermore, Russian open defence sources have revealed some war scenarios, detailing Russian–PRC coalition-type naval operations against the US and its allies in a global conflict involving major naval powers. It presented four scenarios:

- the Russian navy engaging the United States Navy (USN) in either the Atlantic or the Pacific maritime theatres
- RUSPAC engaging the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) in the Pacific
- PLA-N engaging the USN and JMSDF in the Pacific
- joint battle groups of the Russian and Chinese navies operating against the USN, JMSDF and their regional allies.³¹

In late 2020, Russian military analyst Vladimir Karnozov suggested US-led Western naval supremacy could be strategically balanced by the combining of Russian and PLA naval forces.³² Without a doubt, such a scenario would not just alter the global naval balance; it would cause a detrimental impact across the Indo-Pacific maritime domain, potentially comprising Australia's and other allies' ability to maintain favourable regional maritime security.

30 *Morskaya Doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii* ['The Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation'], *Kremlin.ru*, 26 July 2015, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/uAFi5nvux2twacjftS5yrlZUVTJan77L.pdf>

31 Konstantin Sivkov, 'Bitvy Veka v Tikhom Okeane' [Battles of the century in the Pacific Ocean], *Voенно-Promyshlennyi Kurier*, 10–16 December 2019, 48 (811), p 4.

32 Vladimir Karnozov, 'Rossiiskie Podvodnye Lodki Usilivayut Kitai' [Russian submarines strengthen China] 'China', *Nezavisimoe Voенnoe Obozrenie*, 5 November 2020, https://nvo.ng.ru/armament/2020-11-05/1_1116_submarine.html.

Table 3: PRC–Russia bilateral and trilateral naval exercises, 2009–2020

Exercise	Exercise Area	Forces involved	Russian navy	PLA-N
Peace Blue Shield 2009 18 September 2009	Gulf of Aden	6 warships and auxiliaries	1 DDG, 2 auxiliaries	2 FFGs, 1 auxiliary
Maritime Interaction 2012 22–27 April 2012	Yellow Sea	25 warships and auxiliaries, 22 aircraft, naval infantry and special forces	1 CG, 3 DDGs and 3 auxiliaries, 9 helicopters, two naval infantry forces units	4 DDGs, 4 FFGs, 2 submarines, 1 auxiliary, naval aviation, special forces
Maritime Interaction 2013 5–12 July 2013	Sea of Japan	19 warships and auxiliaries, over 10 aircraft, naval infantry and special forces	11 surface units (1 CG, 2 DDGs), 1 submarine	4 DDGs, 2 FFGs, 1 auxiliary, 3 helicopters
Maritime Interaction 2014 20–26 May 2014	East China Sea	12 warships and auxiliaries	1 CG, 2 DDGs, 1 LST, 2 auxiliaries, 2 helicopters, special naval infantry unit	3 DDGs, 2 FFGs, 2 submarines, 1 auxiliary
Maritime Interaction 2015 16–20 May 2015	Mediterranean Sea	9 warships and auxiliaries	1 CG, 1 FFG, 1 FFLG, 2 LSTs, 1 auxiliary	2 FFGs, 1 auxiliary
20–28 August 2015	Sea of Japan	22 warships and auxiliaries, 23 aircraft, over 500 marines (naval infantry), over 30 items of heavy equipment	15 warships and auxiliaries (1 CG, 2 DDGs, 1 LST, 2 FFLs), 12 aircraft, 212 marines (naval infantry) and special forces, 9 items of heavy equipment	2 DDGs, 2 FFGs, 2 LSTs, 1 auxiliary, 11 aircraft, 300 marines, 21 items of heavy equipment
Maritime Interaction 2016 12–19 September 2016	South China Sea	18 warships and auxiliaries, 21 aircraft, naval infantry and special forces	2 DDGs, 1 LST, 2 auxiliaries	2 DDGs, 3 FFGs, 1 LST
Maritime Interaction 2017 21–28 July 2017	Baltic Sea		2 FFLH	1 DDG, 1 FFG, 1 auxiliary
18–25 September 2017	Sea of Japan and Okhotsk	13 warships and auxiliaries, 8 aircraft, naval infantry	1 CG, 1 DDG, 1 FFLH, 2 FFLs, 2 submarines, 1 auxiliary	1 DDG, 1 FFG, 2 auxiliaries
Maritime Interaction 2018	Yellow Sea	Cancelled		

Table 3 continued

Exercise	Exercise Area	Forces involved	Russian navy	PLA-N
Maritime Interaction 2019 29 April to 4 May 2019	Yellow Sea	15 warships and auxiliaries, 10 aircraft, naval infantry	1 CG, 2 DDGs, 1 FFLH, 1 submarine, 2 auxiliaries	2 DDGs, 2 FFGs, 1 submarine, 3 auxiliaries, 2 strategic bombers
MOSI 2019 25–30 November 2019	Horn of Africa, south Atlantic	6 warships and auxiliaries (including two units from the South African navy)	1 CG, 2 auxiliaries	1 FFG
Marine Security Belt 2019 27–30 December 2019	Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea	Over 10 warships and auxiliaries (including at least 6 units drawn from the Islamic Republic of Iran)	1 FFG, 2 auxiliaries	1 DDG

DDG: guided-missile destroyer | FFG: guided-missile frigate | CG: guided-missile cruiser

Sources: *Krasnaya Zvezda* (issues 2009 to 2020); *Morskoj Sbornik* (issues 2009 to 2020); *TASS* (issues 2009 to 2020); *RIA Novosti* (issues 2009 to 2020); data is collected by the author.

Another important aspect of Russian and PRC joint military activities, which could extend into the Australian security zone, is their joint aerial operations involving strategic bomber aircraft. To date, elements of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) have encountered occasional displays of Chinese (in the South China Sea area) and Russian (off the Indonesian coast in 2017) aerial activities across Southeast Asia.³³ However, in the past two years, both countries have displayed their resolve by launching regular aerial deterrent operations in proximity to their respective homelands. On 23 July 2019, two Russian Tu-95MS and two Chinese H-6K strategic bombers, supported by AWACS aircraft (airborne early warning and control), staged the first joint aerial patrol over the Sea of Japan and South China Sea, triggering alerts in the Republic of Korea and Japan. It was reported that the joint patrol was part of a coordinated plan of bilateral defence activities for 2019.³⁴ On 22 December 2020, two Tu-95MS and four H-6K staged a second joint patrol over the same area.³⁵

33 Christopher Knaus, 'Australian Air Force put on alert after Russian long-range bombers headed south', *The Guardian*, 30 December 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/30/australian-military-alert-russia-bombers-indonesia-exercises?>

34 Evgeniy Podzorov, 'Vpervye Rossiiskie i Kitaiskie Letchiki Sovmestno PatruleirovaliPatruleirovalki nad Tikhim Okeanom' [Russian and Chinese pilots ran joint patrol over the Pacific Ocean for the first time], *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 24 July 2019, pp 1–2.

35 Christopher Woody, 'Russian and Chinese bombers conducted another joint patrol between South Korea and Japan', *Business Insider Australia*, 23 December 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/russian-chinese-bombers-do-joint-patrol-between-south-korea-japan-2020-12>.

For now, PRC–Russia joint strategic bomber aerial operations have been limited to this northeast Asian flank of the Indo-Pacific theatre. However, Russia’s successful deployment of the bomber task group to South Africa in October 2019 suggests the such operations could be extended into the wider Indo-Pacific.³⁶ This presents a possibility that such operations could eventually extend to areas closer to Australia, particularly in response to the ADF’s continuous investment in antiballistic missile (ABM) defence capabilities.

In addition to their willingness to support technology and information sharing, joint operational activities, and limited strategic deterrence operations, another point of concern is the deepening Sino–Russian cooperation in the sphere of strategic nuclear deterrence. Since 2013, Russia and China have consulted on questions concerning ABM defence. In May 2016 and December 2017, Russia and China ran *Aerospace Security*: computer simulations on coordinated counter-ABM operations. In October 2019, Putin revealed that Russia was assisting China in acquiring ABM early warning and detection capability.³⁷

This aspect of deepening Russian–PRC defence cooperation can be seen as a response driven by US deployments in theatre-level ballistic missile defence elements (THAAD) provided to the Republic of Korea (RoK) and Japan. However, Australia’s active deployment of sea-based ABM/BMD elements (the Hobart class air warfare destroyers) as well as ongoing operations of ground-based detection capability makes both Moscow and Beijing consider Australia in ways similar to the RoK and Japan.³⁸ It is also another indicator of much closer coordinated operational and strategic planning and of further strategic trust and confidence in each other as allied nations, not just as strategic partners.

Analysis of the current state of Russian–PRC security and defence cooperation highlights China’s ongoing reliance on Russia as a leading military power. For China, Russia has maintained its role as the source of contemporary military knowledge, and operational and tactical expertise. While the Chinese military trains with various foreign counterparts, including the ADF, these engagements are limited in both scale and depth. Being a large force, which is in the midst of major qualitative modernisation, the PLA seriously lacks operational and combat

36 Guy Martin, ‘Russian Tu-160 bombers arrive in South Africa’, *Defence Web*, 24 October 2019, <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/aerospace/aerospace-aerospace/russian-tu-160-bombers-arrive-in-south-africa/>.

37 ‘Russia is helping China build a missile defence system, Putin says’, *The Guardian*, 4 October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/04/russia-is-helping-china-build-a-missile-defence-system-putin-says>.

38 For example, Australia’s shipborne *Aegis* capability was identified as one of risks factors by one of Russia’s leading defence publications closely linked to Russia’s Ministry of Defence and the defence industrial complex. Vladimir Kozin, “‘Idzhis” – Pymaya Ugroza Rossii” [Aegis is the director threat to Russia], *Natsional’naya Oborona*, N 11, November 2020, <https://oborona.ru/includes/periodics/maintheme/2012/0416/18358201/detail.shtml> (oborona.ru).

experience as well as the ability to plan and execute large-scale joint force operations against a technologically advanced adversary.

To be upskilled by the Russian military, a battle-hardened experienced force, which has made considerable advances in planning and executing high-tempo joint force operations, represents invaluable experience for the PLA; both its personnel, and C4I2 structures (communications, command, control, computers, intelligence and interoperability structures). Therefore, it is no surprise that for the most part, during these activities, PLA command structures and field units either operate under Russian command, as either integrated force element, or as an allied force element under close guidance of Russian military advisers. The fact that Russian has often been chosen as the principal language supports the claim Russia is taking the leading role in joint exercise and training activities.

The Russian military also sees value in having close interaction with their Chinese counterparts. Russia views joint operational training with the PRC as another form of CBMs at tactical, operational and strategic levels. It also allows Russia to see and test China's latest military hardware in action. In addition to improving interoperability with a partner army, joint exercises with China allow Russia to promote its own capabilities, as well as showcase new weapons systems to a lucrative client. Finally, training with the PLA provides the Russian military with insights into PLA operations, ranging from contingency planning and composition of tactical combat formations to logistical enablers and the overall efficiency of the Chinese military machine.³⁹

In 2021, Russian–PRC mil-to-mil cooperation has matured to the point when their military forces demonstrate high levels of professional competence and integration to operate and fight alongside each other. Over the years, joint exercise activity and training has grown in its complexity, scale and reach. Regularising joint combined-arms training of ground, air and naval forces, alongside various special force elements, represents an important step forward in preparing for possible future joint operations. Joint operational activities have extended well beyond continental Eurasia and across maritime and aerospace domains, stretching into the highly sensitive sphere of strategic nuclear deterrence, thus reaching a point when a military alliance may be the next logical step.

39 For example, Russian military observers who took part in joint exercises noted that PLAAF pilot training resembled Soviet pilot training methodologies. 'Mirnaya Missiya 2013' [Peace Mission 2013], *Aviatsiya i Kosmonavtika*, 11, 2013 (online), <https://military.wikireading.ru/56752>.

Russian–PRC alliance: scenario planning

When trying to predict future patterns of the Russian–PRC security and defence relationship, Australian and allied strategic and defence planners could entertain the following scenarios:

- hostility re-emerges between Russia and the PRC
- Russia and the PRC move towards forming an alliance
- the current status quo of a near alliance remains for a foreseeable future.

Hostility re-emerges between Russia and the PRC

Given a mix of dramatic history and a certain lack of trust, this scenario must form part of such strategic forecasting analysis. The history of Russia and China’s interactions, which dates back to 1618, has seen a number of dramatic developments, including open conflicts.⁴⁰ At first glance, such a scenario may be viewed as a pressure diffuser with respect to Australia’s national security and defence as well as the security and defence of its major allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. For the PRC another confrontation with Russia would restrain its ability to exercise power across the Indo-Pacific; and, the Taiwan issue would have to be placed on hold. The PLA would have to reorient its ongoing capability upgrade by investing more in conventional ground and air power components, plus rapidly developing its nuclear deterrent. The PLA’s northern and western theatre commands would also have to be bolstered and positioned much closer to the border with Russia. Forward operations across the Indo-Pacific could be curtailed, as the PLA-N could be forced to bolster its North Sea Fleet and result in Chinese naval and aerial operations in the seas of Japan and Okhotsk intensifying.⁴¹ China’s national strategic nuclear deterrent in such a scenario would also have to be considerably recalibrated and focus on more strategic targets in Russia.

Similarly, Russia would find itself reliving the Soviet nightmare scenario of balancing against a hostile PRC, NATO and the US simultaneously. It would be compelled to effectively halt its forward activities in the Mediterranean and

40 Perhaps, the most serious episodes of confrontation in the history of Russia and China were military-strategic standoffs in 1969 and 1979, which also saw heightened risks of a nuclear conflict. A Bogaturov A, *Velikie Derzhavy na Tikhom Okeane* [Great Powers in the Pacific], Moskva: Institut SShA i Kanady RAN., 1997, pp 141–42; During the 1979 standoff some 25 Soviet divisions supported by air power (250,000 strong force) were massed along the Sino-Soviet border and all combat and support units were placed on full alert. The Soviet naval task groups were also deployed to the South China Sea. Adding to that, the Soviets staged a series of large-scale manoeuvres involving over 200,000 personnel, some 900 aircraft and 80 warships. These coercive measures placed considerable pressure on the PLA, forcing Beijing to eventually suspend offensive operations against Vietnam. Anatoliy Zaitsev, ‘40 Let Nazad Nachalas’ Pervaya Sotsialisticheskaya Voyna’ [The first socialist war began 40 years ago], *Voенno-Promyshlenny Kurier*, February 2019, 5 (768):12–18, p 11.

41 A considerable portion of the PLA-N’s amphibious element would have to be reoriented towards possible offensive operations against Russia’s Maritime Province, the Kuril and Sakhalin islands.

the Middle East, make concessions with Ukraine and limit its influence across Eurasia. Should there be a rapid deterioration in relations with China, Russia would be compelled to, once again, heavily militarise its border with the PRC and rapidly form new mechanised and armoured divisions.⁴² Russia could accelerate the development of additional strategic nuclear capabilities, such as railway-based systems, specifically as a deterrent against Beijing. The accelerated expansion of Russian naval power in the Pacific, along with the redeployment of some assets from the Russian Northern Fleet, would also be likely.

Moscow would also be likely to intensify its existing strategic and defence relations with India and Vietnam, as well as offer support to other countries that are wary of Chinese expansionism; thus, attempting to revive the Soviet anti-Chinese containment network.

Any confrontation between Moscow and Beijing would fracture Western Pacific and Eurasian security environments. It could trigger a massive build-up of conventional and unconventional military capabilities on both sides of the Russian–PRC border, significantly increasing the risk of a nuclear exchange should tensions transform into open clashes along the border. Even if open large-scale conventional conflict could be avoided, hostile coexistence of two nuclear-armed states and their aggressive hedging against each other, as well as other major rivals, could fuel strategic anxieties across the region. Moscow and Beijing would once again find themselves completely encircled by a fragile security environment.

Both Russia and the PRC understand too well the risks associated with this scenario, as well as the potentially disastrous consequences for either of them should a bilateral confrontation unfold again. Ruling elites in both countries are mindful of existing shortfalls as well as their dramatic past, and they are determined to avoid this. Adding to that, the history of Russian–PRC relations demonstrates the ability of both powers to defuse open conflict, even against the background of ideological and political confrontation.⁴³ Thus, this scenario seems unlikely in the foreseeable future.

42 In response to China's threat the Russian military might form an additional operational-strategic command by splitting the Eastern Military District (MD) in the Far Eastern and the Siberian or the Transbaikal MDs.

43 For example, the high intensity border conflict of 1929 between the USSR and the Chinese nationalist forces under the command of Chiang Kai-Shek lasted only 10 days and was quickly deescalated by follow on political talks. Anatoliy Ivan'ko, 'Doroga, ne Privedshaya k Voine' [The road, which did not lead to war], *Voennoe-Promyshlenny Kurier*, December 2019, N 47 (810):3–9, p 8.

A formal Russia–China alliance

If Russia and the PRC are unlikely to allow potential points of concern to escalate into an open confrontation, could the two powers once again become formal allies, particularly since they have a history of being formally allied (during the Second World War and the 1950 Treaty), as well as fighting alongside each other against common enemies.⁴⁴

There are grounds for this to happen. The two share a common strategic and defence agenda, including: mutual denial of unipolarity and hegemony in international relations, and rejection of the US-led rules-based order; active defence, including strategic pre-emption as a form of active defence; and, common approaches towards understanding the problem of contemporary and future wars and national responses to conflicts – or contemporary military art.⁴⁵

Since the 1990s, Russia and the PRC have expanded their security and defence cooperation from comprehensive CBM and extensive MTC to close coordination at operational and strategic levels. Conducting joint operational training, regular exercise activities, and limited joint operations has allowed the two militaries to reach high interoperability levels, including on the logistical enabler.

Recently, both countries have begun prioritising joint capability development, thus manifesting an intent to deepen MTC to levels normally seen among trusted allies. Intelligence cooperation and information sharing are further markers of allied-type relations. In early November 2020, the chief of Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Sergei Naryshkin, admitted high levels of existing cooperation and ‘trusted’ information sharing with Chinese counterparts, ranging from counterterrorism to strategic forecasting.⁴⁶

This is the most radical scenario, which may cause the most detrimental impact on the Indo-Pacific geostrategic landscape, including Australian national security and defence. From a military–strategic viewpoint, a Russian–PRC alliance would become the second political–military union of more than one nuclear power. The combined military potential (nearly 3.5 million standing force) would allow a Russian–PRC alliance to form robust and mobile combined-arms formations that could operate across the Eurasian and Indo-Pacific strategic theatres and beyond.

44 Examples include Soviet strategic offensive in Manchuria in 1945; the Sino-Soviet military intervention in the Korean War (1950–53). Both of these cases of allied operations are still being remembered as highlights of Sino-Soviet/Russian relations.

45 Aleksandr Bartosh, ‘Treugol’nik Strategicheskikh Kul’tur’ [A triangle of strategic cultures], *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie* (online version), 28 June 2019, http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/2019-06-28/1_1050_strategy.html

46 ‘Glava SVR Rasskazal ob Obmene Informatsiei s Kitaiskimi Spetssluzhbumi’ [Chief of the SVR told about information sharing with the Chinese special services], *RIA Novosti*, 3 November 2020, <https://ria.ru/20201103/obmen-1582825259.html>

The strategic balance of power in the Western Pacific could be tilted towards a new alliance. Further, security and defence of some of Australia's core allied partners in East Asia – Japan and the RoK – would likely be seriously challenged.

Southeast Asian security would also be affected as Russia would probably accept China's stance on the South China Sea, even at the expense of damaging its relations with ASEAN, India and other countries.⁴⁷ The PRC may also be granted preferential access to Russia-controlled Arctic territory.

Both nations would be likely to engage in enforcing favourable maritime security regimes across the Indo-Pacific and other maritime theatres. The Russian and Chinese navies could establish a permanent operational presence in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Joint Russian–PRC naval operations – including carrier and amphibious battle groups, and strategic bomber deployments – could represent high risks to the ADF and allied forces operating in the region.

There may be some scepticism that economic disparities would prevent the two from forming a security and defence alliance; however, this is unlikely to be the stopping point. History, including that of Russian–PRC relations, has demonstrated working alliances comprising members with unequal economic potentials before.⁴⁸ China brings to the table its massive economic might, enormous human power base and a massive standing force. Russia, in turn, offers political, diplomatic and military influence, and a smaller but skilled human power base. Russia's modern military force as well as its advanced strategic nuclear arsenal, which is vastly superior to the Chinese strategic nuclear deterrent, appeals to Beijing. Finally, Russia brings to the table some core technological capability and operational expertise desired by China.

However, given the lack of political will and embedded differences discussed earlier, such a scenario is still unlikely to unfold in the near future, but it cannot be ruled out completely. The main push factor, which could draw Russia and China into a formal alliance, would be a dramatic escalation of strategic tensions with the US, particularly with respect to Sino-US relations.

Retaining a near allied status

This is the most likely scenario for the foreseeable future. There is an obvious lack of appetite to pledge full mutual commitment to more complete political and, if necessary, military support. When it comes to the pursuit of their national

47 In return, Beijing will probably recognise Russia's annexation of Crimea as a justification of its claims in the South China Sea and on Taiwan.

48 It is worth noting that when the Soviet Union and communist China formed the alliance in 1950, Soviet economic and technological might was far more superior to that of Beijing. Yet, it was a mix of ideological and geostrategic convergence that pushed the two powers into forming an alliance.

agendas, Moscow and Beijing are keen to remain independent, or fall short of providing each other with much needed political clout and overt support. Being a steady supporter of the non-alignment movement, China rejects in principle any formal alliance frameworks.⁴⁹ Adding to that, Russia and China’s previous alliances have not passed the test of time.⁵⁰

There is no consensus in Moscow on whether Russia should form an alliance with China. Russia’s principal security and defence doctrinal documents clearly advocate for an Asia–Pacific free of any alliance or military blocks.⁵¹ Some of Russia’s respected strategic and defence analysts continue to question the value of near allied ties with China, referring to Cold War confrontation with Beijing.⁵² Russians are also suspicious that China has not revoked ambitions to reclaim Russian territories in the Far East, which the PRC considers theirs. Furthermore, there are areas where Russia and China find themselves competing with one another for geopolitical and economic influence, such as in former Soviet Central Asia.⁵³

Russia has stopped short of supporting the PRC’s unilateralism vis a vis the South China Sea dispute, nor is it likely to support their possible plans to take control of Taiwan by force. This is potentially because Russia also pursues close security and defence ties with a number of Indo-Pacific countries as an alternative to formal alliance building, including ones that have deeply embedded concerns about the PRC, among them Vietnam and India.

A recent example of Russia’s lack of appetite to back China unconditionally occurred in June 2020, during the most serious escalation of tensions between New Delhi and Beijing in years. Following tense border clashes and rapid military build-up in Galwan Valley, India requested emergency acquisitions of

49 Mai, ‘Beijing Gives Cautious Welcome to Vladimir Putin’s Hint over Russia-China Military Alliance’; Ma Shikun, ‘Abandoning the Nonalignment Stance? It’s not a Policy Option for China’, *China US Focus*, 30 January 2014, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/abandoning-the-nonalignment-stance-its-not-a-policy-option-for-china>.

50 Liu Wing, ‘Sino-Russian Relations: an alliance or Partnership?’, *Contemporary International Relations*, 4 (2016):1–11.

51 The National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation; The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (translation), 2014, Russia’s 2014 Military Doctrine 26-12-2014 (offziere.ch). N.B. Russia’s reference to Asia-Pacific is based on the rejection of the concept of the Indo-Pacific.

52 Aleksandr Khranchikhin, ‘Etapy Rossiisko-Kitaiskikh Vzaimootnosheniy’ [Stages of Russia-China Relationship], *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie* (online version), 27 February 2020, http://nvo.ng.ru/gpolit/2020-02-27/1_1083_china.html.

53 Dmitry Gorenburg, ‘An Emerging Strategic Partnership: Trends in Russia-China Military Cooperation’, *George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies*, N 054, April 2020, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/emerging-strategic-partnership-trends-russia-china-military-cooperation-0#toc-scenarios-for-future-russia-china-military-cooperation->

Russian combat systems.⁵⁴ Despite pressure from Beijing, Moscow agreed to provide India with urgent military-technological assistance, as well as to act as a political mediator. Furthermore, Moscow delayed the delivery of advanced S-400 *Triumf* (SA-21 *Growler*) air defence system to China, fuelling speculations of the India factor.⁵⁵

In contrast, the PRC has no interest in supporting Russia's balancing game against the NATO or in its geopolitical and military stand-off with Ukraine. The fact that the PRC has not recognised Russia's annexation of Crimea or Georgia's breakaway provinces is telling of the existing political shortfalls.⁵⁶ China also shows no interest in being part of Russia-US strategic arms limitations deliberations.⁵⁷ Finally, the PRC points to inherited differences in national identities, which could cause problems for alliance building.⁵⁸

Cooperation in cyberspace is another important indicator of strategic trust; or rather, the lack of it. The 2015 information security agreement between Moscow and Beijing has not resulted in the development of any decisive joint operations strategy in regard to cyberspace. Russian cyber security experts have also expressed concerns about Chinese hacking operations against Russian targets, including military espionage.⁵⁹

Similarly, despite declared trusted cooperation between the two intelligence communities, there is evidence of ongoing operations against each other. Russian media repeatedly reports of spy scandals involving Russian nationals accused of transferred sensitive data to the PRC. In 2020 alone, at least

54 In particular, India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh travelled to Moscow to request accelerated delivery of S-400 *Triumf* advanced air defence systems. Also, an emphasis was placed on acquisitions of 21 MiG-29 *Fulcrum* and 12 Su-30MKI *Flanker* aircrafts, ammunitions and spare parts to various Russian-made systems to bolster India's operational capability: Vivek Raghuvanshi, 'India Accelerates Weapons Purchases in Wake of Border Clash with China', *Defense News*, 6 July 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y4gr9s2z>; Sergei Strokan, 'Rossiiskoe Oruzhie Speshit v Indiu' [Russian weapons hurry to India], *Kommersant*, 26 June 2020, p 2.

55 Mark Episkopos, 'Russia halted S-400 air defence sales to China. Why?', *The National Interest*, 30 July 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/russia-halted-s-400-air-defense-sales-china-why-165876>.

56 Marcin Kaczmarek, 'The Sino-Russian Relationship and the West', December 2020–January 2021, *Survival*, 62(6): 203–204.

57 *The New START Treaty: Central Limits and Key Provisions*, Congressional Research Service, R41219, 23 October 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R41219.pdf>; Leanne Quinn, 'China's Stance on Unclear Arms Control and New Start', *Arms Control Association*, 23 August 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2019-08-23/chinas-stance-nuclear-arms-control-new-start>.

58 Ying Liu, 'Strategic partnership or alliance? Sino-Russian relations from a constructivist perspective', *Asian Perspectives*, N 42, July 2018, pp 343–50.

59 Adam Seal, 'Peering into the Future of Sino-Russian Cyber Security Cooperation', *War on the Rocks*, 10 August 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/peering-into-the-future-of-sino-russian-cyber-security-cooperation/>; Kelly Jackson Higgins, 'Chinese Cyberspies Pivot to Russia in Wake of Obama-Xi Pact', *DARKReading*, 2 September 2016, <https://www.darkreading.com/endpoint/chinese-cyberspies-pivot-to-russia-in-wake-of-obama-xi-pact/d/d-id/1324242>.

two cases of Chinese industrial espionage were made public.⁶⁰ The problem of Chinese industrial espionage and intellectual theft (on a par with reverse engineering) is often linked to bilateral MTC. For example, in December 2019, a senior representative of Russia’s major defence conglomerate *Rostekh* openly accused China of 500 confirmed cases of ‘unauthorised copying over the past 17 years’.⁶¹ It is also plausible to assume that Russia has never suspended intelligence operations against its ‘partner’. It is no surprise therefore that neither are ready to sign an agreement, similar to the Five Eyes agreement, pledging not to engage in any hostile intelligence operations against one another.

For now, both countries find the current status quo of a near alliance practical and convenient. It is a basis from which they can support each other politically and economically; launching joint technological projects (such as in the defence space) or forming sporadic coalitions and joining military forces in response to mutual threats (for instance to support either individual or joint strategic hedging against the west). Such scenarios of Russia and China partnering as *occasional de facto allies* should be considered a reality rather than a possibility.

Conclusion

Russian–PRC strategic and defence affairs have matured over the past thirty years, reaching their highest point since the early 1950s. The current state of the near alliance is based on the convergence of geopolitical and military–strategic interests. But neither country is ready to engage beyond this near alliance level. Nonetheless, despite embedded problems and complexities, Moscow and Beijing recognise strategic interdependence, and the subsequent need to support each other in order to mitigate risks and also explore strategic opportunities elsewhere.

For Beijing, expanding and deepening security and defence relations with Moscow remains pivotal. The significance of Russia as a near allied military partner to China was highlighted by the 2019 edition of the Chinese defence white paper.⁶² This is particularly evident when it comes to considering the impact of Russian defence technologies on the evolving Chinese defence capability; operational and training activities. The extent and depth of the two major nuclear-armed neighbours’

60 In June 2020, Russian media reported on the trial of a retired senior naval officer, Valery Mit’ko, who was accused of sharing sensitive data with the Chinese concerning submarine detection technologies: Ivan Petrov, ‘Severnoe Slivanie: Uchenogo Obvinili v Peredache Kitaiu Gostainy’ [Northern dumping: a scientist was accused of transferring state secrets to China], *Izvestia*, 16 June 2020, <https://iz.ru/1023903/ivan-petrov/severnoe-slivanie-uchenogo-obvinili-v-peredache-kitaiu-gostainy>. Also, in February 2020, a director of the Russian Marine Co. Ltd. company, which is based in northeast China, was charged with treason: Aleksei Chernyshov, ‘Maslo Shpionazhem ne Isportish’ [Oil cannot be affected by espionage], *Kommersant* (online version), 7 February 2020, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4249441?from=main_7.

61 Dimitri Simes, ‘Russia up in Arms over Chinese Theft of Military Technology’, *Nikkei Asia*, 20 December 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Russia-up-in-arms-over-Chinese-theft-of-military-technology>.

62 Lu Hui, ‘China’s National Defense in the New Era’.

cooperation in the sphere of security and defence, and its subsequent impact on the state of the PLA and the PLA-N, is a point of growing strategic concern.⁶³ Similarly, Moscow considers its special relationship with the PRC pivotal to its interests.

Although the Russian–PRC defence tandem has not caused a strategic impact on Australia’s security and defence, its importance cannot be underestimated. Moscow and Beijing are viewing Australia through the same adversarial prisms with which they assess the US’s close allies. The ABM factor alone would push the two nuclear powers to consider response options. Additionally, attention needs to be paid to the deepening of Russian–PRC naval cooperation, and the expansion of joint operations across the Indo-Pacific and beyond; advancements in joint capability development (submarines, aircraft, hypersonics, space-based assets), which would pose a military-technological challenge; and the possible intensification of intelligence gathering and influence operations against Australia, which do not require a coordinated approach but the sharing of acquired sensitive information.⁶⁴

Russian–PRC joint operational activity across the Indo-Pacific could create pressure points on Australia and its allies. It is therefore essential that risks posed by this Russian–PRC defence tandem are carefully assessed and regularly reviewed.



63 The 2020 edition of Defense of Japan noted that Russia-China strategic convergence needs to be closely observed. *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, Department of Defence, 2020, https://www.defence.gov.au/StrategicUpdate-2020/docs/2020_Defence_Strategic_Update.pdf.

64 Daniel Hurst, 'ASIO Chief says foreign spies trying to 'deceptively cultivate; Australian politicians at every level', *The Guardian*, 21 October 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/oct/21/asio-chief-says-foreign-spies-trying-to-deceptively-cultivate-australian-politicians-at-every-level>; Sarah O'Connor with Fergus Hanson, Emilia Currey and Tracy Beattie, 'Cyber-enabled foreign interference in elections and referendums.', *ASPI International Cyber Security Centre Policy Brief Report*, N 41, 2020.