

# Russia-China Defense Cooperation

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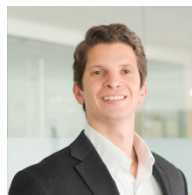
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## Introduction

Russia's war in Ukraine has been a critical test of the depth of Sino-Russian relations. Since Russia's invasion, China has remained an essential partner for Moscow. Although there have been limits to what Beijing has been willing to do for Russia, China has served as a vital lifeline for the Kremlin including by parroting Russian talking points about the war, increasing purchases of Russian oil and gas, and continuing to export microchips and other component parts to Moscow cut off by the West. Warnings by senior U.S. officials that China is contemplating providing Russia with lethal military aid in support of its war against Ukraine underscore the depth of their partnership.<sup>1</sup> Emerging reports that Chinese companies have provided rifles and dual-use equipment such as drone parts and body armor only add credibility to these warnings.<sup>2</sup> Although it remains unclear at the time of writing whether China will ultimately decide to send lethal aid to Russia, the last year has provided further evidence that Russia and China are deeply aligned and that the persistence and evolution of their partnership will continue to pose challenges that the United States and its allies must navigate.

This working paper will focus on the challenges that Russia-China military cooperation poses to the United States and its allies and partners. This aspect of their relationship has been one of the most consequential dimensions of their deepening partnership. Already, China has obtained key capabilities from Moscow such as Su-27 and Su-35 fighter aircrafts, S-300 and S-400 air defense systems, and anti-ship missiles, which bolster China's military posture in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>3</sup> Russia too has benefited from a large market for its arms sales and access to technological components it can no longer access following the imposition of Western sanctions in 2014—a need that has grown exponentially since Russia's reinvasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Meanwhile, more frequent and elaborate joint exercises have signaled to onlooking countries the two partners' mutual support for each other's security priorities and willingness to push back against the United States.

In the context of Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine and increasing U.S.-China tensions in the Indo-Pacific, it has become even more urgent to understand how future military cooperation between Russia and China could evolve and what it would mean for the United States and its partners. This memo examines this aspect of the partnership, including what is driving it, how it has evolved following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and the implications for the United States and its allies and partners.

## Factors Shaping Russia-China Military Cooperation

Russia-China military cooperation has grown since the end of the Cold War when the two countries took steps to overcome long-standing tensions and reduce the potential for conflict along their shared border. This cooperation further accelerated in the wake of Russia's 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea. Viewing few opportunities for cooperation with the West, Moscow pivoted decisively toward Beijing. Since then, arms sales between the two countries have grown. Russian arms have contributed meaningfully to the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) augmentation of its air defense, anti-ship, and submarine capabilities. To blunt the impact of sanctions, Russia looked to China for electronic components and naval diesel engines that it had previously bought from Western countries. At the same time, joint Russian and Chinese military exercises have become larger, more frequent, and more complex. For Beijing, the exercises provide valuable operational knowledge through exercising with and learning from Russian counterparts who have seen combat in Ukraine and Syria, helping to offset the PLA's lack of combat experience, one of its most significant weaknesses relative to the United States.<sup>4</sup> Russia too benefits from

the exercises, not just through the signals it conveys to onlooking countries that Russia is not isolated, but by tying Beijing more closely to Moscow.

The following factors have been key drivers of this growing military cooperation. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has increased the salience of many of these drivers, indicating that Russia-China military cooperation will persist, if not deepen, in the coming months and years.

***Shared perceptions of the United States as their most significant security challenge.*** The primary factor fueling Russia-China relations, including their deepening military cooperation, is their shared view of the United States as their most significant security challenge. Even before February 2022, the convergence of their interest in undermining U.S. power and influence propelled their partnership. Both countries also view U.S. power as in decline and seek to hasten a shift to a more multipolar world order. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has only heightened the salience of these factors. As Chinese President Xi Jinping told Russian President Vladimir Putin at the close of their summit in Moscow in March 2023: "Right now there are changes, the likes of which we haven't seen for 100 years. And we are the ones driving these changes together."<sup>5</sup>

Russia, for its part, has no options other than China. Moscow's lack of alternatives means that Russia is all in with China and will look to deepen relations where it can, including in the military domain. China's drive to deepen ties with Russia at this moment when its value as a partner is so clearly diminished also indicates the level of importance Beijing places on Moscow as a partner. Above all, Russia remains critical to China amid Beijing's heightened competition with the United States, the outcome of which Chinese leaders expect will determine their success in achieving great-power status, delivering the "rejuvenation of the Chinese people," and ultimately ensuring the regime's control in the decades to come.<sup>6</sup> Chinese leaders, despite their long-standing rejection of the concept of alliances, recognize that the U.S. alliance network is one of Washington's greatest strengths and that Beijing suffers from a lack of partners, which is critical to fending off the United States. Russia, despite its evident weaknesses, is not only China's most important strategic partner; it is the only partner that can help China compete with a United States viewed as bent on the Chinese Communist Party's destruction. And while Russia may be down, it is not out; its conventional forces may be degraded, but the Kremlin retains the intent to challenge the West and retains several tools to sustain its own confrontation with the West. Russia will remain a distraction for Washington, making Russia a diminished yet useful partner for China.<sup>7</sup>

***The personalization of power and growing acceptance of risk.*** The rapport between Putin and Xi has been a major catalyst for their two countries' cooperation. As Xi has personalized the political system—a trend that has accelerated with the removal of term limits and his appointment of yes men around him—China's foreign policy decisions are likely to be increasingly determined by his own preferences. Xi has staked his reputation on his backing for Putin, suggesting he is committed to keeping Putin in power. Moreover, as Xi has surrounded himself with loyalists and sycophants, it is likely to shut down political space for debate about China's approach to Russia, reinforcing Xi's preference for sustaining the partnership.

Moreover, the personalization of Xi's regime likely portends a riskier and more assertive foreign policy coming from Beijing. Research shows that personalist autocrats pursue the most risky and aggressive foreign policy of any regime type.<sup>8</sup> This is in part because these leaders are held accountable by the smallest cohort of domestic actors, providing them with the latitude to take risks that other leaders simply cannot afford to take. Xi may now be more accepting of risk—including the risks that come with providing lethal aid to Russia that may be needed to protract the war in Ukraine or prevent Putin from losing. Likewise, if Xi is intent on greater confrontation with the United States, he is likely to find Putin an ever more useful partner in his efforts.

**Mutual benefits from defense trade.** Beyond their complementary geopolitical interests, both China and Russia have seen practical gains from their defense partnership. For Beijing, the primary benefits have been the acquisition of more sophisticated military capabilities and enhanced operational readiness from joint exercises with the more experienced Russian forces. Moscow, for its part, has seen a significant influx of capital from both China's purchases of weapons systems and its investments in Russian defense projects. Cooperation in developing capabilities such as artificial intelligence, guided missiles, and unmanned vehicles has allowed each country to progress faster than it would on its own.

In the wake of his invasion, Putin would almost certainly welcome Chinese ammunition, drones and other military aid that would strengthen Russia's position in Ukraine. Xi too is likely to calculate that as Russia is weakened and more dependent on Russia, he can leverage his position to compel Moscow to provide ever more sophisticated systems that would benefit Beijing.

In addition to the factors pushing the two countries together, there are also long-standing constraints on their military cooperation, although some of these may be eroding. The constraints include:

**Historical distrust.** While rapprochement between Russia and China is a trend that has persisted over several decades, the two countries nonetheless continue to grapple with the legacy of many years of competition during the Cold War. This history has at times contributed to reservations about the bilateral defense partnership, though it has generally not prevented it from deepening. For instance, despite concerns about Beijing's theft of military-related intellectual property, Russia did not stop selling China advanced weaponry, illustrating that Moscow has perceived the financial benefits of doing so to exceed the potential risks.<sup>9</sup> Still, there has been a tendency for defense trade to focus on capabilities that have higher strategic value in the context of competition with the United States than in a hypothetical conflict with each other.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there have been few indications that Moscow is limited by such distrust. Notably, Russia has deployed all of its forces from the Eastern and Central Military Districts in this war, leaving the country almost completely defenseless against China for over a year. Such actions call into question the extent of distrust that remains between them.<sup>10</sup>

**Chinese military modernization.** In at least one respect, the bilateral defense relationship has paradoxically become less valuable to China the more that it has deepened over time. As Beijing has gradually acquired more sophisticated capabilities from Moscow, the technological gap between the two militaries has narrowed and Russia's ability to provide new systems to China has diminished. Certain Chinese systems are now even more advanced than their Russian equivalents, for instance when it comes to fifth-generation stealth fighter jets (China's J-20 versus Russia's SU-35).

Taken together, the factors facilitating the deepening of Russia-China defense cooperation have become stronger and more conducive to deeper partnership since Russia's reinvasion in February 2022. Geopolitical factors, along with the personalization of Xi's regime, suggest that military cooperation will grow. It remains plausible that China could, for example, provide lethal military aid to Russia—a decision that would significantly change the way the United States and its allies and partners think about their partnership.

## Implications and Challenges Stemming from Russia-China Military Cooperation

Deepening Russia-China defense cooperation amplifies the challenges that both countries pose to the United States and its allies and partners. While Russia's amplification of the China challenge has so far been the most consequential outcome of their partnership, China's support for Russia is also aggravating the Russia problem in large part by diluting Western pressure on Moscow. U.S. and European sanctions are in part designed to constrict Russia's military and make it increasingly difficult for it to sustain its aggression in Ukraine and beyond. Sustained trade and growing Chinese military support work against these efforts. Going forward, the deepening of Russia-China military cooperation would create the following challenges for the United States and its allies:

***Protracting the Russia-Ukraine war.*** China has the potential to provide Russia with lethal assistance that would help Russia to sustain fighting in Ukraine. Russian forces are increasingly firing missiles at the rate they can produce them per month. China can help Russia sustain or increase its production as a supplier of integrated circuits, smart cards, wafers, and other components. Russia has already turned to China as both a source and transshipment point to compensate for a decline in access to integrated circuits from Western suppliers. Although China may not be overtly providing military assistance, by serving as a workaround to Western export controls it is in effect supplying Russian companies that in turn supply the military industrial complex.<sup>11</sup> Beijing would be most likely to move to more overt modes of assistance to prevent Putin from a clear defeat that could destabilize him domestically. However, Beijing could also pursue more plausibly deniable forms of support for Russia. For example, China could provide commercial drones or other dual use systems that Russia can use in its war. In short, China has the potential to step up its support for Russia in ways that better position Russia to draw out the conflict, which the Kremlin almost certainly judges would raise the prospects that Western support for Ukraine would wane or that political changes in the United States or Europe would lessen military aid to Kyiv.

***Eroding U.S. advantages in the Indo-Pacific.*** Perhaps the greatest risk moving forward will be that Russia's growing dependence on China will make Moscow more likely to provide China with increasingly sophisticated military capabilities. Even though China has been narrowing the technological gap between its own military and that of Russia, Chinese industry remains behind in certain key areas, including submarine technology, remote sensing space satellites, and aircraft engines.<sup>12</sup> If China can pressure a more dependent Russia to provide increasingly sophisticated technologies, for example those that enhance China's submarine capabilities, it would erode the relative U.S. military position in the Indo-Pacific, making it more difficult to counter the PLA in the event of a potential conflict. Already, Chinese purchases of advanced Russian systems such as S-400 air defenses, anti-ship cruise missiles, and Sovremenny-class destroyers have increased the difficulty of U.S. intervention in a Taiwan contingency.

***Signaling a willingness to challenge the United States.*** Collaboration between Russia and China has the potential not only to harm U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific and Europe, but also in other regions of the world. In recent months, the Russian and Chinese militaries have conducted joint exercises with Iran and South Africa.<sup>13</sup> These examples illustrate the way in which Moscow and Beijing are simultaneously making inroads—including in the defense sector—with countries in the Global South that have been reluctant to take the side of the West since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and remain open to deepening whichever ties they deem to be most in their interest. The exercises with Iran also illustrate how China and Russia are cooperating militarily with other authoritarian governments that are hostile to the United States.<sup>14</sup> Through these efforts Russia and China may be working to consolidate an authoritarian axis among Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, which may pose new challenges to the United States and its allies in the future. Expanded military cooperation with third countries also signals to onlooking countries their shared intentions and abilities to project power in various regions of the globe.

**Accelerating Russia's military regeneration after the war.** Since February 2022, Russia's military has suffered heavy losses in Ukraine. These losses have been most significant when it comes to Russia's conventional military capabilities, including key equipment such as tanks, artillery, and command and control stations.<sup>15</sup> Going forward, Russia will seek to regenerate these depleted forces as quickly as possible. While Moscow has typically focused on sourcing military components rather than finished systems from Beijing, it may shift its approach given the severity of the challenge of regenerating its losses. Russia could turn to Beijing to help expedite that process. If China is willing to increase its military support to Russia after the war ends, it could enable Moscow to regenerate its forces more quickly than many currently expect.<sup>16</sup>

**Protracting conflict in an Indo-Pacific scenario.** Russia and China have not formed an alliance, but they do not have to fight together directly to enhance the challenge to the U.S. military. In the case of the Indo-Pacific, even indirect Russian support for China could be consequential. Beijing could gain significant advantages if Moscow were to take actions such as allowing Chinese basing on its territory, interfering with U.S. space-based surveillance capabilities, or assisting with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance efforts. Russia might also increase overland exports of oil and gas to China during a conflict, allowing Beijing to overcome its disadvantageous dependency on large-scale energy imports through chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca. Finally, China could leverage Russia's defense industrial base to sustain its war effort beyond what would be feasible without external support (although such support would depend on whether Russia has ended its war in Ukraine and choices Moscow makes about regenerating its own military versus helping external partners).<sup>17</sup> Any of these actions would allow Russia to enhance China's ability to fight the United States military without putting boots on the ground, furthering Moscow's strategic objective of countering Washington's geopolitical influence.

## The Way Forward

Given the challenges posed by Russia-China cooperation, it is natural to ask what the United States and its allies might do to prevent them from materializing. Any attempt to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing is unlikely to be successful. Ultimately, neither Russia nor China is likely to decisively break from their existing partnership due to an external actions or efforts. Put differently, although natural fissures between Russia and China exist, the United States and its allies have limited ability to aggravate or leverage these differences. The United States and its allies must therefore plan for and seek to offset the impact of Russia-China military cooperation moving forward.

In addition to sustained efforts to strength U.S. leadership and its alliances, there are also several courses of action that can help to mitigate the challenges that Russia-China military cooperation poses. For example, the United States and its allies should prioritize intelligence collection on Russian and Chinese efforts to circumvent sanctions and export controls. Enhanced intelligence monitoring will also be required as more of their defense cooperation takes place out of the public eye. In addition, Washington should continue to work with Europe to build a common picture of the challenge that greater Russia-China coordination would pose and further encourage European leaders to articulate to China the potential costs of providing direct support for Russia's war effort. Along these same lines, the United States and its NATO allies must also build a clear understanding of what capabilities the United States would need to take out of Europe in the case of a crisis in the Indo-Pacific—for example, enablers like air to air refueling—to inform how European countries can direct their defense expenditures. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shown that while there may be limits to the depth of Russia-China relations, it is still a deep and enduring partnership that poses challenges that the United States and its allies will have to continue to address.



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<sup>2</sup> Erin Banco and Sarah Anne Aarup, “‘Hunting rifles’ — really? China ships assault weapons and body armor to Russia,” Politico Europe, March 16, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/chinese-companies-are-shipping-rifles-body-armor-to-russia/>.

<sup>3</sup> Dmitri Simes, “Russia up in arms over Chinese theft of military technology,” Nikkei Asia, December 20, 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Russia-up-in-arms-over-Chinese-theft-of-military-technology>.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, “Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership,” Center for a New American Security, January 2021.

<sup>5</sup> China’s Xi tells Putin of ‘changes not seen for 100 years’, Al Jazeera, March 22, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/22/xi-tells-putin-of-changes-not-seen-for-100>.

<sup>6</sup> David Shullman, “China’s Enduring Partnership with Russia,” Center for a New American Security discussion paper, February 2, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Shullman, “China’s Enduring Partnership with Russia.”

<sup>8</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Erica Frantz, and Joseph Wright, “The New Dictators: Why Personalism Rules,” Foreign Affairs, September 26, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/new-dictators>.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Berger, “Russia now looking to sell its prized rocket engines to China,” Ars Technica, January 18, 2018, <https://arstechnica.com/science/2018/01/russia-now-looking-to-sell-its-prized-rocket-engines-to-china/>; and Simes, “Russia up in arms over Chinese theft of military technology.”

<sup>10</sup> Michael Kofman, “Chinese-Russian Defense Cooperation in Perspective,” Center for a New American Security discussion paper, February 21, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Kofman, “Chinese-Russian Defense Cooperation in Perspective.”

<sup>12</sup> Kofman, “Chinese-Russian Defense Cooperation in Perspective.”

<sup>13</sup> Carien du Plessis, “South Africa’s naval exercise with Russia, China raises Western alarm,” Reuters, February 18, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/south-africas-naval-exercise-with-russia-china-raises-western-alarm-2023-02-17/>; and Dion Nissenbaum and Chun Han Wong, “China, Russia, Iran Hold Joint Military Drills in Gulf of Oman,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 15, 2023, [https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-russia-iran-hold-joint-military-drills-in-gulf-of-oman-aba5f55e?mod=world\\_lead\\_pos2](https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-russia-iran-hold-joint-military-drills-in-gulf-of-oman-aba5f55e?mod=world_lead_pos2).

<sup>14</sup> Sebastien Roblin, “Venezuela Borrowed \$10 Billion from Russia to Pay for Jet Fighters and Tanks. It Can’t Pay It Back,” *The National Interest*, July 27, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/venezuela-borrowed-10-billion-russia-pay-jet-fighters-and-tanks-it-cant-pay-it-back-69467>; and Julian E. Barnes, “Russia is Buying North Korean Artillery, According to U.S. Intelligence,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/05/us/politics/russia-north-korea-artillery.html>.

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<sup>17</sup> Oriana Skylar Mastro, “Posing Problems Without Shacking Up: An Assessment of Sino-Russian Alignment,” Center for a New American Security discussion paper, January 8, 2023.