

CHINA AND RUSSIA'S SECURITY COOPERATION ON ARMS EXPORTS TO THE US' GLOBAL HEGEMONY¹

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyse China and Russia's relationship in terms of arms exports between both countries and its implications for the United States (US) using a qualitative method and the conceptual framework of Neorealism: hegemony and security cooperation. China and Russia are two great powers that have maintained close diplomatic ties since the Cold War Era. Both China and Russia cooperate in various sectors, including security. Since the collapse of the SU (USSR), which marked the establishment of post-Cold War Russia, the country has become a major arms exporter to China. This close relationship has dynamically developed in the last few decades. China-Russia security cooperation has been assessed as a security challenge for the US. The security cooperation between China, the new rival for the US since its rising, and Russia, the US' former superpower rival in the Cold War era, is interpreted as a threat for the US domination in the Asia-Pacific. However, this paper concludes that while China and Russia have a close relationship, China can surpass Russia's military technology. That is why, although these countries relationships are close and Russia does not see China as its primary threat, this does not mean that Russia will let its guard down in facing China's development. There is a tri-polar power balance between these countries and with the US. The main worry is if two actors get too close with each other, leaving the remaining state isolated. Regardless of the global power equilibrium trajectory, China and Russia will more likely become closer than with the US.

Keywords: arms exports, security cooperation, hegemony, balance of power.

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning, between the 1950s and the late 1980s, the relationship between China and the Soviet Union (SU) experienced quite striking fluctuations and changes. Since the Russian Federation was still within the scope of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the two countries more often than not had an noteworthy relationship.⁵ But after a period of cooperation, tensions emerged, leading to competition in border areas and, more generally, for power to lead the communist world during the Cold War era. They become strategic allies in the 1950s as "brothers in arms" until the 1960s, when

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⁵ Mark Lanteigne, *Chinese Policy: An Introduction* (4th edition), (London, Routledge, 2020), 12.

they began competing. One incident that drew attention was the border conflict in March 1969 near Damansky Island (Zhenbao) and the Ussuri River (Wusuli). However, entering the period 1985 to 1991, the relationship between the two seemed to change, especially during the collapse of the SU. Previously, the USSR already had the intention to normalize the relationship with China as was indicated by the speeches of Secretary General Leonid Brezhnev at the Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR in 1981 and 1982. The two parties signed the Intergovernmental Agreement on Economic Cooperation in 1984, and the SU withdrew some of its troops from Mongolia to the Chinese border. The relations between the two countries continued until President Mikhail Gorbachev's visit in 1989 where he ended 30 years of open bilateral confrontation. Since then, relations between the two countries have continued to undergo intensive adjustment and improvement, especially since the 1996 meeting between Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin, in which the two countries officially formed a strategic partnership.⁶

China and Russia are two great powers with significant roles in the Asia-Pacific. Both countries share ideological similarities and are geographically close. However, it is not the only reason China and Russia maintain close diplomatic ties. Both countries also have similar views about global domination of Western countries—with its principle of democratization.⁷ This close relationship enables both countries to cooperate in various sectors, including security. By the end of the twentieth century, after the Cold War, since the Russian state was first established, Russia became a major Chinese arms exporter. Aside from complementary economic and security goals, China and Russia's security cooperation has also been strengthened by a common interest in opposing their biggest rival, the United States (US), as the sole hegemon of the post-Cold War era.⁸

China and Russia have made no secret of their increased cooperation, especially given the deteriorating relations with the US; the regime of international sanctions against Russia, threats of the US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, and the US-China trade. America, from the the last century has wanted to build cooperative and productive relations with Moscow and Beijing, a development described as "triangular diplomacy".⁹ The leaders of Russia and China have always maintained a mixture of suspicion and hatred of American policies that asserts Washington's dominance and their subjugation. In 2008, Moscow and Beijing publicly challenged the US in Eastern Europe and the South China Sea. Russian President Vladimir Putin used military and cyber weapons in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria to counter US influence. Chinese leader Hu Jintao and especially Xi Jinping have expanded China's military presence across Asia and economic resources worldwide. Through initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China now is competing to replace the dominance of the American economy, especially in the Asia Pacific.¹⁰

Challenging American power has united Russia and China. Though unequal and unstable, but the leaders of Moscow and Beijing have a common interest in challenging the US, fighting the expansion of democratic values, and exploiting the global capitalist system. The Trump administration observed the growing Sino-Russian revisionism and then decided to take a hard line. Since early 2017, the US successively abandoned many of the most important bilateral agreements with Russia and China on arms control and trade. Washington increased direct pressure on the two regimes by imposing economic sanctions, high trade tariffs, and a massive military upgrade. President Trump made personal

⁶ Artyom Lukin, "The Russia-China Entente and Its Future," *International Politics* 58, no. 3, (2021): 365.

⁷ Chris Ogden, *A Dictionary of Politics and International Relations in China*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018), 78.

⁸ Rosemary Foot, "China and the Tian'anmen Crisis of June 1989," in Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Tim Dunne, eds., *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases* (3rd edition), (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017), 341.

⁹ Jeremy Suri, "American Pressure Against "Revisionist" Russia and China," 22 November 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/american-pressure-against-revisionist-russia-and-china-21830>

¹⁰ Zhou Fangye, "The Historic Contribution of China's Reform and Opening Up to the World," in Cai Fang and Peter Nolan eds., *Routledge Handbook of the Belt and Road*, (London, Routledge, 2021), 3-8.

pleas to Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, but at the same time the weight of the US policy fell more on the side of increasing coercive pressure on Russia and China.¹¹

Since the end of the Cold War era, the US has become the only superpower to dominate the international system, including in the Asia-Pacific. However, China and Russia are intense rivals, so their security cooperation has concerned US policymakers. China is the largest economic power in the world after the US. In terms of firepower, China is the third-largest military power in the world after the US and Russia.¹² The security cooperation between a rising China and Russia creates a challenge to the US domination of the Asia-Pacific region. Thus, this paper examines China and Russia's relationship, their mutual arms trade, and the implications for the US. In the first part of this paper, the conceptual framework of Realism- hegemony and security cooperation is explored. The following section presents a brief history of Chinese and Russian relations during the post-Cold War era, China and Russia's current relationship, and the implication of this cooperation for the US. The conclusion presents predictions of China and Russia's level of security cooperation and their future relations with the US.

REALISM AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Realism is a theoretical framework that historically held a central position in studying International Relations. It is favoured by some International Relations scholars and vigorously contested by others. However, almost all scholars take it into account to explain the wide range of international interactions.¹³ Realism explains International Relations in terms of power. The concept of power is often defined as the ability to compel another actor to do what it would not otherwise have done (or not to do what it would have done).¹⁴ It is based on their tangible and intangible characteristics, such as their sizes, levels of income, and armed forces.¹⁵ Hans J. Morgenthau argued that international politics is governed by objective, universal laws based on national interests defined in terms of power.¹⁶ Nonetheless, Morgenthau's concept of national interest indicates that the world consists of many countries competing and opposing power and sustaining survival. So that all countries protect their physical, political, and cultural identities from interference by other countries. Morgenthau also focuses on what is meant by the national interest in facing the real world of power politics. The continuity of life between nations is a central element of the concept of national interest, in which other elements are formed according to circumstances.¹⁷ He reasoned that no nation had "God on its side" (a universal morality) and that all nations had to base their actions on prudence and practicality.¹⁸ As such, this concept will be used to explain about the motivation of China and Russia's relationship. Since both have their own national interests in maintaining their national security (from Western's threat), therefore cooperation has become a norm.

Realists view the international system as anarchy where there is no complete chaos or absence of structure and rules but rather the lack of a central government that can enforce rules.¹⁹ In this circumstance, the aspiration for power between state actors, wherein attempts to maintain or overthrow

¹¹ Zachary Paikin, "Great Power Rivalry and the Weakening of Collective Hegemony: Revisiting the Relationship between International Society and International Order," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34, no. 1, (2021): 28.

¹² Stephen Blank, "The Unholy Russo-Chinese Alliance," *Defence & Security Analysis* 36, no. 3, (2020): 250.

¹³ Biao Zhang, "Hans Morgenthau, Realist Theory of International leadership, and the Future of Global Order," *Chinese Political Science Review* 2, no. 4, (2020): 514-515.

¹⁴ Robert Jervis, "Realism in the Study of World Politics," *International organization* 54, no. 2, (1998): 979.

¹⁵ See also Ken Booth ed., *Realism and World Politics*, (London, Routledge, 2014).

¹⁶ John A. Vasquez, "The Enduring Contributions of Hans J. Morgenthau's "Politics Among Nation", *International Studies* 24, no. 1, (1999): 6.

¹⁷ Richard Ned Lebow, "Classical Realism," in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith eds., *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (5th edition), (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021), 60.

¹⁸ John Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Powers* (updated edition), (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 24.

¹⁹ Robert Jervis, "Realism in the Study of World Politics," (1998): 972.

the status quo, leads of necessity to a constellation called the balance of power and policies that aim to preserve it.²⁰ In his book, *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau uses the concept of equilibrium as a synonym of balance. He states,

(...) it is the purpose of all such of equilibriums to maintain the stability of system without destroying the multiplicity of the elements composing it. (...) the equilibrium must aim at preventing any element from gaining ascendancy over others. The means employed to maintain the equilibrium consist in allowing the different elements to pursue their opposing tendencies up to the point where the tendency of one is not so strong as to overcome the tendency of the others, but strong enough to prevent the others from overcoming its own.²¹

Furthermore, Joshua S. Goldstein and Jon C. Pevehouse in their book, "International Relations," state that,

The term balance of power refers to the general concept of one or more states' power being used to balance that of another state or group of states. Balance of power can refer to any ratio of power capabilities between states or alliances, or it can mean only a relatively equal ratio. Alternatively, balance of power can refer to the process by which counterbalancing coalitions have repeatedly formed in history to prevent one state from conquering an entire region.²²

In this paper, the function of the balance of power concept will explain the purpose of China and Russia cooperating when dealing with the hegemony of the US time, even though the international system is multipolarity in nature.

The concept of hegemony in this paper refers to the concept put forward by Antonio Gramsci (1971), an Italian Marxist, who explains that power is not the ability or need to force others to do what the power holder (hegemon) wants. However, it makes actors voluntarily follow the hegemon's agenda without considering other alternatives.²³ If Gramsci's hegemony is seen in a global context, power, in this case, is determined by the size and geographical position, and also internal capabilities based on economic, military and demographic elements, so that a strong state that acts as a hegemon will determine the world's political agenda and a weak state will follow the agenda.²⁴ Concerning this, International Relations scholars have proposed hegemonic stability theory. This theory states that hegemony has some similar order with a central government in the international system, such as reducing anarchy, deterring aggression, promoting free trade, and providing a hard currency as a world standard. When one state has the power to dominate the world, that state can enforce rules and norms unilaterally.²⁵ This concept explains the US' position in the international system (as a hegemon) since the end of the Cold War. The US is the only regional hegemon in modern history. When it gained independence from Britain in 1783, it was a relatively weak state whose people were largely confined to the Atlantic seaboard. To achieve the goal of regional hegemony in the Monroe Doctrine, the US

²⁰ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 1948), 125.

²¹ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 126-127.

²² Biao Zhang, "Hans Morgenthau, Realist Theory of International leadership, and the Future of Global Order," (2020): 514.

²³ Roberto Dainotto, "Gramsci's Bibliographies," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 16, no. 2, (2011): 212.

²⁴ Colin Flint, *Introduction to Geopolitics* (London, Routledge, 2006), 28-35.

²⁵ Brian Schmidt, "Hegemony: A Conceptual and Theoretical Analysis," *Dialogue of civilizations Research Institute*, 15 August 2018, <https://doc-research.org/2018/08/hegemony-conceptual-theoretical-analysis/>; Andreas Antoniadis, "From 'Theories of Hegemony' to 'Hegemony Analysis' in International Relations", (paper presented at the 49th ISA Annual Convention, San Francisco, USA, 28 March 2008), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/2709786.pdf>

pushed Europe out of the Western Hemisphere and at the end of the 19th; the US had achieved regional hegemony. In the 20th century, the US prevented other capable great power to become regional hegemon. The US entered World War I in 1917, when it looked as if Wilhelmine Germany might win the war over Europe. In 1941, the US entered World War II to thwart Japan's ambitions in Asia and Germany's ambitions in Europe. Finally, during the Cold War (1947-1991), the US prevent the SU from dominating Eurasia. Under the administration of George H. W. Bush in 1992, the US through its Defense Guidance stated that the US as the only superpower in the world and planned to maintain its position. In other words, the US will not tolerate the emergence of a new peer competitor. That same message was repeated in the *National Security Strategy* under the same administration in 2002. The US in this case focuses on the value of pre-emptive war.²⁶

SECURITY COOPERATION

The traditional concept of security with the state as the main reference has been debated extensively. The realist view of security which is seen as a "derivative of power" reduces the complex concept of security to merely a "synonym for power". This view can be considered relevant during the period of the World Wars, where states seemed to be constantly fighting for power. However, in the post-Cold War era, the concept of security has become much more diverse and complex. In his book, *People, States and Fear*, Barry Buzan points out that the concept of security is "too narrow", therefore, his aim is to offer a "broader security framework".²⁷

Buzan's approach is interesting because he looks at security from all angles from micro to macro, it also discusses the social aspects of security and how people or societies build or "secure" threats. It is traditionally included in the School of English, which can be considered a more pluralistic view of International Relations. Buzan is an independent thinker and a reformer. This allows him to broaden his existing analysis and provide his audience with a more complete understanding of the complexities of security with the ability to then apply these concepts to current issues, for example, the fight against terrorism. This constructivist approach allows the reader to find not only Buzan's reading of security, but also details of every aspect that contributes to or affects security, from individuals and society to the primary reference, which for Buzan is the state.²⁸

As Buzan points out in his article, "New Patterns of Global Security in the Twenty-first Century", the five sectors do not operate in isolation from one another. Each defines a focal point in security issues, and a way of setting priorities, but all are woven together in a strong network of relationships. This is clearly seen in his book when he examines various security sectors in relation to threats. The real threat that seems to be the most pressing concern is the military, which is capable of posing a threat to the state on several levels. Military threats can affect all components of the country. This can question the considerably basic obligation of a country to be able to protect its citizens and have a negative impact on the layers of social and individual interests. The extent and purpose of military threats can take on various levels of importance, and the fact that they involve the use of force places them in a special category in terms of security. Political threats are also a constant concern for a country. Since the state itself is a political entity, a political threat with the aim of weakening that entity can be considered as equivalent to a military threat. They can be rivalries between ideologies, or attacks on the nation itself.²⁹

²⁶ Brian Schmidt, "Theories of US Foreign Policy," in Michael Cox and Doug Stokes eds., *US Foreign Policy* (3rd edition), (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018), 7-12.

²⁷ Roberto Dainotto, "Macrosecuritisation and Security Constellations: Reconsidering Scale in Securitisation Theory *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 2, (2009): 255.

²⁸ Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 50-53.

²⁹ Ralf Emmers, "Securitization," in Allan Collins ed., *Contemporary Security Studies* (5th edition), (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019), 173-175.

Security studies are usually associated with “threats to survival”. Security means, “absence of threat”, which means the possibility of being safe from harm or a feeling of security. National security is especially important because a country determines the security conditions for itself as it is said to be the most important reference, but countries find it difficult to coexist in total peace with each other and this they seek through military force, however many threats and predictable every year. In the traditional approach, security is considered a military phenomenon because the military is said to protect its territory from threats posed by other armed forces from other countries, because “a state and its people can be in their own condition, safe in political, economic, social and environmental dimensions, but all these achievements can be undone by military failure.” Thus, military security is primarily about identifying real and viable enemies who pose a threat to its country and eliminating them either by gaining more military power or by entering into alliances or allies with other countries to have the necessary power or strength.³⁰ The international order, which is currently considered full of competition and threats, is also a reason for China and Russia to continue to augment their military might. With each other's expertise, then Russia and China decided to cooperate in terms of arms supplies. Such alliance will protect China's territory and national interests. Not surprisingly, China decided to make an alliance with Russia.

CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

The relationship between China and Russia is dynamic. During the Cold War era (1947-1991) Soviet policy in Asia-Pacific was designed not only to counter the US policy of containment, but also to compete for influence with China which had similar communist ideology.³¹ Especially in the first decade of the Cold War, both countries maintained adversarial defense relations and it continued until the late 1980s. The ties between both countries significantly improved after the collapse of the SU which led to the establishment of Russia in 1991 and the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. These events weakened the security ties between China and the Western countries and enabled Russia to become the primary weapons supplier of China.³²

During the post-Cold War era, relations between Russia and China changed from previously competing to cooperating, especially in terms of security cooperation. After the Cold War, the US with its liberal ideology and democratization became a unipolar force which dominates the international system. On the other hand, China's leaders since the reforming era have focused on maintaining a stable international environment that supports economic modernization which required Beijing to avoid a hostile relationship with the US. Yet the US seeks to subvert the Chinese political system and to contain Beijing's economic and military potential. Therefore, China now seeks to build positive relations with other powers, such as Russia to facilitate the emergence of a multipolar world and to deny the US opportunity to construct a coalition to contain China's continued rise.³³ Russia is a successor of the SU in the post-Cold War era. Although Russia has been going through a painful process of redefining its national interests and national security strategy, it already has a defense capability especially in weapons technology. Besides seeing China as a market that can provide huge benefits, Russia also sees Beijing as having the same goal of balancing the US dominance in Asia-Pacific. Russia does not see China as a major security threat at this point. In sum, good ties with China

³⁰ Alexandra Ghechiu and William C. Wohlforth, “The Future of Security Studies,” in Alexandra Ghechiu and William C. Wohlforth eds., *The Oxford Handbook of International Security*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020), 3-7.

³¹ Gilbert Rozman, “Russian Foreign Policy in Asia,” in Graeme Gill and James Young eds., *Routledge Handbook of Russian Politics and Society*, (London, Routledge, 2015), 467-468.

³² Natasha Kuhrt, “Asia-Pacific and China,” in Andrei P. Tsygankov ed., *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy*, (London, Routledge, 2018), 254-257.

³³ Philips C. Saunders, “China's Role in Asia Attractive or Assertive?” in David Shambaugh and Michael Yahuda eds., *International Relations of Asia* (2nd edition), (New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 148.

are important for Russian security and from China's perspective, strong ties with Russia help prevent closer Russian-US interactions that would isolate China.³⁴

China-Russian security cooperation continues to grow in many areas, including arms sales, defense dialogues, joint exercises, and other bilateral and multilateral activities. They have signed several arms-control and confidence-building measures agreements, expanded contacts between their national security establishments, and institutionalized their defense and regional security dialogues, military exchanges, and strategic consultations, in multiple frameworks, especially the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001 which excludes Western countries.³⁵ The SCO consist of China, Russia and the Central Asian states, such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, as its members. This organization initially targeted the internal security problems of the region. However, through the SCO, Russia and China created their own common norms that differed from Western normative preferences, such as non-interference, states sovereignty, preservation of the political status quo, territorial integrity, and states security. In this framework, the SCO became an institutional tool to pursue soft balancing policies against the US.³⁶ Besides SCO, the improvement of China-Russia cooperation can also be seen in the Treaty for Good Neighbourliness, Friendship, and Cooperation. This treaty is a China-Russia strategic cooperative partnership which was proclaimed in 1996. Both countries had signed the treaty in 2001 and ratified it in 2008. This treaty enables frequent visits between high-level leaders from both countries, growing cooperation in energy, expanding trade, Russian arms sales to China, expand people-to-people contacts, and some level of diplomatic cooperation in the Middle East and other issues. After this treaty, Chinese and Russian leaders signed more than fifty additional bilateral agreements.³⁷

CHINA-RUSSIA ARMS EXPORTS

In fact, the SU has already provided China with a wide array of military hardware during the early and mid-1950s. By the early 1960s, China-Soviet military cooperation ceased due to strategic enmity.³⁸ China's arm industries then sought the help of foreign suppliers and designers of equipment and components. In the 1970s and 1980s, specialists came primarily from Europe and the US. However, these Western experts were largely unable to enter China after the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. After that incident China began a search for alternatives. By coincidence, rather than design, Russia and China found themselves in desperate need of a market and a source of military equipment respectively.³⁹ After thirty years of hostility, normalization of relations happened when President Mikhail Gorbachev's visited to China in 1989. Military contacts were resumed, and the sales of weapons and defense technology became part of this new military relationship.⁴⁰

The first discussion on China-Russia arms sales began in June 1990 during General Liu Huaqing, Vice Chairman of the Chinese Central Military Commission's visit to Russia. This was followed by extensive and frequent dialogues between the two sides on the transfer of advanced weapon systems, despite the collapse of the SU and the domestic crisis in Russia. Since then, China-

³⁴ Marc Lanteigne, "Security, Strategy and the Former USSR: China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation," in Shaun Breslin, ed., *Handbook of China's International Relations* (London, Routledge, 2010), 166-176.

³⁵ S. M. Trush, "Russia-US-China: Motives and Risks of Russian-Chinese Military Reproachment," *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 90, no. 6, (2020): 665.

³⁶ Zachary Paikin, "Russia between East and West, and the Future of Eurasian Order," *International Politics* 58, no. 3, (2021): 321.

³⁷ Paul J. Bolt, "Sino-Russian Relations in a Changing World Order," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 4, (2014): 48.

³⁸ Alexander A. Sergounin and Sergey V. Subbotin, *Russian Arms Transfers to East Asia in the 1990s*, (Stockholm, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2000), 70

³⁹ Lora Saalman, *China-Russia Relations and Regional Dynamics from Pivots to Peripheral Diplomacy*, (Stockholm, International Peace Research Institute, 2017), 85-86.

⁴⁰ Silvana Malle, "Russia and China in the 21st Century: Moving towards Cooperative Behaviour," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 8, no. 2, (2017): 138.

Russia arms deals and defense industrial cooperation have become the focal point of China's efforts to engage Russia in a substantive military relationship and to obtain advanced military equipment and technology in order to modernize the inventory of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), enhance its air and naval capabilities, and advance its power projection in East Asia.⁴¹ The large volume of Chinese arms imports from Russia in the 1990s was also influenced by the disputes in South China Sea (SCS). China's first large orders for combat aircraft, air defense systems and naval equipment from Russia also took place after Taiwanese purchases of combat aircraft and naval equipment from the US and France in 1992.⁴²

Since the resumption of their military cooperation, Russia has become China's leading arms supplier. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) (Figure 1), during the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia's arms industry survived largely because of its exports of newly produced combat aircraft, armoured vehicles and warships to China. China was Russia's largest client between 1999 and 2006, accounting annually for 34–60 per cent of the volume of Russia's weapons export. By 2006, however, the mutually beneficial export-import relationship between Russia and China begun to shift.⁴³

China was the first country to purchase the Su-27 fourth generation heavy fighter aircrafts while some Russian allies such as India only had access to the MiG-29 fighters which are considered less sophisticated. Between 2001 and 2009, the value of military cooperation between China and Russia reached \$16 billion USD, although in 2008 the volume decreased by 18%.⁴⁴ After several years of decline, the arms trade continued its show an upward trend in the 2010s. In recent years, Moscow has sold Beijing advanced weapons such as the S-400 air defense system and Su-35 combat aircrafts, as well as helicopters and aircraft engines. In 2016 Russia and China signed contracts in the field of military-technical cooperation with a total value of about \$3 billion USD.⁴⁵ Two years later, Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu stated that 12% of Russian arms exports were sold to China. Deputy CEO of the Russian arms export agency Rosoboronexport, Alexander Scherbinin stated that the technical-military cooperation between Russia and China amounts to billions of dollars per year and is developing military technical cooperation in a new field of high technology.⁴⁶

In 2010, Russia delivered 15 additional batteries of S-300 surface-to-air missiles to China, which saw a \$2 billion USD deal signed in the mid-2000s. China has obtained about a dozen S-300 batteries from Russia under contracts signed in previous years. But the S-300 is a Soviet-era air defense system, with each battery consisting of four truck-mounted launchers holding four missile tubes each. Later Russia replaced it with the more effective S-400 (codenamed 'Triumph' by NATO). Meanwhile, the Russian defense industry is continuing to develop a more sophisticated surface-to-air missile system, the S-500, which could potentially intercept targets in space flying at hypersonic speeds of five kilometres per second. Moscow has many alternate clients if China stops purchases (Table 1). According to SIPRI data, Russia is the second largest exporter of conventional weapons in the world, after the US. The Asia-Pacific region is Russia's main weapons destination, accounting for more than

⁴¹ Vladimir Kolsov and Maria Zotova, "The 'Pivot to the East' and China in Russian Discourse," *Geopolitics* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1952184>

⁴² Linda Jakobson, Paul Holtom, Dean Knox and Jingchao Peng, *China's Energy and Security Relations with Russia*, (Stockholm, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2011), 16-17.

⁴³ Jeanne L. Wilson, "Russia's Relationship with China: The Role of Domestic and Ideational Factors," *International Politics* 56, no. 6, (2019): 778-779.

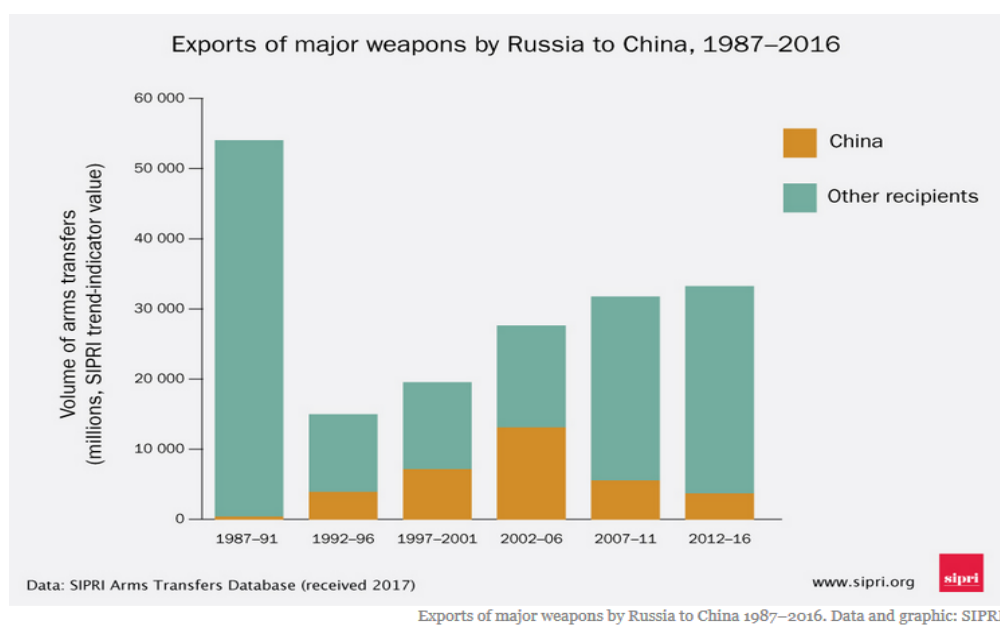
⁴⁴ Maria Mary Papageorgiu and Alena Vieira, "Mapping the Literature on China and Russia in IR and Area Studies: A Bibliometric Analysis," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 26, no. 4, (2021): 1-6.

⁴⁵ Maria Mary Papageorgiu and Alena Vieira, "A Friend in Need? The Sino-Russian Relationship Under the Coronavirus Crisis in Twitter: A Russia Perspective," *East Asia* 38, (2021): 225-227.

⁴⁶ Andrea Passeri and Antonio Fiori, "Beyond the 'Win-Win Rhetoric Drivers and Limits of the Sino-Russia Partnership,'" *Interdisciplinary Political Studies* 5, no. 2, (2019): 445.

two-thirds of Russia's defense exports during the 2005-2009 period. Warplanes are Russia's best export item, accounting for 40 percent of Russia's global sales.⁴⁷

Figure 1. Export of Major Weapon by Russia to China (1987-2016)⁴⁸



Russia views its military exports as a primary means of achieving its national security interests. The arms trade is an integral part of its image as a world power, a vital part of its relations with other nations, a central element in its defense and security treaties, and a critical component of its ability to gain and maintain access to influence and resources in a region of interest. Russia seeks to maintain and expand its status as a world power and views its focused and targeted exports of military technology to key countries as a fundamental means of achieving this.⁴⁹ Russia has two main concerns with China. First, the Russian government sees China's rapid rise and suspects China will eventually take on the Russian Far East. There was also an increase in the capabilities of the People's Liberation Army which had increased in recent decades. Second, Russia chose to sell more sophisticated weaponry to China than India. At first Russia sold it equally between China and India. As previously mentioned, Rosoboron export is negotiating with China for the sale of the Su-35, which is the most advanced version of the Russian Su-27, and far more advanced than the Su-30MKI that Russia is selling to India.

Russia is selling its Amur (Lada) class attack submarines to China, which are a more sophisticated and quieter version of the Indian Navy's 8 Kilo-class submarines. In addition, Russia is selling more sophisticated and high-performance jet engines to China than to India. Thus, Russia has changed its military export practices with China for several reasons. One, of course, Russia is trying to improve and support the independence of its defense industry by increasing sales to China.

⁴⁷ Richard Weitz, "Why China Snubs Russia Arms," *The Diplomat*, 24 November 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2010/04/why-china-snubs-russian-arms/>

⁴⁸ Siemon T. Wzeman, "China, Russia and the Shifting Landscape of Arms Sales," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)*, 5 July 2017, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2017/china-russia-and-shifting-landscape-arms-sales>

⁴⁹ Stephen Blank and Edward Levitzky, "Geostrategic Aims of the Russian Arms Trade in East Asia and the Middle East," *Defence Studies* 15, no. 1, (2015): 63-64,

Table 1. The 40 Largest Importers of Major Arms and their Main Suppliers, 2016-2020⁵⁰

Importer	Share of arms imports (%)		Per cent change from 2011-15 to 2016-20 ²	Main suppliers (share of importer's total imports, %), 2016-20		
	2016-20	2011-15		1st	2nd	3rd
1 Saudi Arabia	11	7.1	61	USA (79)	UK (9.3)	France (4.0)
2 India	9.5	14	-33	Russia (49)	France (18)	Israel (13)
3 Egypt	5.8	2.4	136	Russia (41)	France (28)	USA (8.7)
4 Australia	5.1	3.6	41	USA (69)	Spain (21)	Switzerland (3.4)
5 China	4.7	4.4	5.5	Russia (77)	France (9.7)	Ukraine (6.3)
6 Algeria	4.3	2.6	64	Russia (69)	Germany (12)	China (9.9)
7 South Korea	4.3	2.7	57	USA (58)	Germany (31)	Spain (6.5)
8 Qatar	3.8	0.8	361	USA (47)	France (38)	Germany (7.5)
9 UAE	3.0	4.7	-37	USA (64)	France (10)	Russia (4.7)
10 Pakistan	2.7	3.4	-23	China (74)	Russia (6.6)	Italy (5.9)
11 Iraq	2.5	2.5	-0.6	USA (41)	Russia (34)	South Korea (12)
12 Japan	2.2	1.0	124	USA (97)	UK (2.1)	Sweden (1.0)
13 United States	2.1	2.9	-30	UK (22)	Germany (14)	Netherlands (14)
14 United Kingdom	2.1	1.5	41	USA (72)	Spain (18)	Germany (4.0)
15 Israel	1.9	1.2	65	USA (92)	Germany (5.9)	Italy (2.3)
16 Viet Nam	1.8	3.0	-41	Russia (66)	Israel (19)	Belarus/South Korea (4.8)
17 Singapore	1.7	1.8	-9.0	USA (36)	Spain (25)	France (17)
18 Indonesia	1.7	2.0	-18	USA (23)	Netherlands (19)	South Korea (17)
19 Italy	1.5	0.7	120	USA (62)	Germany (26)	Italy (5.9)
20 Turkey	1.5	3.6	-59	USA (29)	Italy (27)	Spain (21)
21 Norway	1.3	0.7	93	USA (79)	South Korea (12)	Italy (3.3)
22 Bangladesh	1.2	1.3	-3.6	China (71)	Russia (16)	UK (4.1)
23 Thailand	1.2	0.8	44	South Korea (26)	China (22)	Ukraine (12)
24 Oman	1.2	1.0	12	UK (47)	USA (14)	Turkey (12)
25 Afghanistan	1.0	1.3	-24	USA (89)	Brazil (8.2)	Belarus (1.0)
26 Netherlands	1.0	0.6	52	USA (90)	Germany (6.8)	Italy (2.0)
27 Kazakhstan	1.0	0.6	62	Russia (89)	Spain (3.6)	China (2.4)
28 Jordan	0.9	0.6	38	USA (36)	Netherlands (22)	UAE (11)
29 Morocco	0.9	2.1	-60	USA (90)	France (9.2)	UK (0.3)
30 Canada	0.8	1.0	-24	USA (48)	Australia (14)	Israel (12)
31 Philippines	0.8	0.2	229	South Korea (42)	Indonesia (17)	USA (17)
32 Azerbaijan	0.7	1.6	-56	Israel (69)	Russia (17)	Belarus (4.8)
33 Myanmar	0.7	1.2	-40	China (48)	India (16)	Russia (15)
34 Taiwan	0.6	2.0	-70	USA (100)	-	-
35 Mexico	0.6	0.7	-14	USA (49)	Netherlands (34)	France (10)
36 Poland	0.6	0.6	-12	USA (33)	Italy (13)	South Korea (11)
37 Brazil	0.6	0.9	-38	France (23)	USA (21)	UK (20)
38 Belarus	0.5	0.3	93	Russia (99)	China (0.5)	-
39 Angola	0.5	0.1	843	Russia (64)	China (9.7)	Lithuania (8.1)
40 Malaysia	0.5	0.2	114	Spain (32)	Turkey (17)	South Korea (11)

However, it is also because Russia knows it must now maintain friendly relations with China. Due to China's increasing military and economic power, and the relatively weak Russian economy and tensions with the West during the Ukraine Crisis, Russia believes that China is the only global partner that will challenge the US. The sale of advanced weapons helps to ensure this. Or as Putin puts it, military-technical cooperation with China is a factor in ensuring global strategic stability.⁵¹

CONTEMPORARY CHINA AND RUSSIA COOPERATION

Since the last two decades of the twentieth century and specifically in the beginning of the twenty first century, China has emerged as a great power with a rising economic. In terms of economy, China has shifted substantially toward a market economy. However, Chinese government continues to follow Marxist political line which provides central control by the Communist party, where the state controls

⁵⁰ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 2021

⁵¹ Silvana Malle, "Russia and China in the 21st Century: Moving towards Cooperative Behaviour," (2017): 138.

major industries. This transition has dramatically increased China's economic growth.⁵² The economy now is able to support the modernization of China's military force. According to China Defense White Paper, China's military security under Xi Jinping's administration is confronted by risks from technology surprise and growing technological generation gap with other countries. China needs to strengthen its national defense and military to provide security guarantee for its peaceful development. That is why, greater efforts is being invested in military modernization to meet national security demands.⁵³

China's military modernization enabled it to become a major player in the global arms trade. For years, Beijing imported several times more conventional weapons than it sold overseas, but for most of the last decade, China has been a net arms exporter. Between 2008 and 2018, China exported some \$15.7 billion USD worth of conventional weapons across the globe— especially to Asian, Latin American and African countries—making it the 5th largest arms supplier behind the US, Russia, Germany, and France.⁵⁴ According to Global Firepower, today China is the third military power in the world after the US and Russia is in the second place.⁵⁵ Although Russia is still a major exporter to the Chinese, after 2006, the number of arms exports has been decreasing lately. This trend reflects China's growing capability to produce its own weapons, which in many cases has been supported by the successful reverse engineering of existing technology.⁵⁶

The security cooperation in arms exports between China under the administration of Xi Jinping and Russia under Vladimir Putin remains well established to this day. Xi Jinping has described Vladimir Putin as his "best friend" during a visit to Moscow.⁵⁷ Although relations between both countries are fairly close, China's growing military power could create a dilemma for Russia. On one hand, Russia needs China as a market to sell its weapons. On other hand, if China wants more sophisticated weapons, it might decisively affect the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region (by alienating the US), as well as the balance of power between China and Russia itself.⁵⁸ When it comes to the arms trade, China has not only learned from Russia, but succeeded in challenging it. Given its financial and defense industrial base, China is likely to have more chances to develop new military technologies than Russia. China's electronics, composites, advanced materials and shipbuilding industries are all more advanced than those in Russia. The size of the Chinese economy means that it has many more resources and much more manpower to invest in research and development. Thus, it is more than likely that China's military technology will surpass that of Russia on all levels very soon.⁵⁹

During the first meeting of the Commission on Military Technology Cooperation, officials said Russia would look at the overall situation and prospects for military technology cooperation with foreign countries, with traditional partners, and with new partners as well, with the aim of expanding Russia's presence in the global military weapons and equipment market. This means expanding the number of countries to export, and expanding the range of goods and services on offer. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Russia is the world's second largest arms exporter with 24 percent of the global market. The US is in first place with 30 percent. This is followed by Germany with 9 percent, France with 8 percent, and Britain with 4 percent. In other words,

⁵² Willy Wo-Lap Lam, "The Agenda of Xi Jinping in the Chinese Communist Party: Capable of Through Reform?" in Willy Wo-Lap Lam ed., *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Communist Party*, (London, Routledge, 2018), 3-24.

⁵³ Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, "China's National Defense in the New Era," 13 December 2019, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2019-07/24/content_4846452.htm

⁵⁴ Center for Strategies & International Studies (CSIS), "How dominant is China in the global arms trade?," 10 December 2019, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-global-arms-trade/>

⁵⁵ *Global Fire Power*, "2021 Military Strength Ranking," 25 November 2021, <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php>

⁵⁶ S. M. Trush, "Russia-US-China: Motives and Risks of Russian-Chinese Military Reproachment," (2020): 665.

⁵⁷ *BBC News*, "China's Xi Praises 'Best Friend' Putin During Russia Visit," 14 December 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48537663>

⁵⁸ Jeanne L. Wilson, "Russia's Relationship with China: The Role of Domestic and Ideational Factors," (2019): 778.

⁵⁹ Paul J. Bolt, *Sino-Russian Relations in a Changing World Order*, (2014): 50.

Russia is still in a strong position. Russia has a time-tested reputation as a high-end manufacturer of the most advanced military hardware.

Since the 1970s, Russia has been India's largest arms supplier but in recent decades, India and Russia are experiencing some problems in their strategic relationship. This includes India buying arms from the US. Another major problem is the intense sales of Russian arms to China. Last August, the Russian news agency Sputnik quoted an official as saying Russia was designing a 'non-nuclear' submarine with China. Viktor Kladov, Director of International Cooperation and Regional Policy said that Russia is currently working with China on a joint project of a new generation of non-nuclear submarines as well as on weapons for land, air and sea use. Russia has also made progress in assisting the development of a missile attack warning system that monitors and provides early warning of enemy nuclear missile launches using long-range radars, satellites and other sensors. Despite considerable progress in the development of most of its land, air and sea weaponry, China continues to buy weapons from Russia. From the mid-1990s, China had purchased up to 12 conventional 'Kilo' class submarines from Russia. Despite fears that China is stealing Russian technology, Moscow continues to export weapons to Beijing. China is the first export buyer of Su-35 fighters and S-400 air defense systems. However, the overall value of Russian arms sales to China has declined. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Russian arms sales to China averaged \$2.6 billion USD during the 2000s, peaking at \$3.2 billion USD in 2005. This figure fell significantly, averaging \$816 million USD between in 2010 and 2018. As a result, China's share of Russian arms exports has decreased from 47.7 percent of total sales in 2006 to 13.7 percent in 2018.⁶⁰

Apart from the cooperation that is being undertaken, there are several problems that are increasingly colouring the relationship between the two countries. First, the 160th anniversary of Vladivostok is seen as an insult to China, as it was part of China which was annexed by the Russian Empire in 1860 after it lost the Second Opium War. Second, Russia signed an arms deal with India shortly after New Delhi and Beijing entered into a military confrontation along the disputed border in the Himalayas. Meanwhile, China is still awaiting delivery of the S-400 anti-aircraft missile system, which was initially "delayed" due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic but was later labelled "suspended" by Moscow. However, India reckons that Russia will join the US-led Indo-Pacific grouping. This would be considered a betrayal to China. That Russia might be looking for a way out is not surprising. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated problems Moscow. Russia has often been depicted as slowly being eaten by its economically superior ally. Moscow recognizes that China is more of a threat than an ally.⁶¹

IMPLICATIONS OF CHINA AND RUSSIAN COOPERATION FOR THE US

After the Cold War which marked by the collapsed of SU, the US became the only superpower which dominate the international system. The US maintains its hegemony as a unipolar force of the world. Any kind of multipolar cooperation—including China-Russia security cooperation—is seen as a threat for the US unipolarity. In relations with the US, China-Russia cooperation is influenced by the common interest of eliminating the US unipolarity from the Asia Pacific, but this common interest has slightly different objectives due to differing views. Russia sees itself as a global power with multiple regional interests which seeks to against US power in multiple regional theatres. Russia under Putin is comfortable with very public and continual friction with the US, by contrast, China sees itself as a

⁶⁰ *The Week*, "Russia Working with China to Design Submarine, Missile Defence System," 25 August 2020, <https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2020/08/25/russia-working-with-china-to-design-submarine-missile-defence-system.html>

⁶¹ Stanislaw Skarzynski and Daniel Wong, "Is Putin's Russia Seeking a New Balance Between China and The West?" *The Diplomat*, 28 August 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/is-putins-russia-seeking-a-new-balance-between-china-and-the-west/>

regional power in Asia, albeit one with growing global interests.⁶² On balance, China is not yet ready to act as a global power, but it is moving in that direction. Thus, China under Xi Jinping is most focused on taking on the US in Asia.⁶³

The most dangerous scenario for the US is a grand coalition of China and Russia coming together to unite against the West. Russian President Vladimir Putin views Europe as weak and divided. Chinese President Xi Jinping believes that his country is on its way to becoming the dominant power in Asia and has a more successful political and economic model than the West. As can be seen that increasingly close strategic partnership between Russia and China is complementary. The two countries have secured the continent's nuclear power and have dominant military forces in their own territories. They believe the chaos in the West is in their favour geopolitically.⁶⁴

The relationship between China, Russia and the US also has a competitive, triangular aspect to it, with each side adapting hedging strategies. The US pivot to China is a hedging strategy rather than a containment strategy. China, similarly, is hedging against the US through its relationship with Russia. Russia hedges against both China and the West. Each state worries about the other two countries getting too close, although arguably the US is less susceptible to this worry than China or Russia.⁶⁵ Regardless of the trajectory, China and Russia will likely become even closer. When the US supports policies that Russia and China oppose or commits to policies targeted at China or Russia, it drives Beijing and Moscow closer. Additionally, broad policy incoherence or inconsistency on key issues by the US could create opportunities for China and Russia to find new and diverse ways to undermine the interests of Washington and its allies.⁶⁶

The deepening security relationship between China and Russia in recent years reflects a bilateral relationship that has moved to a higher level of cooperation since 2012, when President Xi Jinping took over and President Putin returned, claiming the presidency in Russia. According to Elizabeth Wishnick, Professor of political science at Montclair State University and a senior fellow at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University, Russia's growing bilateral relationship is rooted in a shared desire to oppose Western interferences in other countries' domestic affairs. As the Sino-Russian military-to-military relationship experiences a period of warming, there is a chance the two countries will form a new geopolitical axis or alliance that could threaten US global interests. The geographic scope of the Sino-Russian exercise agenda expanded in recent years - from the Mediterranean Sea and Sea of Japan in 2015 to the South China Sea in 2016 - along with an expanded agenda to include missile defense, reflects increasingly aligned security interests. This means that Beijing and Moscow are signalling each other's support for security priorities. As the two sides advances missile defense cooperation, the US could face a more complex strategic environment that would present further obstacles to contingencies in the Asia Pacific. Beijing and Moscow want to reduce the effectiveness of the US-led missile defense systems through advanced missile development and other coordination.⁶⁷

The US National Security Strategy Document (NSS) dated December 2017 characterizes Russia and China as "revisionist" forces. The concept of revisionism is flexible enough to accommodate various meanings that usually distinguish between states that accept the distribution of status quo power in the international system and those that seek to change it to their advantage. However, in geopolitical terms, the NSS document says, "China and Russia are challenging the US"

⁶² Ronald J. Hill, "The Putin Era," in Andrei P. Tsygankov ed., *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy*, (London, Routledge, 2018), 13-15.

⁶³ Mark Lanteigne, *Chinese Policy: An Introduction*, (2020), 45.

⁶⁴ Chris Ogden, *A Dictionary of Politics and International Relations in China*, (2018), 45.

⁶⁵ Mark Lanteigne, *Chinese Policy: An Introduction* (2020), 86.

⁶⁶ Willy Wo-Lap Lam, "The Agenda of Xi Jinping in the Chinese Communist Party: Capable of Through Reform?" (2018), 21-22.

⁶⁷ Ethan Meick, "China-Russia Military-to-Military Relations: Moving Toward a Higher Level of Cooperation," *US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 26 November 2020, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China-Russia%20Mil-Mil%20Relations%20Moving%20Toward%20Higher%20Level%20of%20Cooperation.pdf>.

power, influence and interests, trying to erode Washington's security and prosperity. China and Russia want to shape a world against the US values and interests. China is trying to displace the US in the Asia Pacific region and Russia aims to weaken the US' influence in the world. Russia is investing in new military capabilities, including a nuclear system that remains the most significant existential threat to the US. The developing strategic partnership has brought comprehensive benefits to both countries and has become a strategic asset together. While strengthening their respective status in the international arena and providing basic support for the diplomacy of the two countries, the Russia-China alliance does not intend to confront the US militarily head on. The US cannot destroy the alliance unless it defeats China and Russia simultaneously.⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

China and Russia have maintained close diplomatic ties for decades, but especially during the post-Cold War era. In this period, China and Russia have cooperated in many sectors including security. Since the late twentieth century, Russia has become China's major source of arms although the volume of the arms export since the early 2000s. The cooperation was fuelled by their mutual desire to enhance their level of multilateral cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region and to prevent Western domination of the Asia-Pacific region, especially US hegemony.

Even if both China and Russia have close relations, it does not mean that they do not face any problems in their relationship. Backed by the world's largest economy, China has modernized its military force by importing lots of weapons from other countries, especially Russia, bringing economic benefits to Russia. However, the risks are real for Russia, as China challenges the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region which threatens Russia itself. China now has the potency to surpass Russia's military technology. That is why, Russia has to be cautious in dealing with a rising China.

Regarding the US, China and Russia cooperation can create a new threat for the US' hegemony. The US, as the sole hegemon in the Asia-Pacific, of course does not want its position to be replaced by its rivals. The relationship between these three countries is competitive, with each adapting hedging strategies towards the others. Each state worries about the other two getting too close to each other. However, regardless of the trajectory of the relationship, China and Russia will likely remain close by alienating the US. Given the complex relations between these three countries and ever shifting geopolitics, in the future, there is always a possibility that the relationship between China and Russia will change, with important ramifications for the US. If China's economic growth keeps increasing into the future, it will be able to rapidly develop its military technology. One day, Russia may no longer be a major arms exporter. In the future, at the same time, Russia may establish cooperative relations with the US to limit China's military development. But this eventuality is unlikely due to the long history of conflict of ideology between the US and Russia since the Cold War.

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⁶⁸ *Global Times*, "China-Russia Military Cooperation Road Map Can Cool Down Hot Heads in US: Scholars," 24 November 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1239846.shtml>

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