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BEYOND THE AXIS OF CONVENIENCE: REASSESSING THE DURABILITY OF SINO-RUSSIAN ALIGNMENT

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Abstract

This study examines the Sino-Russian strategic partnership as a case of alignment rather than alliance, and assesses its implications for United States foreign policy. Applying Glenn Snyder's conceptual distinction between alignment and alliance, the study analyses four dimensions of the relationship: its institutional and governance convergence, its economic asymmetry, the divergent ways Moscow and Beijing each understand the partnership, and its structural limitations. Drawing on official bilateral documents, summit declarations, trade and arms transfer data, and secondary scholarship through 2026, the study finds that the partnership has deepened into a durable but structurally unequal alignment. Recent developments, including record bilateral trade, near-complete de-dollarisation of bilateral settlement, and expanded cooperation in advanced technology, indicate continued institutionalisation rather than the tactical convenience often assumed in earlier literature. The study concludes that the alignment is unlikely to be disaggregated by United States policy, and that Washington's strategic planning should proceed on the assumption of sustained rather than transient Sino-Russian coordination.

Introduction

The end of Cold War brought both Russia and China together who now enjoy a stable and Pragmatic foreign relation for more than 25 years or so. This substantial convergence for more than two decades is in the sharp contrast to their turbulent and profoundly uncertain relationship the both countries shared during Cold War. The early 1990s saw the period of stabilization of relations between Russia and China which more than anything else, are now based on accommodation of each other's interest tactically, keeping in mind the requirements of changing geo-political landscape of the world. Both Russia and china claim that they enjoy sustainable relationship based on multifaceted cooperation on different levels which wasn't the case in the past. This convergence is given the name of "axis of Convenience" by author Bobo Lo in his book. The cooperation between Russia and China has always been a complicated affair given their historical distrust and competing interests in the region. Despite their extreme geo-political rivalry and breaking up of relations due to doctrinal

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divergence during 1960s, both countries managed to forge a lose alliance based on flexible and opportunistic arrangements. This is evident through the treaty of “Good neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation” signed by both the countries in 2001. Their sporadic convergence then converted into “Comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination.” This strategic partnership was also observed when first official visit president Xi Jinping made was to Russia after taking office in 2013. This move signified the unique partnership that Russia and China have been trying to consolidate and a new type of power relation that has been emerging in the world since then.

The strategic partnership that Russia and China succeeded in forging indicated that geo-politics had made a comeback onto the political landscape of the world in the 21st century. This new kind of geo-politics required both countries to avoid creating a formal alliance of NATO sort. Instead the partnership was based on strategic arrangements to safeguard mutual interests. Such alignment of interests and geopolitics of economic, energy and defense cooperation have posed serious challenge to United States of America and its interests.

There are certain factors that have driven Russia and China towards strategic partnership. These factors include counterbalancing U.S. influence in the region and also at global level, creating a strategic culture that could revise the international power dynamics and consolidating close bilateral cooperation against U.S interests in terms of economy and military power. Their shared interests and concerns about US national interests provide a strong basis for this close cooperation. In other words the Sino-Russian alignment has evolved into a "quasi-alliance" that analysts describe as the greatest threat to U.S. national interests in sixty years.

The U.S. National Security Strategy evolved from 2018 to 2026, shifting from viewing China and Russia as unified "revisionist powers" to adopting a more transactional "America First" approach focusing on domestic and economic sovereignty. The 2017 NSS labeled both as "revisionist powers," while the 2022 NSS described China as the "pacing challenge" and Russia as an "acute threat"; the 2025 NSS and 2026 NDS frame China as an economic competitor and downgrade Russia to a European responsibility. However, together Russia and China poses a multifaceted challenge to the United States primarily by seeking to replace it as the leading global actor and eroding its influence across multiple regions.

This emerging world scenario gives rise to questions this study will address subsequently. These questions are:

- Is Russia and China relationship durable?
- How china and Russia view Sino-Russian alignment individually?
- What are the limitations of this strategic partnership?
- What are the implications for US?

The purpose of this study is to analyze the facets of Sino-Russian relationship and their implications on US. This study will also shed light on incentives both Russia and China will accumulate through convergence on areas such as economy, military and energy. The international relation scholars are of the opinion that the incentives for both countries would be robust. But in terms of cost and benefit analysis china will have an upper hand as the costs for china will remain low. Whereas, US cannot do much to limit the implications these relations will have for US interests. This study will also analyze the trajectory of Sino-US relations under trump administration. Some scholars believe that due to incoherent policies of Trump Beijing and Moscow will likely to grow further despite their reservations for each other.

The study will also analyze whether the current convergence between two regional powers is just a marriage of convenience or they have deeply rooted strategic partnership where divergence would cost both countries greatly.

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This study advances a specific argument in response to this question. It contends that the dominant characterisation of Sino-Russian relations as an axis of convenience, influential since Bobo Lo's formulation and still widely reproduced in policy analysis, no longer adequately describes the relationship and now actively misleads policy. The axis of convenience thesis holds that cooperation between Moscow and Beijing is tactical, shallow, and contingent on a shared irritation with Washington, and that it will therefore weaken as circumstances change or as the asymmetry between the two partners becomes intolerable to Russia. This study argues the opposite on each count. The relationship has become institutionally embedded rather than tactical, its asymmetry stabilises rather than destabilises the alignment, and its documented frictions are managed rather than mounting. The corollary for policy is direct: strategies premised on the eventual disaggregation of the partnership, including recurrent proposals to court Moscow away from Beijing, rest on an empirical assumption this study finds unsupported.

Conceptual Framework: Alignment and Alliance

The relative sustainability of the growing partnership between Russia and China is probably the billion-dollar question in this trajectory of foreign relations. The purpose of providing theoretical framework to Sino-Russia relationship is to examine the level to which their strategic cooperation and policy convergence have become institutionalized. Since, there exist many complex and self-augmenting bilateral and multilateral agreements between these two countries. In the post-cold war international system, this close cooperation of Russia and China has grabbed world attention. Especially, because it has relegated US importance in world politics. There may not exists the conventional form of alliance, but there are clear signs of substantial alignment occurred between these two countries in the last 10 years.

The strategic partnership between Russia and China has created a new kind of bilateral model for state cooperation. This form of bilateral cooperation requires a definitional precision that could set some parameters for state-to-state alignment. In order to prevent misapplication of the term "alignment" there need to apply some conceptual framework in order to analyze strategic partnerships in International relations.

Alignment as a concept has been defined by Glenn H. Synder. He refers it as "expectations of states about whether they will be supported or opposed by other states in future interactions". According to Wilkins the main aim of alignment in any bilateral relation between two countries is upgradation of relations from regular channels to an intensified condition. Alignment constitutes a pattern for two or more states to behave in such a way which align their common interests and forge a commitment for policy coordination in certain areas for mutual benefits. This cooperative relationship based on commitment should be institutionalized. Such kind of bilateral cooperative relationship is different from formal military alliance such as NATO as it doesn't seek to clearly express mutual security and defense guarantees. Alignments may seek to include the element of mutual security, but it is not compulsory as in the case of alliance.

Alignment was previously thought as a concept that could interchangeably use for alliance as well. The reason for using alignment as synonym for alliance is that is always assumed that security cooperation is central to any bilateral relationship between two countries. But todays changing geo-political landscape require distinction between these two terminologies.

Glenn H. Snyder has tried to illustrate this distinction. According to him alignment refers to the expectations of policy makers, who are concerned, that in a bilateral or multilateral relationship between two or more states, to what extend and in what contingencies:

- Who defends whom?
- Who will support whom?

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- And who will resist whom?

He further adds that defense, support and resistance should not be limited to military security only. In an alignment these three facets should have a broad scope in terms of economic, political and energy cooperation. Alignment sees strategic partnership as something which is beyond security cooperation.

The choice of alignment rather than alliance as the governing concept is not merely terminological, and it carries a substantive analytical claim. Much of the policy literature that predicts Sino-Russian estrangement does so by implicitly measuring the relationship against the standards of formal alliance, observing the absence of mutual defence guarantees, the absence of an integrated command structure, and the absence of binding treaty obligation, and concluding from these absences that the partnership is therefore shallow. That inference does not hold. It mistakes the deliberate avoidance of alliance for the absence of commitment. Both Moscow and Beijing have stated repeatedly and consistently that they regard formal alliance as strategically undesirable, not as an aspiration they have failed to reach. Judging the relationship by a template both parties have explicitly rejected produces a systematic underestimation of what has actually been built. Snyder's framework avoids this error by directing attention to observable patterns of support, resistance, and coordination across multiple domains, rather than to the presence or absence of a single legal instrument.

Snyder further observes that alignment is broad and more fundamental concept than alliance. According to him alignment should be understood in terms of:

- Alignment against
- Alignment with

The distinction between these two types of alignment is very important according to Snyder. He argues that for middle powers like Russia and China cooperation only in the area of security is not a viable option. The negative and positive undertones of these two types of alignment give an idea regarding what kind of strategic partnership it would be.

For Snyder alliance is one of the subsets under the broad-based concept of alignment. The only purpose of alliance is to consolidate the already existing alignments by incorporating precision in legal and moral obligation and reciprocity.

The main characteristic of 21st century is that states are preferring alignments over alliances due to the prevailing trend in the international system of unconventional arrangements between states. One of the reasons for preferring alignment over alliance is that international system has become increasing fluid over the years. This fluidity has compelled states to avoid giving any kind of security assurance against any state, they don't have any direct conflict with. This was not the case during cold war where hardcore security blocs were created.

The concept of alignment suits the foreign policy thinking of China and Russia very well. Both these nations have deliberately avoided to create any form of international security bloc or alliance as they consider them obsolete and an outdated concept which could foster international divisions and can't do much for their foreign policy goals. The creation of Collective security Treaty organization (CSTO) may indicate that Russia and China are seeking to engage in a traditional security alliance but to debunk any myth of alliance, Russia went as far as declaring that it is not a member of any security alliance. Similarly, when we talk about China's perspective, it seems that China is more adamant and clearer that they would never want to be a part of any formal alliance, so and so they even have formal policy of avoiding any kind of security alliance. One of the reasons for the need of declaring their clear-cut rejections of alliance system is because it has potential to create confrontation and conflict with third parties. Both china and Russia instead of forming alliance are more comfortable in establishing multiple level of partnership of strategic nature

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which could be in convergence with their interests. This strategic partnership was declared by both China and Russia in 1996 through CSTO, epitomised the very core of the concept of alignment.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design appropriate to the analysis of an evolving bilateral relationship for which comprehensive quantitative measurement is neither available nor analytically sufficient. The central analytical task is to determine whether Sino-Russian cooperation constitutes alignment in the conceptual sense set out above, and if so, how durable and how consequential that alignment is for United States interests. This task requires interpretation of state behaviour, declaratory policy, and institutional practice rather than the testing of a discrete hypothesis against a dataset.

The study draws on three categories of source material. The first consists of primary official documents, including bilateral treaties and joint statements issued by the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, summit declarations from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS, and successive iterations of the United States National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy. These sources establish the declared intentions and formal commitments of the parties, and permit tracing of how the stated basis of the relationship has shifted over time.

The second category consists of quantitative indicators used as corroborating evidence rather than as the object of statistical analysis. These include bilateral trade volumes and their sectoral composition, arms transfer data, currency settlement shares, and voting records in the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly. These indicators are used to test whether declaratory commitments correspond to measurable behavioural change, on the reasoning that stated alignment unsupported by material coordination would constitute rhetoric rather than alignment in Snyder's sense.

The third category consists of secondary scholarship and policy analysis from established research institutions, drawn upon both for interpretation and for competing readings of the same evidence. Where the scholarly literature diverges, as it does particularly on the question of durability, the study presents the competing positions rather than adjudicating prematurely between them.

The analysis is structured around Snyder's alignment framework, which directs attention to three questions: who defends whom, who supports whom, and who resists whom, across military, economic, political, and energy domains. Each empirical section that follows examines one dimension of the relationship against these questions. Two methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, official Russian and Chinese sources are declaratory instruments serving domestic and international audiences, and are treated here as evidence of stated position rather than of underlying intention. Second, the analysis relies on open-source material, which necessarily excludes classified dimensions of defence and intelligence cooperation that may be material to the relationship's actual depth. The findings should therefore be understood as an assessment of the observable relationship rather than a complete account of it.

Results

Institutional and Governance Convergence

Since the creation of CSTO in 1996, both countries have expanded their area of cooperation and successfully forged closer bilateral relations. China's president Xi Jinping during his first foreign visit as president in Russia expressed that China and Russia are each other's major and most important strategic partners of coordination and both countries accord priority to their bilateral relationship in their overall diplomatic agenda and foreign policy'. Same

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sentiments were expressed by Russian Prime Minister Dimitri Medvedev that both countries have never reached such high levels. Some scholars even observed that west's reaction to Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought China and Russia even closer. This intense cooperation has consequently led strategic shifts on the areas such as energy, economy, infrastructure development and R&D. Some scholars such as Gabuev even give it a name of "soft alliance" which has facets similar to the concept of alignment. But Apart from bilateral trade expansion and military outlooks, the most strategically durable result giving dimension to Sino-Russian alignment is their mutually growing impact on the institutions of global governance. Alignment between China and Russia have significantly Reconfigured the Global Governance which has in turn consolidated the alignment between these two. Throughout the period of 2018 and 2024, the cooperation between Russia and China has focused on these international institutions not altogether dismantling their existence, but by their diversification, partial circumvention, and reinterpretation.. This reflects their mutual preference to alter the existing governance order into more pluralistic global structures while remaining intact in the multilateral frameworks.

This convergence is manifested due to their cooperation in the UN systems, more importantly in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and General assembly (UNGA). If the voting behavior of China and Russia is empirically analyzed it will be identified that both show the top rates of alignment among any permanent member state, when it comes to the resolutions on the matter of sanctions, sovereignty and mediation for conflicts. The research published by Mercator Institute for China Studies analyses the voting behavior between these two countries, till 2024 Beijing has not directly voted against any UNSC resolution backed by Russia. They have dually vetoed 16 resolutions of Security Council. It is apparent that the divergence among them is not the opposition but the form of tactical abstentions, showing that this is not an automatic alignment but understood and calculated coordination.

This Governance coordination is not only confined to UN systems but has extended into the norm setting debates, which include state's sovereignty in the digital space, cyber governance and opposing stances to unilateral sanctions regimes. Both Russia and China have given joint statements at multilateral forums where they have emphasized on the principles such as state centric interpretations of the international law and non-interference policy. This will help in the governance vision that enhances policy autonomy and regime stability. These positions have been articulated in the submissions by Russia and China to the United Nations working groups on cyber governance and information security.

While engaging within these institutions which exist already China and Russia have also invested in the platform of multilateral cooperation, most importantly Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS. These institutions are expanding with time, for instance in 2024 BRICS officially included Ethiopia, Iran, Egypt and UAE, altogether representing share of substantial global GDP (PPP) and energy production. The BRICS calls for a reform in global financial governance, including greater representation of emerging economies in the World Bank and IMF. There are 154 bilateral Sino-Russian agreements and 54 agreements and declarations signed under the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

BRICS as compared to any formal alliance acts differently, in-fact its institutional maturation and essentially through the New Development Bank (NDB), represents how Russia and China look forward to take rhetorical oppositions aside and operationalize different governance options. The Bank's increasing financing through the local currency aligns with the Sino-Russian efforts to lower reliance on the system dominated by the

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dollar. This practice accelerated after 2022 and continues through the years.

In addition there has been bilateral intensification of coordination for financial governance. There has been growing issuance of Yuan dominated bonds by the Russian financial institutions and expansion of cross border settlement mechanism (the first Yuan bond was issues by the Russian aluminium giant RUSAL in August 2022) this depicts sanction adaptation and in longer term to institutionalize currency diversification. Bank of International Settlements analyzes that in Russian external trade settlements there is growing role of renminibi and particularly in the energy transactions.

Another strategic pillar shaping global norms is the Energy governance. Power of Siberia pipeline system is a project of long term infrastructure and talks on Power of Siberia 2 are not just commercial ventures but these are the aspects which can shape the pricing benchmarks, energy security calculations and market governance throughout the Europe and Asia. International Energy Agency has documented that redirection of Russian energy exports from Europe towards Asia by 2026 will change dynamics of global supply chain.

It is important to note that governance convergence doesn't mean that there is any uniformity or there are no constraints. Many studies show structural imbalances among the partnerships, specifically discussing Russia's growing dependence on Chinese markets and financing and China's greater economic leverage. It is published in International Affairs that even the cooperation is being institutionalized; it still remains interest driven and selective. Both sides safeguard their strategic autonomy.

Speaking of Arctic governance this type of institutionalization is very evident. For example Russia and China coordinate in infrastructure and shipping initiative in the routes of the northern sea. Russia has remained thoughtful of internationalizing the arctic governance. This depicts limitation and trust deficit but not similar strategic priorities.

Altogether there governance related developments suggest that the Russian and China alignment doesn't not wholly work as the revisionist bloc but as a system shaping partnership. It does it so by coordinating with the existing institutions, reinforcing the alternatives of these institutions, and embedding long term interdependencies with the help of development mechanism, finance and energy. China and Russia are increasingly influencing how the global governance shall operate rather than altogether challenging its existence directly.

These governance trends seen among these powers show the trends that are significant these can not only disrupt established institutions but these can also alter the course of action in the environment in which power is being exercised. The combined effect of parallel governance platforms, institutional coordination, and long term economic interdependencies creates incentives and constraints that are navigated by other major actors. It is essential to understand this governance architecture which is evolving to assess the broader strategic implications of the alignment between Russia and China, particularly terming in institutional resilience, recalibration of influence and through normative competition within the international system

The impact of Sino-Russia alignment would be long-lasting on the geo-political landscape of the world given the importance of their geographical location, emergence of China as an economic and military power, and Russia's historical background as superpower, its nuclear arsenal and sphere of influence within former Soviet Union states. The interdependence of china and Russia in the areas of defence and energy cooperation has deepened the ties to an extent of being their partnership labelled as alignment. This kind of interdependence raises a question on the durability of their relationship that how long would their cooperation would go?

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Developments through 2026 have reinforced rather than qualified this assessment. President Putin undertook a state visit to China in May 2026, followed by a second meeting with President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation heads of state summit in Bishkek on 31 August 2026, at which both leaders characterised the trajectory of the relationship as directed toward higher-quality and higher-level development, and reported substantial implementation of the commitments agreed in May. Bilateral trade in the first half of 2026 reached approximately 134 billion United States dollars, a year-on-year increase of roughly 25 percent, and Russian officials publicly restated a 300 billion dollar bilateral target. The composition of that trade is also shifting. While energy shipments continue to account for the majority of Russian exports to China, non-energy sectors now constitute a substantial and growing share of total bilateral volumes, and Russian export institutions have begun targeting Chinese regional markets beyond the northern provinces that previously absorbed the overwhelming majority of Russian goods.

Three further developments bear directly on the institutionalisation argument advanced above. First, bilateral settlement has moved close to complete de-dollarisation, with the overwhelming majority of Sino-Russian trade now denominated in yuan and roubles, supported by an expanded cross-border payment mechanism operating outside the SWIFT system. Second, cooperation has extended into advanced technology domains, including announced joint work in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and semiconductor development, explicitly framed by both governments as reducing dependence on Western technology. Third, the pattern of economic cooperation has begun to decentralise, with regional governments, universities, and cross-border industrial clusters assuming roles previously held by large state-directed projects. This last development is analytically significant: alignment sustained through distributed institutional linkages is less vulnerable to leadership change or single-project failure than alignment resting on a small number of state-to-state agreements, and therefore indicates deeper structural entrenchment than the earlier phase of the relationship.

Durability and Asymmetric Interdependence

The durability of the relationship is most often questioned on the grounds of its asymmetry, and this study argues that the inference commonly drawn from that asymmetry is mistaken. The conventional expectation holds that a widening power differential will eventually generate Russian resentment sufficient to fracture the partnership. The evidence assembled below supports the premise but not the conclusion. Asymmetry is real, growing, and acknowledged on both sides. What does not follow is instability. A partnership in which one party has become structurally dependent and the other has acquired corresponding leverage is, other things being equal, harder to exit than a partnership between equals, because the dependent party bears the overwhelming share of the exit cost. Russia's constrained position does not give Moscow a motive to defect; it removes the option. The question is therefore not whether Russia is comfortable with asymmetry, which the evidence suggests it is not, but whether Russian discomfort translates into a viable alternative, which the evidence suggests it does not.

Russia and China both share communist ideology, but their common interest will determine the sustainability in their relationship. In today's time both Russia and China could only rely on each other. West and Russia are in serious disagreement over many issue and betraying China would be a colossal mistake for its geo-political and geo-strategic interests. Relationship between Russia and west has always remained complicated. Even after the collapse of USSR. They have always viewed each other with suspicion and a degree of friction always remained. Because of geographical location and

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doctrinal divergence, west has always perceived Russia to be its competitor. There has always remained clash of interests between Russia and west with its own serious implication for the region. The eastern European countries joining of the NATO increasing the military potential of this military alliance, has always perceived by Russia to be a grave threat to its national security and sovereignty. By the same token, Russia is crucial to China as a strategic partner to counterbalance US influence, providing secure energy supplies, and offering a stable, non-threatening northern border. This "no limits" partnership allows Beijing to focus on maritime challenges in the Indo-Pacific, while leveraging Russian resources and military cooperation in Central Asia to expand their influence against Western-led international orders.With such regional situation they both see each other as reliable partners. This reliability can guarantee sustainability and durability in their relationship.

China and Russia both have a similar perception of the concept of sovereignty. This is one of the many common points between two countries which can assure long term relations. Allen Carlson view sovereignty at the core of the contemporary China's overall relationship with rest of the world. The end of cold war has changed so many things in terms of power dynamics. East has gained economic strength to an extent that it can easily challenge the western interests globally.

The contemporary china has also dominated the Russia which is quite remarkable given that it has happened for the first time in modern history. During cold war the power relation between Russia and China was tilted towards Russia due to its superpower status. But now the power dynamics have changed completely as China is more economically viable than Russia. This was clearly seen during 2014 negotiations over Gas deal. China tried to exert its influence over Russia. But at the same time did not push Russia against the wall and offered quite beneficial term to it. According to analysts those terms were the best possible for Russia. China adopted a different mode of interaction with Russia. This kind of dealings paint an optimistic picture of Russia-China relations.

This implies that they should have varying dimensions upon which their relationship is to be examined. Both China and Russia are aware of the importance of intimate economic cooperation in sustaining their relationship. The relationships between Russia and China at present can only be characterized as the asymmetric interdependence, which is made by both the necessity of the economic process, and the tactic of strategic foresight of the countries, as well as the shared lack of resources in the region, as opposed to the equal partnership. Following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia has already lost over 60 percent of its trade with the European Union and China has assumed the position of its leading trading partner, contributing about 30-35 per cent of all trade. In the case of Moscow, this shift does not denote a strategic decision but a structural imperative: sanctions, financial access, and diversification, have reduced Russia to the position of depending on China to adsorb discounted energy sales, provide essential machinery and electronics, and provide some circumvention of sanctions. The war-based economy of Russia, which is supported by military Keynesianism and high defense expenditures, is capable of surviving in the short term, in large part due to China, which insulates its international weaknesses, although the long-term stagnation threat is becoming increasingly severe.

In the case of Beijing, though, Russia is still a key contributor to the economy but not essential. The overall level of trade of China in the United States and the European Union is much higher as compared to its trade with Russia. However, the gap shows that collaboration with the West is the key to the economic growth, technological development, and foreign policy of China. Although China is advantaged by the availability of cheap Russian energy and raw materials and

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having an upper hand in controlling a weakened partner, there is no reason to compromise its extended production chains and financial relationships by engaging in a fully sanctioned economy. This asymmetry solidly positions China in the key position and is therefore able to selectively support Russia without over strategic exposure.

In addition to the economic factor, there is coherence in a common regional security calculation. Both Russia and China have involved and complicated relations with their neighbors and endure numerous fault lines in the region both Eastern Europe and Caucasus as well as the South China Sea and Taiwan. These limitations render the possibility of direct hostility between Moscow and Beijing very low, since both of them realize that the destabilization of their strategic back would have grave effects on their national interests. Therefore, the stability of the Sino-Russian relations is not based on profound economic integration and ideological solidarity, but on the coordination without exclusivity. Unless one party is compelled to make a decision between that union and its broad regional or global interests, the relations will probably remain a stable, albeit unequal, building block of Eurasian geopolitics.

Divergent National Perspectives on the Partnership

Chinese attitude towards the Sino-Russian relationship has not changed much as compared to the starting point. The transformation of this convergence to a formal military alliance is something that Beijing has never hoped to be. In its turn, China has considered the relationship to be most advantageous, as the relationship can bring about massive economic, military and diplomatic benefits. Overtime, China has slowly put a view that it prefers the increased collaboration with the Russians. Following the fall of the cold war, China was gradually perceiving the U.S. world hegemony as a threat to its national security, especially in Asia-Pacific. The U.S. advocacy of democracy and human rights was also seen in Beijing that tried to destabilize the strategic position of China. Here, China rebuilt the relationship with Russia not only to break the U.S. influence but also to gain the advantages of trade, investments and energy partnerships. The majority of the key changes in Sino-Russian relations that have taken place since 1960s can be seen as the reflection of the changing concept of national security and the international politics, as perceived by China.

The other factor that is critical in the foreign policy of China is that it considers itself a regional power whose interests extend to the world. Although Beijing tends to position the policy as peaceful development and non-interference, long-term objectives indicate the existence of a calculated intention to make it one of the world leaders. Repeatedly, President Xi Jinping has made the goal of realizing the great revival of the Chinese nation in 2049, which would lead to a restoration of a central place in the world order. China is not only responding to world events, but it is also devoted to reestablishing international governance, international norms and financial systems via plans like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Global Development and Security Initiatives. Meanwhile, China is making efforts to have a world-class military by 2049 and has already become a powerhouse in world economics, production, and technology.

The main foreign policy objectives of China seem to be the restriction of U.S. influence in the Asian region. To this end, Beijing sees Russia as an expedient ally, one that is more ready to take on the United States head-on. The other aspect of the Sino-Russian relationship would be the wish of China to dilute the U.S. economic power especially the use of U.S. dollar in the global financial system. China needs the cooperation of Russia to propel the renminbi internationalization. According to reports in the end of 2025 and early 2026, this goal is no longer in rhetoric since over 99 percent of Sino-Russian

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trade is being allegedly determined in local currencies, the primary ones being the yuan and the ruble.

With such enormous advantages, there is a low possibility that China will change its perception of the Sino-Russian relationship drastically. Russia is also another country that Beijing thinks is a key source of weapons sales and military alliances which has assisted China in building its military might and disrupt the U.S. dominance in the area. Even some Chinese scholars have termed Sino-Russian relations as the model of the new form of major power relationship. Simultaneously, Chinese analysts indicate that the size and intensity of economic collaboration is at a disadvantage in comparison with the political and strategic aspects of the relationship, which demonstrates a disproportion between discourse and economic fact.

Increasingly, there is a realization among the Chinese that the relationship has increasingly become asymmetrical in the past years. Between 2024 and 2026, there has been increased realization of China on Russian reliance on Chinese technology, trade, and investment on the part of Beijing which has built significant leverage on the Russian economy. This is the source of discomfort in Moscow, especially in connection with the growing role of China in Russian Far East. Even though there is public confirmation that the partnership is not limited, Russian security agencies claimed that China is a silent but long-term threat. The issues are based on the demographic disproportions, economic reliance, and the fear of sequential territorial and strategic encroachment. The Chinese business on local enterprises as well as making official maps where Chinese names are used to refer to portions of the Russian Far East have been other causes that have enhanced the Russian anxieties.

This asymmetry plays to the advantage of China in the eyes of Beijing. President Xi Jinping has used his own personal ties with President Vladimir Putin which he has had over forty meetings together to balance this imbalance and assure Moscow. China still depicts Russia as a big brother since the image enables Beijing to still have access to energy resources, weapons and strategic partnership. But how much can China continue to be asymmetrical without compromising the stability of the bilateral relationship in the long term is not clear.

Russia however takes a different angle over the relationship. The city of Moscow still considers itself a great power that has regional and global interests, which include Eurasia, post-Soviet space, Arctic and Middle East. Russia perceives the international order by the U.S. led as the main enemy under President Putin and sees the conflict in Ukraine as an existential battle against the West. Whereas official rhetoric is nearer to strategic partnership with China, Moscow is becoming uneasy with its expanding position as a subordinate partner. Unlike the confrontation that Russia sees the conflict, China sees the fight as a strategic opportunity- an opportunity that enables Beijing to further its collaborations with Moscow, on its own conditions, without sacrificing the vital economic relationships it has with the West.

On the part of Russia, Sino-Russian relationship is defined by its long term image of being an independent international force. Although its economic power has become rather weak in comparison to China, Moscow still believes that it is an important international player whose contribution to the world development is warranted and exclusive. The strategic culture of Russia during the presidency of Vladimir Putin is still highly affected by the great-power mentality, in which status, autonomy and recognition are as important as material capabilities. This self-image causes an innate contradiction in the relationship where Russia is opposed to any structure that would be an overt manifestation of it becoming a subordinate component in a China-dominated structure.

Locally, Russia highly emphasizes the need to retain influence throughout the post-Soviet environment, which Russia considers a special

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zone of privilege and holds a strategic position in its national interests. Eurasia, especially Central Asia, Caucasus and Eastern Europe, is still at the core of the strategic calculations in Moscow. Although collaboration with China has provided an economic reprieve and a diplomatic ally against the west, it also breeds a sense of anxiety particularly as the Belt and Road Initiative proposed by Beijing continues to increase Chinese economic, infrastructural as well as political power in central Asia. This increased presence undermines the classical domination of Russia in a region that Russia has always regarded as its geopolitical backyard with a certain aspect of silent competition under the banner of cooperation.

The so-called turn to the East, which has been highly praised and glorified by Russia, can be viewed instead as a strategic requirement, and not a choice. Secluded by the West, technology, and money, Moscow is depending on China to keep its economy alive and counter Western pressure. Meanwhile, the Russian policymakers are still acutely aware of the threat of being a junior partner in an asymmetrical relationship. Although the official rhetoric is focused on the strategic alignment and mutual opposition against the Western dominance, in every possible way Moscow still balances between cooperation and being cautious in order to retain its autonomy and influence. This two-sidedness, strategic reliance and geopolitical insecurity, can be used to describe the relationship Russian has with China and highlights the delicate balance that the two are based on.

Table of Perspectives

Aspect	Russia's Perception	China's Perception
Self-Role	Restored "Great Power" / Sovereign Pole	Rising "Global Power"
Partnership	Essential for resisting the West	Useful partner, resource provider
Key Theater	Post-Soviet Space (Regional focus)	Global (with regional emphasis on Asia)
Main Target	US/NATO (existential threat)	US-led containment (strategic competitor)

Structural Limitations of the Alignment

China and Russia have concluded that their partnership has great potential in yielding substantial and enduring benefits for both. There are less chances that this foreign policy thinking will change in short or medium term. Both countries recognize the importance of arm trade, economic, strategic and energy cooperation. China and Russia have great incentives in this close bilateral cooperation but there are also number of constraints and limitations. Some notable limitations are as follow:

These limitations warrant careful treatment, because they constitute the principal evidentiary basis for the competing interpretation this study rejects. Analysts who anticipate the partnership's decay point precisely to these frictions, in Central Asia, in the arms trade, and in Russian defence relations with Vietnam and India, and read them as accumulating stresses that will eventually exceed what the relationship can absorb. The pattern observable to date does not support that reading. In each case, the friction has been contained rather than escalated, and containment has followed a consistent logic: the party with more to lose has absorbed the cost. Beijing tolerates Russian arms sales to Vietnam because Russian dependence on China elsewhere makes the irritation affordable; Moscow accommodates Chinese economic penetration of Central Asia because it lacks the means to resist it and cannot afford the confrontation. The frictions are therefore better understood as the ordinary transaction costs of an unequal but functioning alignment than as evidence of impending rupture. The analytically significant question is not whether frictions exist, since they invariably do in any sustained bilateral

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relationship, but whether either party has demonstrated willingness to escalate a dispute to the point of jeopardising the wider partnership. Neither has. However some of the notable limitations are:

- Growing asymmetry between Sino-Russian economic relations
- China's decreasing dependency on Russian arms
- Diplomatic divergences over regional countries
- Clash of interests in central Asia
- Friction over Russian activities in Asia pacific and maritime peripheries.

One of the main limitations is China's growing leverage in their bilateral relations. Russia is lagging in terms of economy and has less to offer to China militarily. China over the years has improved its defense system and this improvement has declines its dependency on Russia. There is also frustration at Russian end over Chinese reverse engineering of technology sold to china Since Russia sells china its most advance technology and defense system.

The final and prolonged reduction of the reliance of Chinese weaponry on Russian systems, which not only indicates the speed at which Beijing indigenizes its defense technology, but also shows the increasing pressure on the supply of weapons by Moscow because of the conflict in Ukraine. Overall imports of arms in China decreased by 64 percent between 2020 and 2024 compared with the last five years, and in a rare change in its history, China fell out of the top ten importers of arms in the world, when it once imported over 83 percent of its total arms imports directly out of Russia in 1990s and the first half of 2000s. In the year 2024, Russian exports to China were at a few margins as compared to previous record levels, which highlights a structural realignment of the market. All that is left of the relationship is extremely concentrated in niche aerospace components, especially turbofans, which most of the current Chinese military imports of Russian sources represent; at that, even there Beijing is catching up by fitting it with home-built engines, which include WS-10 and WS-15, on advanced platforms, such as the J-10C and the J-20, with older Russian engines serving only legacy systems. This shift can be attributed to the fact that reverse engineering has been successful on previously Russian systems, observed in the J-11 and HQ-9 platforms, and the fact that Russia is rapidly declining in export capacity, as the share in the arms market has dropped catastrophically since 2012. The dynamic has been subtly reversed as China, with its near-parity and even competitive capability in multiple sectors, including drones and even naval shipbuilding, has started exporting well over four billion dollars of dual-use commodities most of its microelectronics and machine tools to Russia, in essence turning the prior balance of power between the two giants on its head.

The biggest limitation to Sino-Russian relation could be competing priorities in Central Asia. So far both sides could not coordinate their economic and strategic policies in the region. China is investing heavily in Central Asia and has great incentives to offer to Central Asia than Russia. China has even succeeded in gaining considerable amount of political influence through investment and trade activities. Chinese Road and Belt initiative has great potential in attracting Central Asian states more towards China than Russia. There is a visible discomfort on Russian part over Chinese influence of Central Asia. But China don't seem to be discontinuing its engagement with the region any time soon. In fact, Russia has accepted China's engagement albeit reluctantly. Both countries have divided labor in Central Asia unintentionally. China has become primary source of economic goods whereas Russia has taken up the job of security provider. It will be interesting to see how long this equation will continue given China's economic might can also enhance its military might.

Another region which could limit bilateral cooperation of China and Russia is East Asia.

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Russian activities in the region have already miffed China. As already mentioned, that Russia is an important provider of arms to Vietnam. . In 2025, Moscow and Hanoi revitalized their defense, energy, and technological cooperation, including reports of covert financial arrangements to sustain arms transactions despite Western sanctions. Vietnam is reportedly negotiating a multibillion-dollar deal for Su-35 fighter jets alongside upgrades to its submarine fleet and air defense systems. In addition, Russia's Rosatom has renewed cooperation with Vietnam on civilian nuclear energy projects, while Russian firms remain actively involved in offshore energy ventures in the South China Sea—an area that directly intersects with China's territorial claims. This could become a cause of friction between Russia and China. Some Chinese scholars have even named the Russian defense cooperation with Vietnam as "covert containment" of china. They View this cooperation as amount to give "strong hand" to Vietnam against China and its claim over South China sea. Nevertheless, China has largely tolerated this friction, partly because Russia's growing economic dependence on Beijing provides China with significant leverage and partly because Moscow's broader alignment with Beijing on major geopolitical issues, such as Taiwan and opposition to Western influence, remains strategically valuable.

Discussion: Implications for the United States

The Sino-Russian relationship has grown to be what many observers now refer to as a quasi-alliance, which is the most significant strategic threat to the United States in decades.

The policy implication most frequently drawn from this assessment, and the one this study most directly contests, is that Washington should seek to separate the two partners. Proposals of this kind recur in American strategic debate, generally invoking the precedent of the 1970s opening to China and proposing some inversion of it directed at Moscow. The analysis presented here indicates that such a strategy is unlikely to succeed and may be actively counterproductive. It fails on three grounds. First, it misreads the 1970s precedent, which succeeded because Sino-Soviet hostility was already acute, to the point of armed border clashes, and American diplomacy exploited an existing rupture rather than manufacturing one. No comparable rupture exists today; the frictions documented above are managed irritants, not a fracture awaiting exploitation. Second, any inducement substantial enough to interest Moscow would have to be substantial enough to matter, which in practice means concessions in the European theatre that would damage American alliance commitments more than they would damage the Sino-Russian partnership. Third, and most fundamentally, the strategy misidentifies where the relationship's centre of gravity lies. Russia is not the partner with discretion. Moscow's alignment with Beijing is sustained by structural dependence rather than by strategic preference, which means the inducement would have to substitute for the entire economic and diplomatic function China currently performs for Russia. No plausible American offer approaches that threshold. The partnership is no longer characterized by diplomatic coordination, symbolic gestures but is increasingly characterized by operational military interoperability, economic insulation against the sanction of the West and common ambition to dilute U.S. influence in world governance. It is rooted in the convergence of interests in this way both Beijing and Moscow are interested in containing American power, revisioning the aspects of the U.S.-led order as well as developing strategic depth against what they see as containment. In the case of Washington, such alignment complicates forming deterrence calculations, extends military planning into various theaters, and is undermining the leverage conventionally provided by economic statecraft.

Militarily, the relationship has grown to become a permanent, formal cooperation that has direct influence on the force posture and contingency

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planning of the U.S. In 2024, 200 joint exercises were held by China and Russia, including Arab Arctic patrolling, which was previously not the main scope of the Chinese activity but the central element of joint signaling. Recurrent long-range bomber patrols off Alaska and coast guard co-operation in the north waters by 2025 have strengthened fears of encroachment into the territories previously thought to be strategically safe to the United States. Of greater importance is the fact that Russia has sold sensitive technology of early-warning of missiles to China and this technology may integrate their detection structures and further their capabilities to monitor the launch of missiles by the U.S. in actual time. This kind of technological integration reduces the time to issue warnings and increases the price of an error. The threat of opportunistic aggression makes U.S. strategy that more difficult: the crisis in the Taiwan Strait or Ukraine might invite concerted pressure on the part of the other partner, leaving Washington with the management of a de facto two-front situation with limited resources.

The war between Russia and Ukraine has given the best example of the extent of depth and usefulness of this alignment. Though China has publicly presumed the attitude of neutrality and refuses to provide direct lethal aid, it has become the enabling genius behind the war in Russia. About 80 percent of the dual use commodities that Russia currently relies on to support its defense industrial complex are of Chinese origin. Beijing is the supplier of virtually all microelectronics in Russian precision-guided munitions, radar equipment, and armored platforms as well as a major portion of machine tools to be used in the production of engines and ballistic missile components. It has also been a major producer of nitrocellulose and special chemicals in the manufacture of artillery shells, which helped Moscow to refill the battlefield depleted stores. Chinese companies offer motors, flight controllers and batteries in drone sector which forms the foundation of the unmanned systems in Russia and it was reported that it is being developed and made jointly and on Russian soil with the help of Chinese technology long range attack drones. At the same time, the ban on the export of drone components to Ukraine has increased the susceptibility of the Ukrainian supply chain.

In addition to hardware, cooperation is increasingly getting involved in intelligence and navigation. The Ukrainian estimates indicate that China has been supplying Russia with satellite imagery to help it target the strike and the combination of a GLONASS navigation system and the BeiDou Chinese navigation system has increased the accuracy of positioning of military operations. The picture is perfected by economic assistance. In 2024, bilateral trade was at a record level, with China being a significant proportion of the foreign trade of Russia. The sale of Russian crude oil and liquefied natural gas to the Chinese provides the revenue that subsidizes the war spending in Moscow, and the use of financial mechanisms in the form of yuan and cleared elsewhere means that there is not so much exposure to Western sanctions and the SWIFT system. Combined, these actions have softened the coercive effect of U.S.-led sanctions and showed that the presence of a significant power, supported with an economic partner, could withstand prolonged economic pressure.

The consequences are not only in Europe. On the diplomatic front, Beijing and Moscow are becoming more aligned in their policies at multilateral forums especially on issues of sovereignty and non-interference. They propagate a form of governance in which regime security and prerogatives of the state are privileged at the expense of what they describe as Western imposed universal norms. This story echoes in sections of the Global South where there is a lack of confidence in U.S. power and a sense of exasperation in the current institutions that leave openings to different forms of alignment. Even though China has been risk-averse in its voting behavior concerning Ukraine to avoid the

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secondary sanctions, its overall alignment with Russia in the UN General Assembly and other institutions is an indication of gradual undermining of U.S. hegemony in agenda-setting.

They are other fronts of this alignment and are emerging areas like space, cyber, and information warfare. The use of navigation systems, the growth of satellite ground infrastructure, even to sensitive areas, and cooperation in the digital ecosystems are trying to minimize the dependence on the U.S. controlled resources like GPS. In the meantime, greater investment in operations of foreign influence and operations of cognitive domain mirrors a mutual agreement that war against U.S. power is as much a matter of making narratives as it is a matter of hardware. Beijing and Moscow are aimed at weakening allies and complicating the formation of coalitions by disputing the technological superiority of Americans and escalating the sense of American decline.

The strategic problem of the United States is cumulative. The Sino-Russian alliance combines mutually complementary advantages: Russia brings military experience, development of advanced weapons, and is ready to resort to the use of force, China brings economic volumes, industrial depth, technological potential, and the global business networks. This synergy undermines the efficacy of conventional instruments of U.S. statecraft, including sanctions to the sending of deterrence messages and compels Washington to be ready to face contingencies that will not occur in a serial manner but rather in parallel. Controlling this difficulty will necessitate not just strengthening unions in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, but a restoration of industrial strength, investment in resilience in new technologies, and re-setting the economic tools to encompass coordinated evasion of sanctions. The alignment does not necessarily make up a formal treaty alliance, but in reality it is a strategic partnership that has the capacity of redefining the balance of power- and challenging the versatility of American grand strategy in a multipolar world

An Anticipated Objection

One objection to the argument advanced here deserves direct acknowledgement. It may be held that the assessment above reads present conditions forward too confidently, and that the partnership's current density reflects the exceptional circumstances of Russia's post-2022 isolation rather than any durable structure. On this reading, a settlement in Ukraine and a subsequent easing of Western sanctions would restore Russian economic options, reduce dependence on China, and permit Moscow to rebalance.

The objection has force and cannot be dismissed on present evidence. Two considerations nonetheless limit it. The first is that the relationship's institutional architecture substantially predates 2022. The 2001 treaty, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the coordination of voting behaviour in the Security Council, and the first Power of Siberia agreement were all established before the invasion, which suggests that the war accelerated an existing trajectory rather than creating one. The second is that several of the post-2022 developments are not straightforwardly reversible. Payment infrastructure, currency settlement practice, redirected pipeline capacity, and cross-border industrial linkages represent sunk investment and accumulated institutional habit, and would not be unwound simply because an alternative became available again. Sanctions relief would widen Russian options at the margin without restoring the pre-2022 structure of Russian trade.

The honest formulation is therefore conditional rather than categorical. This study does not argue that the alignment is permanent, which no analysis of an evolving bilateral relationship could responsibly claim. It argues that the alignment is considerably more robust than the axis of convenience thesis allows, that its documented frictions are being managed rather than accumulating toward rupture, and that American

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strategy should be constructed on the assumption of its continuation rather than on the expectation of its collapse.

Conclusion

Russia's association with China will go a long haul for years to come, or possibly insofar as the contemporary political scenario exists in Russia. It is a result of Russia's domestic political landscape, its status around the world, and global patterns, and as well as the purposeful strategic arrangements carried out by Russian policymakers. Any endeavors by the United States to part Russia from China in hope of achieving its foreign policy goals by pitting two middle power against each other will fall flat. There are many reasons for this strategic partnership between Russia and China. First and foremost reason is that Russia is basically a marginal actor in zones where U.S. interests clash with those of China. On the issues of both trade and the conflict in the South China Sea, Russia is a minor stake holder, and this situation is likely to persist in the future. Also, any opening that the United States gives to Russia could empower it to indulge in its own geopolitical schemes in the European theater, while doing little to debilitate China.

The breakdown of the Soviet Union removed the component of ideological divergence from the relationship and later China under Deng Xiaoping's leadership followed a pragmatic path. These factors really helped both countries to rebuild their relations. The two nations have valid justifications for collaboration on key issues: They both are against a world commanded by a sole superpower. The two of them have always maintained that their interests have been compromised by the United States' unilateralis m, interventionism, and backing for democratic rights and political reforms. Their economies are correlative, with Russia providing military apparatus, energy, and raw materials, while China gives capital and consumer goods. They have a mutual interest in not letting Central Asia to turn into a breeding ground of religious extremism and terrorism. For more than three decades since U.S.- China made a leap forwards in their relations during mid-1970s, the United States gained a position in the triangle between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing which was complementary to US interest. During that era US managed to start a reconciliation process with both of these countries. Today the tables have turned as China is in a favored position now. The collapse of the Soviet Union basically nullified the Russian threat in Chinese eyes and diminished the prospect of power struggle between these two countries. From China's perspective, this is a significant achievement. But for Russians the situation is not very ideal as they relegated from the status of Superpower to merely a regional power, have concerns about China's rising global clout and leverage in their bilateral relations. But incentives they both can gain through this strategic partnership are lucrative enough to keep Russian insecurities in check. Together both countries have potential to expand their influence in Central Asia, South Asia and Middle East. Their strategic partnership is here to stay as that seems to be the only way to contain US influence.

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