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ANNEX A TO
ACT/SPP/SF/TT-8689/SER:NU
DATED 28 FEB 25

EVOLUTION OF SINO-RUSSIAN PARTNERSHIP

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. **Purpose.** In April 2024, the Military Committee (MC) and Defence Policy and Planning Committee (DPPC) tasked NATO ACT with conducting a foresight study over the Evolution of the Sino-Russian Partnership (ESRP)¹. This study will inform the annual Bi-SC report on China.

2. Key Findings.

a. The four pillars of Sino-Russian cooperation are: 1) Common adversary - the US; 2) Complementary geopolitical priorities; 3) Complementary economic strengths; and 4) Authoritarian domestic politics.

b. Limits of the friendship include: 1) Russia's nuclear threats not aligning with Chinese messaging; 2) China's desire to avoid western sanctions; 3) Uneven recognition of each other's territories; 4) Imbalance of relationship and power dynamics (China stronger); and 5) Major trade deals weighted heavily in China's favour.

c. As the future operating environment grows in complexity, so too will non-state actors and proxy threats enabled by and through the Sino-Russian partnership.

d. A treaty of friendship provides ample flexibility for China and Russia to align strategic priorities where convenient, distance themselves when necessary, but quickly form into a formal military pact, if desired.

e. The NATO Alliance should be viewed as a data point, not a comparison point. A political-military alliance that has evolved over 75 years should not be compared to a partnership of convenience between two autocratic leaders.

3. Conclusions/Recommendations/Responsibilities.

a. **Conclusion.** The consolidated, assertive actions by the Sino-Russian partnership pose the greatest risk to international peace and security.

b. Recommendations.

(1) Better cooperation with the European Union (EU) for a common NATO foreign policy.

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- (2) A broader, global focus to build mutual trust and enhance dialogue with Indo-Pacific allies and partners.
 - (3) Formal education and training of NATO personnel in China-focused topics over culture, society, and diplomacy.
 - (4) Increase official dialogue between NATO and China senior leadership.
 - (5) Implement an enduring, foresight focused-study over the evolving Sino-Russian partnership.
- c. **Responsibilities.** Better coordination between NATO HQ and the Bi-Strategic Commands (Bi-SC) is required to avoid duplication of activities. There are various lines of effort studying the Sino-Russian partnership ongoing throughout the Alliance, but with little cross-command coordination. For example, the NATO ACT-funded ESRP workshop in Oslo, NOR conflicted with a NATO HQ workshop over the same subject, at the same time.

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Foreword

I am pleased to present the Allied Command Transformation (ACT) Strategic Foresight Analysis (SFA) report on the Evolution of Sino-Russian Partnership (ESRP). This report contributes to other ACT Strategic Foresight studies that are ongoing or planned for 2025. The research team is deliberately small, with a compressed timeline, and meant to provide a focused visualization of the future security environment. The foresight program of work supports the development of the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept (NWCC) Future Operating Environment (FOE).



History has demonstrated that an accurate assessment of the future is critical for any organization to make good decisions in the present. Together, the SFA and FOE provide military advice and inform the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP). This subordinate report, along with the SFA and FOE, will provide an understanding of the anticipated complexities and challenges of the future security environment.

The ESRP report comes at a time of significant global change and geostrategic competition. Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea in 2014, followed by a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, has not slowed the deepening of ties across the elements of national power between China and Russia. This brutal and unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine is decisively enabled by China.

This report supports the need for NATO to increase its understanding of the Sino-Russian partnership. Their quantifiable actions in support of each other continue to undermine and manipulate the rules based international order (RBIO). Their imperfect partnership is united around their common disdain for the U.S.-led international order. We must not allow current, political sensitivities to deceive us from providing the best military advice that will enable the Alliance to secure a stable future for the next generation. Trend forecaster Gerald Celente captured this scenario perfectly when he said, "If you don't prepare, you could lose everything. If you prepare for the worst and nothing happens, you've lost nothing."

FOR THE SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER TRANSFORMATION:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Devin R. Pepper".

Devin R Pepper
Major General, US Space Force
Deputy Chief of Staff
Strategic Plans and Policy

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Background

The ESRP is a multi-disciplinary study with five subject matter experts (SMEs) contributing from the fields of academia, international law, military strategic-level staff, NATO strategic-level staff, and a Chinese expatriate. The tone and research deliberately leans towards a China-focused tone as the team had unique access to the Chinese expatriate. The Alliance has focused on the Russian problem for quite some time and only recently began studying the Chinese perspective. This inaugural study was deliberately small and focused with a timeline of eight months from research to publication.

At the 2024 Implication workshop in Oslo, Norway, China-Russia experts, scholars, scientists, military researchers and analysts assessed the initial draft of the report and developed potential implications that the NATO alliance will need to draw out of the current Sino-Russian development. The workshop had three objectives: 1) refine the draft study, 2) identify future scenarios, and 3) assess likely implications for the Alliance. The implications are based on three geo-strategic hypothetical scenarios, which are described in Appendix 3.

Introduction

1. The 2024 NATO Summit Declaration states that: “The deepening strategic partnership between Russia and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut and reshape the rules-based international order, are a cause for profound concern.”² Fully acknowledging this new reality, this report sheds light on various aspects of the development of the Sino-Russian collaboration and offers an analysis of their state of cooperation. It also highlights how their intentions are implemented through the facilitation of international legal frameworks. The paper shows that their relationship is not only one of convenience but also a strategic survival guarantee to an unfounded, perceived threat from the West.

2. This report seeks to show the level of cooperation and interdependencies between the two countries who, at least in part, openly oppose the current Rule Based International Order (RBIO), multilateral agreements and conventions, and supranational organizations as a whole. Publications such as the Strategic Foresight Analysis 2023 (SFA) have already described the significant challenges and threats to the international order imposed by the two countries: China as the economic powerhouse with the technical-military capabilities to use coercion, force and exploitation to reach its strategic goals, and Russia with its neo-imperialistic agenda manifested in openly aggressive patterns through its Military Instrument of Power (MIoP) as well as non-military instruments in direct confrontation to NATO.

3. Since its illegal occupation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian Federation has displayed a constant, increasingly assertive behavior, which corresponds with its blatant disregard of the international rule of law. Russia today, through its actions, has manifested itself as the most significant security challenge to the Alliance. Russia’s domestic policies have developed increasingly authoritarian traits while its foreign policy changed from the status of a competitive

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partner on the international level into an assertive actor with clear neo-imperialistic ambitions. Although already cooperating with China in various domains in the past, both countries have increased and intensified their cooperation significantly since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. That is, not only due to systemic similarities of the respective political system and common geostrategic aspirations, but most importantly due to military and economic opportunism.

4. This paper examines the extend of the two countries' engagement in respective geo-strategic ambitions, military affairs and technological exchange. Almost every single area of cooperation in this partnership has indirect or direct implications to NATO, its allies and partners worldwide and must not be ignored. This paper discusses the state of this formal alliance, details the alarming extend of Sino-Russian exercises, technological-military cooperation, and economical interdependencies.

5. Finally, the paper assesses areas where the Sino-Russian cooperation reaches its natural limits based on the varying strategic trajectories and diverging political focus. Different motives and outlooks where Russia and China want to position themselves in the future could be an indicator for a natural expiration date of their cooperation. The paper will assess the predictability of a rift in the Sino-Russian partnership and the deriving long-term implications for the Alliance.

Development of the Sino-Russian Partnership

6. The Sino-Russian relationship has evolved over time. During World War II, both the Soviet Union and Republic of China were allied through the United Nations, which stood against the Axis powers of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan. In the early years of the Cold War, the People's Republic of China and Soviet Russia shared an ideological affinity for Communism and became formal allies through the signing of the 1950 pact. The nations famously split in the 1960s, in no small measure due to efforts by the United States to improve relations with the Beijing-based government. Since the end of the Cold War, the relationship evolved again, initially as nations that seemed poised to eventually enter the US-led "Liberal International Order" of mostly democratic states, but soon demonstrating a persistent adherence to strong authoritarianism. Over the years, the evolving nature of their joint political statements, declarations and the signature of high-level political treaty reflect an upward trend in promoting trust and common alignment in their respective defence policy.

7. The Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation (also called "The Big Treaty") between China and Russia, signed in 2001, established a strong foundation for enhancing bilateral relations. It should be noted that unlike the 1950 "Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance," the 2001 treaty does not explicitly define external threats or include a mutual defence clause, making it distinct from an alliance treaty. However, Art. 2, 7, 8, 9, and 16 of the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation contribute to a clear consultation and non-aggression pact. These provisions can be interpreted as elements of an implicit defence pact.³

³ Article 2 outlines commitments related to avoiding force, economic pressure, and nuclear weapons use. Article 7 emphasizes coordination of military efforts to enhance security and stability Article 8 addresses participation in alliances or blocs that could harm sovereignty, security, or territorial integrity. Article 9 of the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly

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8. In 2021, China and Russia took significant steps to reinforce their military cooperation by extending the 2001 Big Treaty. During a virtual meeting on 28 June 2021, President Xi and President Vladimir Putin highlighted the deepening ties between the two nations. They emphasized the stabilizing role their relationship plays in global affairs amidst increasing tensions with Western Countries. The Treaty includes provisions for military cooperation, mutual economic benefits and a commitment to supporting each other's core interests, including Russia's recognition of Taiwan as part of China.

9. In 2022, China and Russia issued a strategic statement emphasizing their growing partnership and opposition to the Western RBIO. Strategically, the 2022 agreement differs from the 2021 extension of the "Big Treaty" in its more assertive stance on specific geopolitical issues, such as NATO enlargement, the US Indo-Pacific strategy and the Australian-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) partnership. While the 2021 extension focused on deepening bilateral ties and cooperation across various sectors, the 2022 agreement explicitly addresses immediate security concerns and international policy stances, reflecting the increasing tension and opposition to Western influence. It is worth noting that China's support for Russia's proposal for long-term, legally binding security guarantees underscores their mutual advocacy for the principle of indivisible security and a "no limit" partnership. By endorsing these proposals, China is aligning with Russia's viewpoint that the security of one state should not come at the expense of another, a concept central to Moscow's argument against NATO's enlargement. The stance challenges the Western perspective, which supports the right of sovereign nations to choose their own security arrangements. The emphasis on indivisible security by China and Russia signified after all the united effort to promote a security architecture in Europe that reflects their strategic interests and counter what they perceive as a western dominance.

10. The strategic dynamics between China and Russia further evolved from the 2022 to the 2024 joint statement. On 16 May 2024, President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin jointly signed and issued a Joint Statement on deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for the New Era in the context of the 75th Anniversary of China-Russia Diplomatic Relations. The shift here is towards joint military exercises and operations, showcasing a higher level of operational coordination and mutual trust. The 2024 agreement also underscores advanced technological cooperation, particularly in space exploration and cybersecurity, indicating a strategic move towards achieving technological superiority. Additionally, the 2024 agreement places a stronger emphasis on developing critical infrastructure, such as the Arctic route. This statement reflects a shift from a primarily defensive posture to a more proactive and forward-looking strategy, aiming to reshape the international order and challenge the western dominance more effectively.

11. **Ideological Roots of Systemic Cooperation.** The mutual anti-US stance of Beijing and Moscow persists by and large after the Cold War. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) initially rejected democratic politics through violent means. However, faced with a power disparity and shifts in the global political landscape, the CCP was compelled to adapt its strategy. This

Cooperation between China and Russia outlines procedures for consultation and cooperation in response to threats while lacking explicit military assistance provisions. Additionally, Article 16 promotes increased military cooperation, including sharing "military know-how." – Korolev 2022.

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adaptation focused on long-term national strength development and emulated the approach of late Qing dynasty reformers by selectively adopting foreign technologies and methods to counter external powers. Meanwhile, Russia, after a brief period of attempted democratization in the 1990s, reverted to oligarchic and authoritarian rule under Vladimir Putin. These parallel developments in governance have led to a renewed alignment between these two non-democratic regimes. Both states are cautious to avoid direct military conflict with the US and its allies, and engage in tactical recalibrations to maintain a strategic balance when perceiving each other as overly aggressive. This cautious approach underscores the complex dynamics of their relationship and their strategic calculations in the global political landscape.

a. **Chinese Perspective.** After the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the CCP, led by Deng Xiaoping, saw the long-term realization of communist ideals as a historical responsibility that had fallen on its shoulders, though it understood the need to bide its time. However, time has moved quickly. China's rapid economic growth in the post-Cold War era, the 2008 global financial crisis and Beijing Olympics, societal divisions in the US, and other international factors have strengthened the CCP leadership's belief in the rise of the East and the decline of the West. This has fueled their resolve to lead anti-Western forces and establish a new international order. Under Xi's leadership, this vision has been crystallized into the goal of China's rejuvenation by 2049 and the promotion of a common destiny for mankind.

b. **Russian Perspective.** After the dissolution of the USSR, the communist legacy and chauvinism have continued to exert a significant influence on modern Russia. Elements of the Soviet political and ideological framework persist, such as the Communist Party's hierarchical governance, limited elite circulation, state-controlled media, and suppression of dissent, adapting to support the current regime in what is often referred to as a "Good Soviet Union" model. Great Russian chauvinism, rooted in historical imperial ideologies and initially defined by early Soviet leaders like Lenin, remains prevalent in contemporary Russia, notably under Putin's leadership since around 2014. The authoritarian nature of these systems replaces individuality with ideological conformity and instills fear to maintain control over society. When it comes to global competition, China takes a more careful, long-term approach, whereas Russia tends to be more provocative and short-term oriented. The CCP's perception of Russia as imposing yet lacking strategic foresight and adeptness in concealing intentions has provided an opportunity for the CCP to exploit Russian actions as a testing ground and pathway forward. A recent example is Russia's performance in the war with Ukraine and how the international community reaction impacts Beijing's strategic considerations regarding Taiwan.

c. **Authoritarianism vs. Free Will.** The PRC and Russia are actively challenging the RBIO and seeking to supplant US and European global leadership. This conflict is often stated as a clash between East and West. However, it is more accurately framed as a struggle between authoritarianism with totalitarian tendencies and free will. The ability of Western nations to collaborate effectively with Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea— Influenced by ancient Chinese culture—underscores this distinction. The anti-US or anti-Western sentiments expressed by CCP, the former USSR, and Putin's government are

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fundamentally rooted in their authoritarian nature, which drives their domestic suppression and challenges to the RBIO.

d. **Russian and Chinese Centrism: Cultural and Strategic Differences.** Russo centrism and Sino centrism are distinct forms of centrism that emphasize the perceived cultural and political superiority of Russia and China, respectively. These ideologies have shaped their national identities and strategic approaches in unique ways. The differences in Russo centrism and Sino centrism significantly impact the strategies and worldviews of the CCP and Russian leadership. Understanding these differences is crucial for analyzing the current global dynamics.

12. Russia and the Soviet Union have historically adhered to a form of Great Russian imperialism and a strategic approach of "trading space for time" for national security. While Russia has its own traditional culture, its primary belief system, Eastern Orthodoxy, was introduced and evolved from the West. Russo centrism believes their ethnically diverse people are Russian-first, nationally-united, and fiercely loyal to protecting the Motherland. This contrasts significantly with China's long history and traditional culture, which is based on indigenous religions such as Taoism and Confucianism, as well as Mahayana Buddhism, which has been fully integrated into Chinese culture. Sino centrism refers to the worldview that China is the cultural, political, or economic centre of the world. This ideology has ancient roots, with Chinese dynasties considering themselves as "all-under-Heaven" (TianXia) and viewing surrounding states as vassals. Although China has also experienced territorial expansion in its history, its mainstream approach has been characterized by a deep-seated cultural superiority and the exportation of cultural influence to achieve great power status.

13. The Sino-Russian partnership has primarily been an inter-regime relationship, lacking broad grassroots support. The durability of this partnership will be influenced by internal challenges and the global response. Since the CCP's strategic planning is long-term, Western responses must also be strong, coordinated, persistent, and long-term, rather than becoming discouraged when immediate results from sanctions are not apparent right away. Moreover, it is not impossible that either nation could undergo significant political changes. Even a smaller-scale protest or act of disobedience in China could send more significant shockwaves through the regime than a larger overseas one to their local politics. The rise of Chinese public discontent and resentment towards the CCP and Xi Jinping is considerable. Therefore, if either country were to transition from authoritarianism to democracy, the remaining regime would likely see this shift as a threat rather than a potential partnership.

14. NATO and its allies should incorporate such scenarios about democracy into their strategic foresight. NATO and its partner nations actively advocate for cultural diversity, which aligns with the principles of coexistence and mutual benefit among all traditions. In contrast, authoritarian regimes dominated by extreme ideologies and fervent nationalism pose a significant threat to global peace and stability. Regardless of NATO's preferences, as long as China and Russia maintain authoritarian systems, they will inherently lean toward their partnership and represent a challenge or potential threat to the existing rules based international order.

Drivers of Sino-Russia Military/Political Cooperation

15. A number of driving forces explain the expansion of the Sino-Russian relationship, both overall and in the military dimension. These can be understood as being geopolitical factors, stemming from both countries' place in the world and their interests, as well as interpersonal dynamics, influenced by the leadership of the two countries, how they identify, and how they are portrayed.

a. Geopolitical Factors.

(1) Similar perceptions of US-lead Western hegemony. Both the PRC and Russia view the United States as their most significant security challenge. Each has a stake in promoting Western decline, a shift to a more multipolar world, and new (or revised) international institutions more favourable to their own national interests. In short, both champion a 'reimagined' global order.

(2) A common fear of NATO expansion in Europe and America's Indo-Pacific agenda. With NATO's framing of China as a "systemic challenge" and mounting concerns over US activities in the Indo-Pacific (such as new multilateral security measures aimed at countering China, like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the Asia-Pacific 4, AUKUS, the emerging Japan-Philippine-US trilateral alliance, and the US engagement of India), both Russia and the PRC are increasingly apprehensive of Western military planning, alliance building (Japan, South Korea) and operations' potential. China is especially concerned about the US relations with Taiwan based on the Taiwan Relations Act from 1979.

(3) Alternative approaches to exercising international influence, encouraging subversion, and jointly managing shared interests. China and Russia both practice mutually supportive coordination tactics, such as veto-wielding permanent members of the UN Security Council to achieve their desired foreign military policy outcomes. Both countries use 'grey-zone' tactics like influence operations, cyber-attacks, and political interference to undermine democratic norms and the national security of competing states.

b. Interpersonal Factors.

(1) A high level of personal amity between Xi and Putin. Since Xi's ascension to power, he and Putin have nurtured an unusually close personal relationship between two heads of state. They have met over 40 times since 2012 to hold bilateral talks focusing on defence consultations and maritime cooperation. Only months apart in age, and sharing similar family situations, they regularly exchange birthday presents amidst declarations of close friendship, hold similar philosophies on global politics and national governance, and promote national development and

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revitalization through a joint strategic partnership. President Xi's personal influence over Putin appears to be increasing in the current context.⁴

(2) The personalization of power, paranoia, and risk-prone behaviour. A characteristic of essentially one-party states with absolute military control, both Xi and Putin have dramatically centralized power. This type of 'Great Leader' mantra has resulted in leadership isolation, distorted perceptions, and encouraged high risk military undertakings. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and China's ongoing unprofessional and unsafe intercepts of Western military aircraft and ships in the Indo-Pacific, are evidence of this.

(3) Disparaging labels and 'identity politics.' US President Biden's public description of his Chinese counterpart as a dictator, effectively equating Xi Jinping with President Putin (and other military despots, particularly in Belarus, North Korea, and Iran) promotes common identities, collusion, and agendas amongst hardline leaders now dubbed the 'Axis of Autocrats.'

(4) President Putin and President Xi do not perceive each other's country as threats to their regime's survivability. Their strategic interests align against western influence, fostering a cooperative rather than confrontational relationship. Both nations benefit from mutual political and economic support, which bolsters their respective regime's security and resilience while the common authoritarian governance models create a shared ideological foundation for their partnership. Recognizing each other's security interests, Presidents Putin and Xi share a common worldview characterized by authoritarian solidarity and anti-Westernism. Leadership alignment between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin plays a crucial role in the durability of the China-Russia military partnership. Both leaders prioritize regime stability and view external threats through a similar lens. Their personal relationship and mutual understanding of each other's strategic priorities facilitate deeper military cooperation.⁵

16. Structured Consultation Mechanism.

a. Since the early 1990s, China and Russia have been enhancing consultation mechanisms every few years, resulting in 20 to 30 high-level security-related consultations annually.⁶ Starting with a border agreement in 1997, which settled most of their border disputes, the two countries introduced higher-level confidence-building

⁴ According to *Financial Times* reporting, (while not independently verified) President Xi during his visit to Moscow in March 2023 apparently played a central role in de-escalating Putin and his threats at the time of possible nuclear use. Equally likely, China has played a central role in warning Putin off any potential attack on Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. See Joseph Webster, "Russia, China, and the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant," *The Diplomat*, 18 July 2023.

⁵ From Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), "China-Russia Relations: A New Era of Strategic Partnership" 2020: "Their May 2024 meeting displayed mutual friendship, with Beijing often echoing Russia's stance on European security. Shortly before the war, Chinese foreign Minister Wang Yi urged the West to establish a balanced and sustainable European security mechanism through negotiations, reflecting China's stance on addressing all sides' legitimate security concerns, as reiterated in various platforms."

⁶ These meetings, which occur almost every two weeks, often conclude with joint statements reflecting shared views on international politics.

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measures (CBM) aimed at demilitarization and information sharing.⁷ After resolving border issues, China and Russia's CBM became less frequent but more sophisticated, evolving into regular consultations. These consultations developed into a comprehensive, multi-level, institutionalized infrastructure involving various government agencies and military units.⁸

b. In 2001, their cooperation deepened with the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).⁹ This organization introduced multiple platforms for regular interactions, including annual summits, the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structures (RATS), and various meetings of defence officials, enhancing the depth and institutionalization of military consultations. The establishment of the SCO significantly impacted China-Russia military consultations by providing a formal framework for regular meetings and exchanges between defence ministers and military officials. It facilitated discussions on regional security issues, joint military exercises, and coordination of defence policies. The SCO also expanded military cooperation beyond bilateral interactions, allowing for multilateral military exercises, with the "Peace Mission" exercises becoming a flagship example of the organizations's military collaboration and joint counter-terrorism operations. The SCO can be seen as a strategic counterbalance to Western alliances, particularly NATO, by promoting a multipolar world order, challenging the dominance of the United States and its Allies. Joint statements from SCO summits often emphasize the importance of sovereignty, non-interference, and opposition to unilateral actions by any single power. Practically, by conducting joint military exercises and fostering military cooperation, the SCO enhances its members' ability to respond collectively to regional security threats.¹⁰

c. In October 2004, China and Russia established the Russia-China Consultations on National Security Issues, a unique mechanism for discussing national security at the highest levels. This mechanism, involving the Heads of the Security Council from Russia and State Council representatives from China, marked a significant step in their bilateral security cooperation. The consultations, which occur at least four times a year, have expanded in response to regional security challenges, such as tensions in China-US

⁷ Korolev, Alexander, *Military Cooperation: Approaching Alliance into China–Russia Strategic Alignment in International Politics*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2022 doi: 10.5117/9789463725248_ch03; – “Key milestones included the 1998 Protocol on Border Defence Information Exchange and the 1999 agreement to remove military units 100 km from the border. The final resolution of border issues occurred in 2004, resolving disputes over two islands”.

⁸ Ibid- “The initial mechanisms for regular consultations between China and Russia included annual meetings between their Defence Ministers (established in 1993) and Chiefs of the General Staff (established in 1997). These meetings facilitated information flow and mutual understanding of military strategies. Despite Russia's pro-West orientation under Yeltsin and early Putin, China and Russia maintained and expanded their military consultations. Formal military consultations began in 1992, with a significant agreement signed in 1993, establishing the foundation for ongoing inter-military cooperation”.

⁹ Edward A. Lynch, PhD, Susanna Helms, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation”, *Military Review* Jan-Feb 2024 – “The SCO originated from the ‘Shanghai Five,’ which included China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The primary focus was confidence-building and demilitarization of border regions. The inclusion of new members like India and Pakistan in 2017, and Iran in 2023, further underscores the SCO's growing geopolitical importance and its ambition to be a major regional player”.

¹⁰ *Military Review* Jan-Feb 2022 – “Despite its ambitions, the SCO faces significant internal challenges. Member states often have divergent political and economic priorities, which can impede collective decision-making. The absence of a dedicated financial structure to support joint initiatives limits the SCO's ability to implement its ambitious projects. Proposed initiatives like the SCO Energy Club and the SCO Development Bank have seen slow progress due to differing national interests and financial commitments”.

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relations and the North Korean nuclear issue. In addition, in April 2015, the China-Russia Northeast Asia Security Dialogue was launched to address regional security, with meetings held as frequently as needed based on the urgency of issues. In June 2016, China and Russia established regular consultations on cyberspace issues, involving high-level officials from both countries. This consultation mechanism aims to enhance cooperation and coordination between the two countries in addressing cybersecurity challenges and promoting the stability and security of the digital realm.

17. **Training & Exercises.** The significant growth of Russia-China joint military exercises is evident since their inception in the early 2000s. These exercises have expanded in scope, scale, and intensity, including larger strategic exercises on each other's territory, joint air patrols, and the potential for future joint air and naval deployments. Joint military exercises between China and Russia began in 2005 with "Peace Mission 2005", with a focus on antiterrorism. This multilateral bloc, led by Beijing and Moscow, has historically focused on promoting economic, social, and security cooperation among members, primarily focused on issues related to central Asia. The "Peace Mission" exercises, conducted by Chinese and Russian armed forces, have been a longstanding multinational endeavor primarily focused on land force maneuvers. These exercises, lasting one to two weeks, have varied in size over the years. While some drills involved only Chinese and Russian troops, others occurred within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, with participation from other member states. These exercises aim to enhance capabilities, promote cooperation, and address scenarios related to insurgency and rebellion.

a. The period from 2012 to 2014 saw a steady increase in frequency of exercises with the introduction of naval exercises. Structured under the framework of the SCO and independently, they have taken place since 2014 in various strategic locations, including the Yellow Sea, Sea of Japan, East China Sea, Mediterranean Sea, South China Sea, and Okhotsk Sea. Up-to-date Sino-Russian joint exercises comprise all military domains up to the highest strategic level.¹¹ The locations of two trilateral naval exercises in 2019 off the coast of South Africa and in the Gulf of Oman and Indian Ocean were chosen to allow for the participation of South African and Iranian navies, respectively. At the same time, both exercises were described as efforts by both Russia and China to highlight their global influence and the ability of their navies to reach distant shores. A similar trilateral exercise with Iranian participation took place in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman in January 2022, and another trilateral exercise with South Africa take took place in early 2023.

b. Since 2015, additional joint activities have been held, such as large-scale ground drills and joint air defence exercises, to improve their ability to protect their airspace from potential threats. Moreover, since 2017 China also attends Russia's annual strategic command staff exercises, which are multiservice exercises that take place in September and rotate among the four main Russian strategic commands. Joint military patrols and grey zone activities are another critical aspect of Sino-Russian defence cooperation, signaling enhanced mutual trust and the will to demonstrate strategic alignment power

¹¹ See Appendix 1 for detailed list of the nature of exercises, dates, location, aim and participants.

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projection. Joint naval patrols have been held in the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. These patrols are strategically significant as they underscore their ability to operate in contested waters and challenge the presence of other naval powers, particularly the United States and Japan. For example, in October 2021, both navies conducted a joint patrol through the Tsugaru Strait, which separates Japan's main islands. This manoeuvre was a clear signal of their growing maritime cooperation and willingness to challenge regional security dynamics. The last patrol in the Indo-Pacific is reported in July 2024, few days before the NATO Summit in DC.

c. The importance of military personnel exchanges is often overlooked. This is a critical means of promoting trust, sharing military culture, fostering strategic communications, and encouraging confidence-building measures.¹² The rotation of Russian and Chinese military personnel and technical specialists has been in effect since the early 1990s, with People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers being trained on operating S-300 Surface-to-air missiles (SAM), jets, and submarines. The practice was institutionalized in formal agreements starting in 1996. According to previous Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, approximately 3,600 Chinese military personnel have been trained in Russian military universities since 1991. Presidents Xi and Putin publicly affirmed the value of military cross pollination during their high-level talks in 2023.

d. Russia is the main destination for Chinese PLA officers receiving military education and training overseas. High-ranking Chinese officers typically attend the General Staff Academy of the Russian Armed Forces. There, they are exposed to broad-based educational programs on military strategy and tactics, which are valuable to learn about Russia's warfighting experience in Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria. Equally important, more junior ranks are schooled in the operation and maintenance of advanced Russian weapons systems. The value of Russian training (informed by Moscow's direct conflict experience in modern military operations, which most PLA personnel lack) can be measured by the promotion rates of former participants, who graduate better able to inform China and Russia's rapidly increasing joint patrols and exercises. The PLA has not fully adopted Russian methods but rather adopts Russian and Western concepts for their specific needs. Overall, these types of military-to-military interactions are a higher-level indicator of the strength of relations, given that commitments of this nature promote compatibility in terms of military thinking and approaches to warfare. Also, they serve as points of departure depending on the demands of future warfare. Some have argued that the PLA force structure, doctrine, and organizational reforms under Xi all draw on Russia's "new generation warfare" concepts.

18. **Military-Technological Cooperation (MTC).** China and Russia share extensive military technologies and expertise as part of their defence industry cooperation. The moderate stage of

¹² Russia's comfort in internally redeploying approximately two thirds of its eastern border forces, as well as substantive equipment stockpiles including S-400, Pantsir-S air-defence systems and Su-35 fighters to exercises near Belarus for prolonged periods in 2022-23 speaks to a new level of trust towards the PRC.

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China-Russia Military-Technical Cooperation (MTC) began in the 1990s,¹³ with a substantial increase of technological transfer and joint tech-military projects from the mid-2000s¹⁴ with the scope to enhance military interoperability. Military cooperation between Russia and China was founded on arms sales in the early years of bilateralism (1950-60), which largely ceased during the Sino-Soviet split until the normalization of relations in 1989. Initially, Russia directly aided China in its involvement in the Korean War, starting in October 1950 with massive amounts of equipment and assistance. Russia was also key in enabling both China's civilian and military nuclear programs. Soviet assistance consisted of training Chinese scientists, supporting the PRC's weapons-grade uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing, and offering guidance with warhead design, production, and missile technologies. China subsequently detonated its first nuclear weapon in 1964 after receiving Russian assistance. Following this, however, arms sales were suspended until the early 1990s.

a. From 1991 to 2005 China profited from a new spirit of Sino-Russian collaboration and acquired large volumes of Russian weapons, including combat aircraft, *Sovremenny*-class destroyers, *Kilo*-class submarines, S-300 type air defence systems, anti-ship missiles, and numerous other platforms. Sales initially averaged around US\$2-3 billion per year, accounting for 83 percent of China's arms purchases. This soon plateaued as China quickly encouraged licensed production agreements, where Chinese defence firms acquired the rights to locally produce Russian weapons in-country using supplied assembly kits. Additionally, the PRC quickly mastered reverse engineering, practiced industrial espionage on a global scale, and developed native production capabilities.¹⁵ This is exemplified by the 500 cases of Chinese intellectual property theft from 2002 to 2019.

b. By the mid-2000s, technology transfers and joint ventures made up 30% of Russia's military equipment transfers to China.¹⁶ During this period China and Russia made several notable military deals and raised up as major Russian arms buyer. First, China received large deliveries of Russian aircraft engines, including AL-31FN, D-30KP-2, RD-33, and RD-93, which are crucial for various Chinese aircraft. Aircraft engines made up 30% of China's total arms imports from 2012-2016, with Russia being the largest supplier. Second, China imported over 200 Mi-171 medium-lift helicopters from Russia, with more than 300 in operation by 2012. These helicopters have been crucial for humanitarian efforts and the PLA's air mobility.

c. For a ten-year period following 2005, with a few notable exceptions, such as transport helicopters and turbofan aircraft engines, sales significantly declined. However,

¹³ China's military-technological modernization was significantly advanced by acquiring Russian military technologies, especially during the 1990s when Western arms embargoes were in place. Unstructured exchanges of the early 1990s were formalized with the 1992 Military-Technical Cooperation Agreement and the establishment of the Russia-China Mixed Intergovernmental Commission on Military-Technical Cooperation (MICMTC).

¹⁴ However, in the mid-2000s, China-Russia military-technical cooperation (MTC) stagnated due to China's growing self-sufficiency and Russia's concerns about reverse-engineering. This trend reversed by 2010, following the 2008 Agreement on Intellectual Property in Military-Technical Cooperation.

¹⁵ Russian defence conglomerate Rostec has identified numerous examples of Chinese reverse engineering, notably from Russian aircraft engines, planes, deck jets, air defence systems, portable air defence missiles, and surface-to-air systems.

¹⁶ In 2000, Russia overhauled its arms export structure, establishing the Russian Federation Committee for Military-Technical Cooperation with Foreign States resulting in increased arms exports and better-quality control.

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with the US Obama Administration's 'pivot towards Asia' and Russia suffering the consequences of its unilateral military occupations of adjacent territories, both countries saw value in reinstating renewed sales and cooperation. Most significantly, Russia began making concessions to China, selling more of its most advanced technologies, with Moscow supplying more than 70 percent of China's arms imports between 2014 and 2018. In 2015, for example, a US\$7 billion sale of Su-35 combat aircraft, S-400 air defence systems, as well as sophisticated combat aircraft engines was unusual. More typically, annual sales averaging US\$1.5 billion. Considering the PRC's defence spending at roughly a 3:1 ratio in comparison to Russia, the ongoing maturation and sophistication of its own national military industrial complex, and China's commitment to rapidly becoming a world leader in science and technology (S&T), today Russian arms sales to China (further reduced by the war in Ukraine) represent a much less important component of the Sino-Russian relationship.

d. Between 2006 and 2014 MTC between the two countries was disrupted due to China's dissatisfaction with the quality of Russian arms and its growing ability to produce military equipment domestically. Additionally, Russian concerns about Chinese intellectual property theft and reverse engineering led to a halt in major arms sales. Cooperation resumed with agreements to address intellectual property issues, and Russia began to supply China with critical military components like aircraft engines and helicopters.

e. By the mid-2010s, the cooperation transitioned to high-level MTC focusing on joint development and production of arms, creating long-term mutual dependencies through joint Research and Development (R&D) projects. Notably, post-2014, the relationship evolved into a reciprocal "two-way street," with Russia procuring critical items from China, such as naval diesel engines and space-grade electronic components. At the same time China became the first foreign purchaser of Russia's advanced S-400 anti-aircraft systems. Also, China purchased 24 Russian Su-35 fighter jets. These jets were quickly integrated into the Chinese military and used in patrols over the South China Sea and near Taiwan. Other notable projects include programmes related to aircraft engines and anti-aircraft weapons, such as the modernization of the Klimov RD-33 turbofan engine for the Chinese JF-17 Thunder fighter jet. One prominent area of cooperation during this period is aerospace technology. Apart from the traditional cooperation in transferring advanced aircraft technology (Su-27 and Su-35 fighter jets), the two countries began to engage in joint projects to develop new technologies, such as advanced jet engines and avionics systems. Additionally, cooperation in space navigation systems flourished as part of a broader strategic effort to enhance their technological capabilities and reduce dependence on the US Global Positioning System (GPS) system.

f. Nevertheless, over the past decade, China and Russia have developed a strong collaborative relationship aimed at enhancing the interoperability and applications of their Global Navigation Satellite Systems (GNSS), Globalnaya Navigazionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema (GLONASS), and Big Dipper Asterism (BeiDou). This collaboration includes several initiatives under the China-Russia Committee on Important Strategic Cooperation. Key initiatives include the Service Platform of Chinese-Russian Satellite

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Navigation Monitoring and Assessment, which aims to improve the interoperability of BeiDou and GLONASS; Joint Demonstrations on BeiDou and GLONASS-Based Cross-Border Transporters, focusing on practical applications in cross-border transportation; and the Joint Design Centre of Chinese-Russian Navigation Chips, dedicated to developing navigation chips operable with both systems. The China-Russia Committee on Important Strategic Cooperation has held several meetings, with the fifth meeting occurring in September 2018, and further meetings are expected to continue, reflecting ongoing and future collaboration efforts in this field.

g. The collaboration between China and Russia in space navigation systems is part of a broader strategic effort to enhance their technological capabilities and reduce dependence on the US GPS system. This partnership is also seen as a way to strengthen their geopolitical influence and technological independence. These initiatives and collaborations highlight the deepening relationship between China and Russia in space technology and their efforts to create interoperable and advanced GNSS systems.

19. **Science & Technology / Research & Development.** With the trendline of arms sales falling, joint technology projects (involving technology transfers and co-development) are rapidly escalating. This is now recognized as a critical component of Sino-Russian MTC. China has long looked to Russia to aid in the development of numerous Chinese weapons. Russia and China have also expanded cooperation on military Artificial Intelligence (AI) in UN forums, space technology, quantum computing, and public-private partnerships. Significant areas of cooperation between Chinese and Russian companies with potential implications on the Ukraine war include emerging communication technologies like 5G networks and satellite navigation. For example, 5G can improve tracking of military objects, support larger-resolution drone images, and enhance communications, including between autonomous vehicles. Further, the results of China-Russia satellite technology collaboration are already seen on the battlefield. The Russian satellite navigation system GLONASS through its partnership with the Chinese BeiDou has already improved Russian missile and drone strikes in Ukraine. It has supported Russian communication by enabling connection to the Chinese Azart portable digital radios used in the field, produced in Russia by Angstrom.

a. Cybersecurity and electronic warfare emerged as another area of tech collaboration by sharing knowledge on cyber defence mechanisms, conducting joint cyber exercises, and developing offensive cyber capabilities. Joint research and development in Emerging and Disruptive Technologies (EDTs) between the two countries also became relevant: China has played a significant role in Russia's military expansion aiding in joint projects related to drones, space capabilities, and machine-tool exports. These collaborations have revitalized Russia's defence industrial base, which faced setbacks after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

b. There is evidence that in the last years China and Russia have significantly advanced their nuclear cooperation, focusing on fast reactors, nuclear fuel cycles, and strategic deterrence capabilities. Notably, Rosatom's agreement with the China Atomic Energy Authority to supply uranium for China's CFR-600 fast-neutron reactors highlights their deepening collaboration. This cooperation extends to the provision of highly-

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enriched uranium, crucial for China's fast breeder reactors, which possess dual-use capabilities for energy and weapons-grade plutonium production. Additionally, Russia is aiding China in developing a "launch-on-warning" system, the most important and sensitive component in the strategic nuclear forces control system. If successful, this system would enhance China's second-strike capability and nuclear deterrence posture, thereby deterring potential adversaries from considering a first-strike option. Further, the possible integration of the missile launch detection system would give both countries a significant advantage in terms of the speed with which they would be warned of a missile strike from the United States (for China, from warning stations in Russia's north, and for Russia, from stations in southern and southeastern China).

c. In other words, technology projects have ushered in new levels of cooperation. Such undertakings are often characterized by long-term investments, shared research exchanges, and deeper integration of the countries' respective defence industries. That said, the Chinese remain expert at effectively selling the idea of co-development, but then quickly manipulating joint development into opportunities for acquiring Russian technology, components, and expertise outright. For instance, since the war in Ukraine, Chinese and Russian companies were cooperating to develop an attack drone similar to the Iranian Shahed model. Nevertheless, Russia retains niche expertise in areas such as heavy-lift helicopters, ballistic missile defence, military space operations, early warning systems, and long-range precision strike capabilities. Russian submarine development, including advanced quieting technology, acoustic systems, and nuclear propulsion, is particularly coveted by Beijing as it seeks to strengthen its maritime force projection capabilities in the Indo-Pacific out past the second island chain. The PRC may be interested in Russian help in the production of early warning systems, which would create compatibilities between the two countries' systems, paving the way for future integration. Russia also fears becoming overly reliant on Chinese dual-use technologies and may be reluctant to let Chinese defence firms access Russian domestic markets.

d. The promotion of defence industry integration and cooperation is further being ushered in by the PRC's advances and global leadership in numerous emerging and disruptive technologies. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) has examined 23 technologies critical to the second pillar of the AUKUS alliance, such as hypersonic weapons, quantum technology, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity. It notes that China has a significant lead over AUKUS members in 19 of these cutting-edge domains.

20. **Dual-Use Systems Transfer.** Since the Ukrainian and Western technology embargoes in 2014, Russia has increasingly turned to China for dual-use systems and technologies. Since 2014, Moscow has acquired Chinese components through joint R&D projects, technology acquisition, and direct transfers. Notably, Rostec holding companies collaborate with China on commercial and dual-use technologies, including electronic products and aerospace materials. Further, Chinese tech firms, including Huawei, have gained access to Russian markets, driving imports of Chinese technologies with military applications. Cooperation between Chinese and Russian firms extend to areas like AI, robotics, and telecommunications equipment.

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a. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Chinese exports to Russia have further risen by over 60%, providing crucial support to Russia's economy. While China has maintained a consistent stance of not providing lethal weapons¹⁷ to Russia during the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict, thus aligning with red lines set by the US and Europe, at the same time Beijing has strategically increased its exports of critical high-tech dual-use products to Russia. These items, identified by Western countries as "high priority" for weapons production, include components used in rockets and drones. China is now the largest supplier of dual-use components covered by Western export controls, including microelectronics and machine tools essential for Russia's weapons production. These countries serve as alternative import sources for Russia, allowing it to circumvent sanctions. Importantly, Chinese customs data reveal that a significant portion of these exports were not directly produced in China but rather originated from third countries and were transferred via Chinese trading companies. As a result, China has become a crucial platform for Russian access to Western dual-use goods, emphasizing its role in the evolving geopolitical landscape of the conflict and in posing a non-conventional security threat to Europe.

b. China's ambitions to become a world class military by 2049 depend on novel 'leap frogging' approaches to S&T development. As part of this shift, China has eliminated barriers between military and commercial defence industries, otherwise known as Chinese Military-Civil Fusion (MCF), which has made China a prominent supplier of dual-use goods to Russia. Although China has abstained from providing lethal arms to Russia, it has emerged as one of the main suppliers to the Russian Military Industrial Complex (RMIC)¹⁸ with critical materials and components. Chinese firms now provide machine tools, optics, semiconductors and microelectronics, all dual-use technologies, which are covered under the "high priority" export-controlled list. All these exports are used in the production of missiles, tanks and aircraft, the raw materials in the production of ammunitions, and electronic parts in making of the thousands of First-Person View (FPV) drones Russia produces. Altogether, China exports US\$300 million worth of dual-use goods per month to Russia. The key role of Chinese exports in sustaining increased production by RMIC is seen by the double increase of "high priority" dual-use goods imported from China between 2021-23 (from 41% to 89% of all Russian "high priority" imports).

c. China justifies its provision of dual-use goods to Russia as normal trade and economic relations and insists that it is following all international laws and regulations pertaining to dual-use goods. However, China may have permitted Russian front companies (firms registered in other countries who supply Russian firms) to buy high

¹⁷ Since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, Chinese exports of microchips and electronic components to Russia have surged. In early 2023, reports suggested that China might provide lethal aid to Russia during the Russo-Ukrainian War, including negotiations for delivering ZT180 prototype drones and parts for Russia's SU-27 aircraft. While US officials found no systematic evidence of Chinese assistance violating Western sanctions, the increased Chinese exports play a key role in sustaining Russia's military capacity.

¹⁸ While in the West, the term "military industrial complex" refers to both the industrial base and its relationship with military and political decision makers, in Russian, the term "оборонно-промышленный комплекс" seems to refer mostly to the industrial base and the people employed in it. In this paper, RMIC has evolved since the beginning of the war to meet the Western definition.

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priority items and ship them directly to Russia. As of 1 July 2024, China has introduced limited controls on some dual-use exports to Russia, primarily tools and software for the aviation sector. The export of these goods will now require the permission of the Chinese Ministry of Commerce or an export license.

d. Finally, China is also helping the RMIC indirectly by importing more oil and gas from Russia, thus enabling the Russian government to increase its investment in the production of weapons and ammunition. China has facilitated that investment by increasing its imports of Russian crude oil (107 million tons) by 24 percent and that of gas by 47 percent (22.7 billion cubic meters) in 2023 compared to 2022. These imports are projected to increase as China and Russia are planning a second gas pipeline (Power of Siberia-2), capable of transporting 50 billion cubic meters per year. In a high-level visit to China in April 2024, American apprehensions were recently noted by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who highlighted that Beijing had provided, “components that are powering Russia’s brutal war of aggression...” such as “...machine tools, microelectronics, and nitrocellulose,” which are crucial for producing rockets, drones, tanks, rocket propellants, and munitions. Following this address, the US State Department and Treasury Department announced sanctions against several PRC defence companies that are supporting Russia’s military-industrial base by shipping dual-use components.

21. **Emerging Developments of Sino-Russian Cooperation.** Beyond and intertwined with existing dimensions of the partnership, Russia and China are likely to keep getting closer in different spheres of international and military affairs. There is still a lot of ground for the relationship to expand as both states can benefit, so long as its foundations do not erode, or the partnership becomes otherwise unworkable. Cooperation over various regions has emerged as of late, and there are grounds for expansion of national security cooperation beyond what already exists. This section assesses cooperation in the Arctic and Indo-Pacific, Chinese partnerships in Europe, and the sharing of intelligence as well as lessons learned (LL) from Ukraine.

a. **Arctic Cooperation.**

(1) Xi Jinping has declared China’s intent to be a “polar great power” by 2030. To this end, the PRC has adopted aggressive Arctic and Antarctic strategies. Originally spurned by Russia, President Putin has increasingly facilitated the PRC’s growing Arctic ambitions since the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Leveraging this partnership, China published its first Arctic strategy paper in January 2018, unilaterally declaring itself a “Near-Arctic-State.”¹⁹ Economically, in the wake of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the PRC’s activities in the Arctic reached unprecedented levels, profiting from Russian backing to insert itself into Arctic diplomacy

¹⁹ Russia’s willingness to enable China’s Arctic aspirations is well established. As far back as 2015, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declared China “a primary partner for cooperation in the region. A 2022 experts’ panel at the Hudson Institute, for example, noted that extensive partnering between the two countries in the Arctic involved multi-use ports and airfields for energy extraction, joint scientific endeavours, as well as sharing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance data. Joint investments since Russia’s invasion in Ukraine have increased significantly, with a focus in the development of the Northern Sea Route.

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discussions, organizations, free trade agreements, research venues, and infrastructure projects. Russia's ongoing diplomatic and economic isolation are projected to increasingly enable China's Arctic footprint vis-à-vis state sponsored investments in the areas of liquified natural gas, mineral extraction, mining, as well as infrastructure projects (such as deep-water ports and railways). While ostensibly trade-based (with a focus on the shipping of Russian crude oil through the Northern Sea Route) and scientific in nature, the PRC's growing collaborations with Russia will progressively hold direct security implications for NATO.

(2) Technologically, China's construction of bases in the Antarctic heavily employs dual-use technology that will likely facilitate intelligence gathering, space operations, autonomous underwater vehicle (AUV) development, as well as military sensors enabling improved telemetry, tracking and communications, all of which will aid in future PLA missions. Moreover, it is anticipated that China will seek Russian cooperation to revise the Antarctic Treaty in 2048, potentially eroding rules on military operations in that region. An overarching strategy for China is the mixing of military-civilian interests in a manner not easily discernible. China's de facto presence in the Arctic intensifies. Scientific research and commercial ventures are likely to increasingly link China's MCF strategy, which aims to marshal civilian resources to support the PLA and ultimately fuse together China's various national strategies to simultaneously advance security and development goals. A concrete example of this is China's BeiDou satellite navigation network. Equally relevant is the PRC's extensive oceanographic surveys and acoustic modeling, which is critical for the PLA Navy to operate effectively in the far north.

(3) Militarily, the PRC is likely predisposed to frame its mounting polar efforts in non-threatening terms. Cooperation will also likely include increasingly sophisticated combined naval patrols in the Bering Sea. Furthermore, new collaborations involving ballistic missile submarines, strategic test sites, missile defence systems, and advanced radar arrays cannot be ruled out. Other trends may include more frequent joint maritime law enforcement measures, counterterrorism initiatives, as well as maritime security exercises. Precise tracking and intelligence sharing by NATO members will be needed to produce a complete and accurate picture of these evolving trends.

b. **Increased Intelligence Sharing and High-Tech Weapons.**

(1) The conflict in Ukraine has both accelerated the rate and increased the sensitivity of intelligence sharing between Russia and the PRC. While the details of this relationship remain largely classified, open-source reporting chronicles China's supply of geospatial intelligence and imagery to aid Moscow in its war against Ukraine. Likewise, bilateral cooperation in the realm of disinformation is also evident. This pattern equally extends to the transfer of sensitive high-tech weapons. While the sharing of dual-use technology (such as shipping navigation equipment, jamming technology, computer chips, drones and fighter-jet parts) has rendered China a "decisive enabler" to Russia's ongoing war effort, new trendlines

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are even more worrisome. Emerging and disruptive technologies are increasingly being incorporated into military applications, including threat identification, intelligence collection, crewed and unmanned combat systems, as well as cyber and information operations.

(2) Discussions between China and Russia are now taking place on the military use of AI, 5G, quantum, and satellite technologies. In various ways, each could prove a qualitative enabler in future conflict scenarios (such as Taiwan) by increasing network throughput, enabling high-speed data transfers, as well as offering precision targeting, unbreakable encryption, and lethal autonomous weapons. Of particular note is the extent to which the two countries are focused on space research. Putin's has publicly expressed interest in high-orbit assets and space-based weapon systems to ensure strategic security of both Russia and the PRC. Russia and China are aligning MCF efforts focused on space and counterspace doctrine, which is increasingly focused on attaining information dominance at the earliest stage of a conflict.

c. The Role of Russia in East Asian Conflict Scenarios Involving China.

(1) While there is a significant amount of information regarding China's support to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is unclear how, and the degree to which, Russia would support any Chinese revisionist pursuits in East Asia. This disparity is unsurprising given the latter remains a hypothetical, but recent comments by intelligence and military officials show greater Sino-Russian military cooperation in East Asia, specifically with respect to Taiwan, and adjustments in their contingency plans.

(2) There remain numerous uncertainties about the types of scenarios, and the degree to which Russia would support China in such scenarios, as these will vary based on the specifics of each. However, given the importance of China to Russia's grand strategic interests, Moscow would likely support China in many ways, with varying levels of intensity dependent on the specific context. Moreover, Russia would become more involved, and possibly become a direct participant, in any conflict if it assessed China was facing a major defeat. Russia cannot afford to see China severely weakened, especially at the hands of the West in a conflict, given it is the only power which can realistically challenge American hegemony. This reality is most evidenced by Russia providing significant military assistance over the decades in support of China becoming a major military power, even though China has not reciprocated in terms of similar support in boosting Russia's military capabilities.

(3) The amount of support to China would also be conditioned on Russia's strategic situation and power capabilities. For example, Russia will most likely remain focused on Europe given its ongoing invasion of Ukraine and ever-tense relationship with NATO states, which are reconstituting their military forces and view Russia as their greatest military challenge. Furthermore, while Russia cannot

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offer the same material and diplomatic support that China has provided (given its different economic situation and far more limited diplomatic pull), in a situation where China faced an extensive united opposition by the West and regional actors seeking to cut it off economically and diplomatically, Russia would become extremely important to Beijing, especially in terms of resources and international legitimacy.

(4) Like China's posture, it is likely that Russia, especially if it still has a war ongoing in Ukraine, would not want to partake militarily in any East Asian conflict alongside China unless deemed necessary. However, similar to China's approach regarding the Ukraine war, there exists a suite of scalable options Russia could pursue in supporting China. Politically, it is expected that Russia would back Beijing and work to ensure it was not isolated internationally, and most likely blame the West for causing the war. Whether Russia would have the international clout to try to play a mediator role as China has done remains unclear. Russia may also issue warnings that it could enter the conflict should it enter certain areas, especially close to its territories in Northeast Asia.

(5) Economically, Russian support would come through natural resources, energy, and food. These supply lines would become vital if other routes and flows were cut off, especially at sea, for China. Russia, however, does not have a domestic market capable of supporting a significant diversion of Chinese exports and does not have a robust financial system that could offer substantial assistance. Russia would, however, be of assistance for China in avoiding Western financial and economic sanctions and act as an intermediary by sending goods and capital from other states covertly into China.

(6) Militarily, Russia would (unlike China in terms of the Ukraine war) most likely send military weaponry to China and act as a site of greater military technology development between the two. Russia could also provide intelligence of allied movements and plans, and potentially send advisors to China given the sizable combat experience of the Russian military compared to the complete inexperience of the PLA. Russia could also deploy military assets in adjacent areas as a way of keeping NATO forces off guard and having to dedicate some level of resources and attention to them. Russia could also try to increase its abilities to conduct sabotage acts against Allied infrastructure, supply chains, and even forces in ways which enable them to claim plausible deniability. If Russia were to become a participant in a conflict, they would most likely do so as an independent force separate from China given the lack of interoperability between the two militaries, but they would do so in coordinated ways with Beijing.

(7) In general, Russia would support China if it pursued a conflict in East Asia, but the type and degree of support offered would vary based on the specific dynamics of the scenario involved, and the ability of Russia to divert resources and attention away from other strategic priorities, specifically in Eastern Europe. In virtually every scenario Russia would side and back China, but the growing

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Russian-North Korean partnership is an interesting potential outlier where Moscow and Beijing may have different interests which impede their ability and willingness to work together should a conflict break out on the Peninsula. Furthermore, Russia would be very overt in its support of China, including by providing weaponry and resources, but in most cases would be reluctant to directly join any war. A concern for the West and its partners would be the stationing and deployment of additional Russian forces in Eastern Siberia, regardless of Moscow's intent to actually deploy them in a conflict.

d. Implications from the War in Ukraine.

(1) China, lacking recent major combat experience, and heavily influenced by Russian weapons and doctrine in its ongoing force modernization efforts, will be profoundly influenced by its assessments of Russian military performance over the course of the Russia-Ukraine War. Western assessments indicate that the PRC will be critically evaluating numerous areas for potential adaptations in possible Taiwan scenarios. Focal points include the effectiveness of unmanned surface vessel (USV) attacks on naval facilities and warships, the use of attack helicopters in providing extensive air cover and firepower for amphibious forces, the potential of rotary-wing aircraft to transport capabilities and special forces, and the utility of hypersonic weapons on the battlefield (such as Russia's air launched Kh-47M2 Kinzhal missile). China also stands to gain from Russia's lessons learned from electronic warfare capabilities in Ukraine, space operations, and testing of ballistic missile systems. In addition to more technical questions, China will likely reconsider the PLA's battalion-level tactical groups' ability to be self-sustaining in combat and effectively fight protracted and high-intensity conflicts of attrition. From a defensive perspective, the PRC is likely to explore effective countermeasures to the employment of the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), a US built medium-range mobile rocket launcher, which has aptly proven its capabilities to deliver devastating blows against key nodes behind an enemy's front lines. A final area of interest will be mine warfare, both its potential use to slow a Chinese attack on Taiwan, as well as the potential of sea mines to both blockade Taiwanese ports and deter the US Navy from offering direct support to the island.

(2) In sum, the Sino-Russian partnership will likely continue to increase and diversify its challenges to the Western liberal world order in different domains and regions through increased cooperation. It covers many dimensions of political and military cooperation. While decreasing in some respects, arms trade and defence research and development will continue to be important. The war in Ukraine has opened a new dimension to the partnership, which may continue depending on Western actions to reduce China's ability to support the Russian war effort. Most notably, joint exercises have become increasingly common and are used as a means of posturing against NATO. It is likely that cooperation will expand into new areas, notably the Arctic and Indo-Pacific. Several aspects of the Sino-Russian partnership run counter to NATO interests and values, highlighting the growing

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systemic challenges posed by the PRC, which threaten Euro-Atlantic security.²⁰ As long as cooperation benefits both parties sufficiently and competing interests do not overlap, there is little reason to believe that the partnership would not extend in any given direction.

(3) However, the relationship remains built on precarious foundations. A number of issues could cause problems if they were to magnify, from conflicting regional interests to technology theft and competing arms industries. More critically, Sino-Russian cooperation is founded on opposition to the US and the Western order. Reduced American power or erosion of the liberal system could make the competing conceptions of the replacement order a major source of tension, if not outright opposition. The seeming decline of Russian power and the coinciding rise of China is worsening the asymmetry of the partnership. If Russia is willing to accept an increasingly junior role, continued cooperation under Chinese leadership is feasible. However, if Russia nationalist sentiment was to prevail in its foreign policy, it would likely oppose a subordinate role, which could ultimately spell the demise of the current period of close relationship.

(4) Looking forward, the degree of China's increasing influence over Russia will likely be manifested by a short-list of possible indicators. For example, to what extent will the PRC incur genuine risk (and possible retribution from the West) in providing Russia with the lethal military aid it requires in Ukraine? Likewise, will China implement measures that enable Moscow to either evade export controls, or process banned financial transactions? Additionally, how effective will the PRC be in utilizing its rapidly increasing national power resources to secure disproportionately advantageous outcomes in overlapping domains of interest with Russia, most notably Central Asia, the Arctic, and Africa? To what extent will China be able to obtain the most sophisticated and latest generation of Russian military technologies (submarine related), prioritized joint development projects (such as missile defence systems), and the co-production of sophisticated new weapons (to enable military space operations and precision strike capabilities)? Concurrently, will Russia and China develop denser and mutually dependent intelligence sharing relationships than currently exist? Moreover, how successful will China be in determining the nature, location, and leadership roles in joint military exercises that offer it advantages in promoting interoperability in East Asia, command experience, and LL to inform possible Taiwan conflict scenarios? Finally, when crises emerge, such as the Wagner mutiny, how far will China go in bolstering Putin's regime, versus suddenly proving non-committal and opportunistic?

Legal Perspective on Sino-Russian use of Lawfare

22. At the beginning of the 21st century, the use of the law as a tool of warfare gained prominence and popularity. Law has emerged as an integral element of gray zone competition, statecraft performed by both China and Russia, as well as an integral part of armed conflict

²⁰ The 2022 NATO Strategic Concept emphasizes the significance of countering the growing Sino-Russian partnership and highlights the importance of the Indo-Pacific and Arctic regions for Euro-Atlantic security.

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campaigns. While using law as one of the tools in warfighting is not inherently negative, its abuse and malicious interpretation undermines the principles of the rules-based international order, based on democracy, transparency, and respect for human rights. Legal warfare (lawfare) is being used in order to leverage one's own legal arguments and existing international institutions to achieve military and political objectives. Lawfare encompasses both the use of law as a weapon and the exploitation of legal systems for political and strategic gain while strategically manipulating legal frameworks and mechanisms to gain advantages in armed conflicts.

23. The first use of the term “lawfare” was in 1975 by John Carlson and Neville Yeomans. Yet their definition was unclear and only briefly mentioned the essence, stating: “Lawfare replaces warfare, and the duel is with words rather than swords.”²¹ In 2001, Major General Charles Dunlap expanded on this, saying that “the use of law as a weapon of war, is the newest feature of 21st century combat,” and “the rule of law is being hijacked into just another way of fighting (lawfare), to the detriment of humanitarian values as well as the law itself.” Lawfare quickly captured scholarly, analytical, and popular imaginations. Dunlap had demonstrated that lawfare is a weapon that is not only wielded by US adversaries but also by the US government in its global war on terror—through “counter-lawfare.”²²

24. Beijing and Moscow are both using every possible means, including lawfare, to achieve their political, economic, and military goals domestically as well as globally. Examples of their collaboration, to list a few, include: 1) CCP forcing 5 million Uyghurs into concentration camps. 2) state control of media and imprisoning of journalist that do not align with party messaging. 3) Justifying the seizure of sovereign terrain or initiating a proxy-war to “protect” Russian citizens. In the international arena, it is also noteworthy how Chinese and Russian message to their own allies. The countries supporting those regimes, or at least not opposing their internal and external politics, vote in their favour or abstain in the United Nations General Assembly. Furthermore, developing states in Africa, South America, and Oceania support the “new regional alternative,” especially amid the lack of an alternative from the West, and the abundance of various forms of donations, humanitarian aid, equipment to schools and hospitals, and basic infrastructure. The most vulnerable, underdeveloped countries become more and more dependent on Russian and Chinese foreign aid and investments, increasing their foreign debt towards Moscow or Beijing. “Debt trapping” is a mechanism that forces countries into political submission in exchange for reducing unpayable loans embedded in mutually agreed legal arrangements.

25. **Legal Tactics to Influence and Change the World Order.**

a. Both Russia and China intent to reshape the rules-based international order and increase their economic, military, technological and diplomatic outreach. The PRC exploits and misrepresents international law for its own benefit and at the expense of other nations. Chinese influence in Europe is immense, done through highly sophisticated acquisitions, business transactions and designing infrastructure which at first glance does not show their geopolitical will to spread their own values or increase and maintain the spheres of power. Thus, in numerous European states, the PRC is perceived as a key economic ally, emphasizing financial influence over fostering mutually beneficial

²¹ Carlson & Yeomans, “The Way Out”, 1975.

²² Charles Dunlap, Duke University, Center on Law, Use of Force in International Law curriculum.

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relationships. Chinese enterprises, spanning various sectors such as harbors, airports, electronics, telecommunications, energy suppliers and higher education, have strategically invested and established mechanisms of influence over the past decade.²³ Letting the PRC enter so many critical infrastructure sectors and their supply chains has enabled the PRC to collect critical intelligence about who is involved in key decision-making processes and how to influence and disrupt them to China's advantage. Due to Chinese investments and encroachments into the energy sector, the PRC has gained potential leverage against Europe. The PRC has been accused by both the United States and the EU of promoting corruptive behavior as well as the frequent use of debt traps. Likewise, Russia uses the same mechanisms not only towards its own citizens, but also in all post-Soviet nations and its satellite states in Europe and Asia. Moreover, it strives for a global approach with the deployment of mercenaries, disinformation, election interference, support for coups, and arms for resources deals, especially in Africa.

b. The Russian and Chinese governments have repeatedly abused and weaponized domestic and international law to support their political and military endeavors. Again, it must be clearly stated that Russia's and China's weaponization of the law is part of their national strategies to satisfy, convince and maintain support from their own domestic opinion and sow discord between the West and their partners in their regions and globally. National-, regional-, and universal law is now viewed as a means to shape operational spaces, forge perceptions of legitimacy and constrain potential (and actual) adversaries, all in conjunction with the willingness to use military force.

c. The PRC and the Russian Federation employ their grand strategies with comprehensive whole-of-nation statecraft to increase their geopolitical influence, develop geostrategic access, and accumulate resources through the application of national political, economic, or security means to influence other actors. The propaganda machines from Beijing and Moscow are deeply embedded in legal warfare as one component of broader political-influence operations utilizing double standards in the interpretation and enforcement of international law. The repetitive propagation of (legally unfounded) Chinese maritime claims in the Indo-Pacific region and the leveraging of vulnerabilities created by climate change, as well as Russian terrestrial claims towards Georgia, Transnistria and Ukraine, are direct results of "One China" and "Great Russia" policies.

d. In the case of both those states, their lawfare is aimed at shaping the perception of their actions. Moscow and Beijing draft and deploy malign narratives by manipulating facts, distorting the meaning of international obligations, passing undemocratic and dehumanizing domestic legislation, and finally spreading broader disinformation and propaganda efforts via social media. These actions gain more and more impact on personal choices, thus shaping future stances on patriotism, democracy and the willingness (or not) to militarily defend the shared values.

²³ Between 2015 and 2016 alone, Chinese investment in the European Union (EU) grew by 77%, including telecommunications, real estate, and the automotive industry. In 2019, the transport, energy, utilities, and infrastructure sectors were the four largest sectors of Chinese foreign direct investment in the EU, with 800 million euros.

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e. Both Russia and China are members of the United Nations Security Council, which drafts and creates the most important sources of law and resolutions for the international legal system. They both agreed to abide by the laws of the rule-based international order, yet they constantly try to impose double standards and present opportunistic approaches in the international law of the sea, law of armed conflict, environmental law, space law, and recently trying to shape the cyber law. Territorial integrity, as a bedrock principle of sovereignty, as well as maintaining peace and stability are major components of international order, created by the United Nations Charter. The cyber domain is becoming the next area of operations where lawfare is already being used by both Nations to gain strategic advantages and impose their political-military primacy over the democratic world.

f. Finally, both Russia and China are fully aware of the lack of legal mechanisms and their limited applicability in many spheres, which creates legal gaps or loopholes. Usage of drones, AI policy or military exercises exist in legal niches. Those are areas that are the most outstanding and implicitly vital for the international security and stability. Concerning military exercises, Moscow and Beijing readily seize the resulting opportunities to create and exploit legal grey zones as well as frequently breach international law, while knowing that little can be done against their malevolent conduct because of their prominent role as permanent members of the UN Security Council.

26. **Lawfare Implications and Recommendations for NATO.**

a. Legal culture enormously affects modern armed conflict where military potency is not the only decisive factor of winning. Application and enforcement of law becomes more and more vital for long-term stability, setting own standards – legal, political, economic, and cultural – in new or old spheres of influence. Adversaries to the democratic civilizations are not ashamed of using this new, effective, rapid and in fact cheap means to accomplish their military goals. They strategically use legal proceedings to intimidate, hamper and challenge their adversaries' policies, actions and omissions under a semi-legal impression.

b. China and Russia have proven many times their flexibility in the interpretation of international law to justify their acts of war, aggression, espionage, economic dependence, bribing local politicians, spreading disinformation and propaganda, supporting military coups, destabilizing already fragile countries, and publishing openly anti-Western statements. If certain legal agreements, interpretations or norms are not in alignment with their strategy, Moscow and Beijing just withdraw from them or ignore them, well aware of the lack of executive means to punish their deeds. On the other hand, they create new customs and soft law arrangements in spheres and domains. Legal warfare (lawfare) is being used effectively by those two countries in order to accomplish their political-military aims. They decided to incorporate the usage of law in their main tactics, elevating law as equally important as their military capabilities, diplomatic means and economic tools. Lawfare represents a central tool of contestation between NATO and its major adversaries while shaping contrasting ways in which NATO and its adversaries' approach it. The West made a mistake in underestimating Russia's imperialistic appetite.

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Russia's war in Ukraine illustrates both points of centring lawfare as NATO's strategic method of securing its democratic values, as well of using legal culture for better understanding of the perpetrators and their true intentions.

c. Therefore, an increasing legal and cultural awareness is a key recommendation. Without understanding opponents' motives, rationale, background and assets, the Alliance will never be able to successfully counter their capabilities. Secondly, a common understanding of the adversaries means, ways and ends is indispensable, despite national interests and obligations of particular NATO members both regionally and globally. Thirdly, NATO and its partners should actively publicize misbehavior and any minor or major breaches of international law by the opponents on all available channels. Gathering, monitoring and publicizing sources and data is an easy, fast and effective way to present how undemocratic states act, why they do so, and what potential consequences for the RBIO could transpire.

d. Finally, NATO and its allies, following the international law principle of good faith, will always be in a position of disadvantage when expecting authoritarian countries and war criminals to follow the law. The Alliance must not be fooled into thinking that what it holds sacred also applies to the Russia and China. Deterrence should not only mean diplomacy or other soft tools but the application of the whole spectrum available to counter Russian or Chinese malignant actions. Undoubtedly, international law is not always clear and there are certain areas where norms have not been formulated. Nevertheless, we must use legitimized legal methods as a beneficial tool to protect democratic civilizations and should also prevent the spread of authoritarian tendencies in other unstable regions.

Alliance or Partnership

27. Current Sino-Russian behavior and actions clearly pose a threat to the international order and security. Their unilateral actions would be considered assertive at a minimum by the international community but their concerted and aligned efforts to destabilize the current status quo makes it indispensable to look at the bigger picture, their level of alignment in the geo-strategic arena. One needs to understand that their collaboration went through various stages consisting of phases of ideologic convergence, alienation and rapprochement. Sino-Russian cooperation was a logical result based on the need to level the dominating role of the United States during the cold war and its aftermath. In the period after World War II, Russia emerged as communist power on the global stage while China started to consolidate its new ideologically driven communist-nation approach beginning in 1949. This trajectory would bring up two competitors in the international order challenging the United States as dominant power, trying to shift a unipolar into a tripolar world order. Those respective shifts occurred through closer collaboration between the two communist nations to counter the US.

28. On the other side, the US tried to enhance relations with China in order to diminish Soviet power and put a divisive element between the two. These constellations were also of utmost importance for NATO's strategic alignment, as the US fulfilled the leading role in the Alliance and for partners in the West. The emanating results of potential power shifts in the Sino-Russian-US constellation were impactful, potentially endangering peace and stability. Considering the

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parties' different motives, political-, economic-, ideological- and military background and how they shape the strategic geopolitical landscape, this still applies today and even more in the future.²⁴

29. The question arises on the likelihood of direct military confrontation with NATO and its allies in present times. The assessments of the nature and effectiveness of the Sino-Russian partnership are varying in the scientific community with different, in part opposing assessments. Some experts state that their current level of engagement is cause for concern, extrapolated from historical data of alliance formations and their willingness to employ aggressive, confrontational and assertive strategies. Based on this, there is the assumption that less formalized agreements are less dangerous and vice versa. In contrast to that, other researchers assume that this partnership does not compare to an alliance such as NATO due to diverging economic standing and long-term geo-strategic interests. Therefore, security implications for the Alliance would remain unchanged but that a potential devastating clash between NATO and a Sino-Russian formation would be less likely.

30. **Diverging Political-Military Assessments.**

a. Currently, China and Russia are partners with aligned interests, but are the two states in an alliance? Is their relationship underpinned by a military treaty that formally obligates the nations to mutual military cooperation? Observed from a scientific standpoint, the conclusion is affirmative. This is based on three factors: first, the Sino-Russian relationship meets the analytic definition of an alliance; secondly, the Sino-Russian formal agreements and relationship compare favourably to other key historic examples of states widely seen as in alliance; and finally, the Sino-Russian formal agreements match the post-Cold War trend of states forming alliances that are “consultative” rather than containing explicit direct “mutual defence” clauses.

b. The historian William Langer observed that rapid movements toward alliance formation and consolidation often precede the outbreak of major wars. Such agreements represent “insurance policies,” as states seek to secure resources and organize their diplomatic relations in the event of conflict. Moreover, it is well established by international relations scholars that alliances are a necessary condition for multilateral wars to break out and for regionally limited bilateral wars, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, to potentially morph into major multilateral conflagrations.

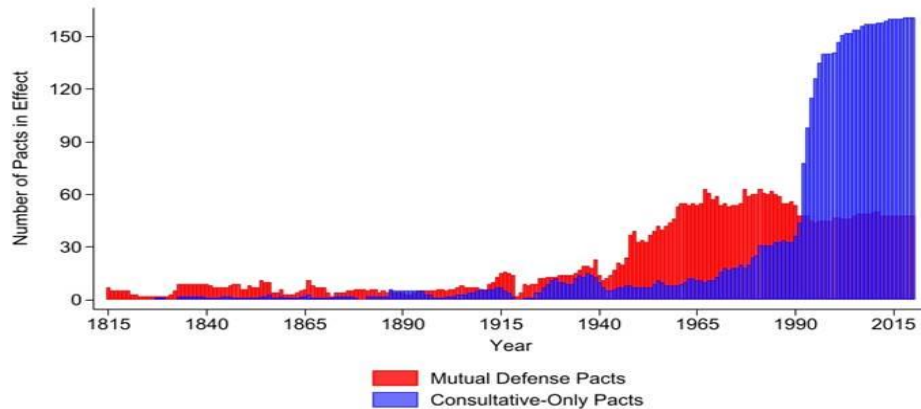
c. In his 2019 book, Professor Paul Poast confirmed Langer’s observations by using data on pre-1945 negotiations to form alliances among European powers. The figure below from Professor Poast shows spikes in attempts to form alliances and consultative pacts in the lead-up and early stages of periods of major war: the Crimean War (1853 to 1856), Franco-Prussian War (1870 to 1871), World War I (1914-1918), World War II (1939-1945) and the Cold War.²⁵

²⁴ The dynamics of power is best described in Hans Morgenthau’s analysis of power balance in tripolar systems in 1948. It basically states that an alliance, a certain level of collaboration or good relations between two parties keep a third party or competitor in check.

²⁵ Arguing About Alliances: The Art of Agreement in Military Pact Negotiations, Paul Poast.

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Graph created by Professor Paul Poast for the ESRP study.

d. The conclusions of this assessment could be compared to a recent report by the RAND Corporation titled “Future Scenarios for Sino-Russian Military Cooperation”.²⁶ It draws on a definition of alliances from Stephen Walt’s 1987 book *Origins of Alliances*.²⁷ While this is indeed an important manuscript, it has a dated conception of alliances, as it stresses both *formal* (i.e. treaty based) and *informal* (i.e. ad-hoc) arrangements. But this is more accurately labeled “alignment”, not “alliance”. Subsequent work, namely the body of research produced by international relations scholar Ashley Leeds and her co-authors, offers an updated notion of alliance that focuses on formal arrangements. This stricter definition of alliance is important because states found to be in an alliance have a qualitatively different relationship than those who are not.

e. According to Ashley Leeds, an alliance is “a formal agreement among independent states to cooperate militarily in the face of potential or realized military conflict”. By formal agreement, Leeds relies on the classic definition from Toscano where a formal agreement can be a “ratified treaty; official exchanges of notes; executive agreements; joint statement verbales”.²⁸ Such formal agreements can specify five types of military cooperation:

- (1) Defensive obligation - pledge to support one another if the other is attacked.
- (2) Offensive obligation - pledge to work together to attack a particular threat.
- (3) Consultative - pledge to communicate with one another if one of the members is attacked.

²⁶ https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2061-5.html, RAND’s Future Scenarios study.

²⁷ *Origins of Alliances*, Stephen Walt, 1987, Cornell University Press.

²⁸ Ashley Leeds, “Alliance treaty obligations and provisions, 1815-1944.”

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- (4) Neutrality obligation - the states pledge to not become involved if one of the members is involved in a war with another state.
- (5) Nonaggression obligation - the states pledge to not attack one another.

To be clear, a given formal agreement need not be limited to just one form of military cooperation. For example, the North Atlantic Treaty has both a consultative provision (Article 4) and a defensive provision (Article 5).

f. Therefore, do the most recent Sino-Russian formal agreements (2001 Establishment of SCO, 2022 Joint Declaration, 2024 Joint Declaration) call on Russia and China to militarily cooperate? They do. The 2001 agreement has a consultative provision and a nonaggression provision. The consultative provision in Art. 9 states “If one believes that there is a threat of aggression menacing peace, wrecking peace, and involving its security interests and is aimed at one of the parties, the two parties will immediately make contact and hold consultations in order to eliminate the threat that has risen.” The nonaggression provision in Art. 2 states, “The two parties will not use force or the threat of force in their mutual relations”. One could go further, noting that the 2022 formal agreement has a provision that can be read as strengthening their consultative pledge and could even be labeled a quasi-mutual defence provision: "Friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation."²⁹

g. Being part of an alliance is meaningful in that it clearly signals the seriousness by which the members view the security concerns over their co-signatories. While the nations could split, just as China and Russia have done in the past, the likelihood of doing so is lower, and the costs of doing so are greater, if they are in a treaty relationship. This would especially be the case for both Russia and China, which want to have the perception of being stalwart protectors and adherents of international law.

h. Despite almost two decades of strengthening ties and the current announcements supporting a “New Era” of cooperation “without limits”, as well as commitments of mutual assistance and defence, Sino-Russian relations still do not meet the standards of a formal alliance. This assessment is justified by the following observations. **The Sino-Russian relationship is one of convenience, heavily reliant on the common perception of the western, liberal world order and American hegemony as hindering their interests.** Both states share a vision of a multipolar world, but this aspiration is not clearly defined and could prove to be contradictory. This is notwithstanding the numerous public, high-level face-to-face summits, such as President Putin’s highly symbolic visit to Beijing in May 2024, his first diplomatic trip abroad since securing a fifth term in office. That being said, the level of bilateral collaboration, shared interest, and mutual cooperation is extremely high.³⁰ For instance, since 1996, China and Russia have progressively

²⁹ The European Parliament has a succinct summary of this 2022 agreement at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/729349/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)729349_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/729349/EPRS_BRI(2022)729349_EN.pdf)

³⁰ Bilateral interactions between high-level Russian and Chinese military officials occur 20 to 30 times a year in multilateral fora, such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation events.

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enhanced their bilateral relationship, evolving from ‘strategic coordination’ to ‘comprehensive partnership’ through a series of diplomatic upgrades.

i. Recognizing that the historic signed declaration between the two leaders in early 2022 proclaiming “No limits [to] Sino-Soviet cooperation and no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation” was more hyperbole than fact, China’s relationship with Russia is witnessing a “historic high.” This declaration by the two sides was built upon a mutual acceptance of each other’s positions on national sovereignty, security, territorial integrity, and economic development. Moreover, Russia has openly sided with China’s goal of reunification with Taiwan by supporting the ‘one-China principle,’ in line with the 2001 Treaty of Good Neighborliness.³¹ China sees cooperation with Russia as a critical way to maintain leverage against the global encirclement put in place by the US-alliance network. Likewise, the PRC has voiced its opposition to NATO enlargement and supported Russian proposals to create long-term legally binding security guarantees in Europe. Concerning the conflict in Ukraine, China has consistently failed to criticize Russia’s aggression and even provided clandestine aid to the war effort vis-à-vis drones, scanners, jammers, and ruggedized computers.³² It has purposely abstained from international condemnations by the United Nations, continued to serve as Russia’s economic lifeline, and has increased its role as a military partner of growing significance.

j. Looking at China’s and Russia’s present strategic alignment while trying to assess how it will develop in the future, NATO and the West need to recollect that the Sino-Russian relationship is a relationship of necessity. They seem powerful through their assertive actions in nearly all domains but both countries have varying priorities that diverge from each other and make future consolidated cooperation questionable. China’s priority is economic deployment and territorial consolidation, while Russia’s aim is directed towards its geo-strategic Cold War status quo. They don’t engage due to shared values and seem to only be aligned due to their perceived weaknesses with the aim to influence the strategic balance. That fact combined with their ongoing adverse actions marks the challenge for the Alliance. Although, the scientific views on the formal level of this partnership may diverge, the potential consequences for NATO, its allies and the RBIO remain unchanged.

Limits Of Cooperation & Potential Future Conflicts

31. While the Sino-Russian partnership has become significantly more extensive over recent years, its strength should not be overstated. Fundamentally, ties between two great powers are precarious as they are unlikely not to consider the other as somewhat of a threat. The growing power disparity between Russia and China could amplify this, magnified by the often-competing interests in regions like Central Asia and the Middle East. The marriage of convenience to oppose American power and the liberal world order only works so long as there is a common

³¹ Russia has declared its unqualified support for the ‘One-China’ principle as defined by Beijing, confirming Taiwan is an inalienable part of China, and rejecting any form of Taiwanese independence.

³² The White House clarified on 24 January 2023 that it is closely monitoring China’s material support to Russia’s war effort in Ukraine.

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force to unite against. Given unclear and possibly conflicting definitions of the multipolarity end goal which unites them, the partnership could find itself on untenable grounds in the future.

32. Fundamental Issues with the Partnership.

a. While the Russia-China partnership was built as an equal relationship, the power of the two countries has changed over time to heavily favour the Chinese. The Chinese economy is second most-powerful on the globe, significantly more so than Russia, with a growing military in multi-domain capability and modernization. Meanwhile, Russia has stagnated (especially in the face of increasing western sanctions) and its current power status is largely upheld by its land-focused military and nuclear weapons. It appears that China is ascending while Russia is declining. Senior Chinese Communist Party leaders are not pleased by the complications Putin's actions have imposed on their lofty aspirations of promoting 'the Chinese Dream.' Niceties aside, President Xi no doubt remains committed to a fundamentally instrumentalist approach to Russia, which it now considers a weakened, sometimes erratic, and potentially domestically unstable strategic partner.

b. This power asymmetry will naturally push the partnership into a senior-junior partner dynamic. Historically, both countries have been in partnerships as a senior actor in which they took advantage of weaker allies. This sets a precedent for difficult relationships, which could be worsened by the proximity in power of Russia and China. This is exacerbated by the nationalist impulses of both states and their foreign policies; it is questionable whether Russia will accept an increasingly junior role in the relationship. Arguably, this will determine the future of the partnership, as without a united purpose of opposing the West, the two states may see each other more as threats if they cannot resolve seniority issues. A consensus exists that the PRC will capitalize on its mounting asymmetry with Russia. Beijing is likely to increasingly profit from Russia's attenuated national power resources. It will strive to displace Russia in Central Asia. China must balance its strategic support with Russia while avoiding damage to its relationship with Indo-Pacific and European partners, as well as avoid penalties for violating international sanctions.

33. Regional Competition and Disagreements.

a. Russia and China share the goal of undermining US hegemony within the Global South but have different strategies to pursue this goal. Both within the Middle East and Africa regions, Sino-Russian cooperation is tactful and shows some lack of mutual trust. Beijing prioritizes economic reforms, stability, and investments in infrastructure, while Moscow's approach focuses on security and geopolitical stability. With the war in Ukraine, China has increasingly been overtaking Russia in arms sales and military cooperation.

b. A centre piece of China's foreign policy towards the Global South is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Global Security Initiative (GSI). Through the BRI, China exerts its military and economic influence by funding numerous mega-infrastructure projects, forty-six ports within the Africa region, and a military base in Djibouti. Beijing has

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sold planes, drones, and missiles to countries in the African and Middle East regions. Through the GSI, China seeks to provide a new security infrastructure to the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region. It also funds military officers to attend Chinese security training programmes and has assisted Saudi Arabia in developing its first drone factory. The civil-military fusion of the BRI and GSI augments commercial and surveillance capabilities of recipient countries, while eroding Russian influence.

c. In the African region, Russia is focused on providing military support and energy security. It currently supplies 49 percent of Africa's military equipment. However, current Western sanctions have increased the difficulty for Moscow to sell weapons, providing space for Chinese-made weaponry in the African region. Further, Russia's usage of paramilitary groups, which provides direct military support in return for resource concessions, has caused some regional instability in the Middle East and African regions. This may be a cause of concern for Chinese leadership given its focus on economic stability.³³ In Central Asia, Russia ensures regional stability through political interventions, which may be undermined by Chinese economic interests.³⁴ It has also tried to limit Chinese economic influence.

d. Looking ahead, Chinese and Russian leadership still hold interest in staying aligned in the Global South, especially considering Russia's increased economic dependence on China since the start of the Ukraine war. China and Russia have held joint military exercises, including Exercise Mosi II with South Africa and Operation Maritime Security Belt with Iran to antagonize the West. In short, despite some fissures in their interests, continued military cooperation with countries in the Global South continues to provide long-term strategic advantages to both sides.

34. **Conflicting Geopolitical Interests.**

a. China and Russia's military alignment is constrained by regional hedging, driven by their diverging geopolitical interests and historical mistrust. Despite their shared goals of countering the US influence and counter the Western liberal order, territorial disputes and a legacy of suspicion lead both Nations to engage in military activities aimed at protecting their own interests and maintaining a balance of power in the region. This hedging behavior reflects a cautious approach and might prevent a full military alignment and operational interoperability.

b. Potential frictions might arise over Central Asia due to their differing approaches to influence and dominance in the region. Russia relies on political and military means, leveraging organizations like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and

³³ Russia has repeatedly deployed the Wagner group, which has threatened Chinese economic interests. In 2019, the Wagner group supported the Libyan National Army to seize major oil facilities in eastern Libya, threatening Chinese commercial interests with the Tripoli-based government. See Samuel Ramani, "The potential and limitations of the Russia-China cooperation in the Middle East," *The Middle East Institute*, June 13, 2023.

³⁴ In Central Asia, Chinese and Russian models of international cooperation differ. China respects international sovereignty and prioritizes economic development, while Russia may intervene to ensure geopolitical stability near its border. For instance, in 2022, the Russian military intervened in Astana, Kazakhstan to suppress anti-government riots. See Olzhas Auyezov, "Russia sends troops to put down Kazakhstan as fresh uprising erupts," *Reuters*, January 6, 2022.

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Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), to maintain its traditional sphere of influence. In contrast, China's strategy is primarily economic, focused on infrastructure development through the BRI. These differing strategies can lead to competition if regional crises arise, with Russia's historical ties and military presence clashing with China's growing economic influence.

c. Another potential area of conflict between China and Russia is the Arctic, where climate change is opening new navigation routes and resource opportunities. Russia, with its extensive Arctic coastline and military presence, seeks to dominate the region, while China as an observer nation, aims to participate in Arctic governance and resource exploitation. These ambitions might clash, especially if China seeks a larger role in regional security or resource allocation. While there are signs of cooperation, underlying tensions and differing interests are largely held at bay at the national level. Russian national sovereignty is the largest obstacle to China gaining permanent or unrestricted access to the Arctic.

d. In the Indo-Pacific region, China's ambitions in the South China Sea and its BRI are key to its regional strategy, which sometimes conflicts with Russia's interests in the Indo-Pacific. Russia's relationship with countries like India and Vietnam, also wary of China's intentions, further complicates the strategic situation around the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, the two Nations differ in their approach and management of North Korea: Russia engages diplomatically and economically with Pyongyang, while China has a more complex relationship, balancing support with frustration over North Korea's nuclear ambition. Yet to be fully understood is the ongoing use of North Korean troops in the Kursk front of the war against Ukraine. These differing perspectives can lead to tensions, especially if a crisis on the Korean Peninsula requires a coordinated response.

35. **Arms Trade and Defence Industry Frictions.**

a. In military technological cooperation, Sino-Russian relations are less one-sided, but the trajectory overall still favours China. Arms sales are no longer a defining advantage for Russia. Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, Beijing only purchased US\$1-2 billion annually. Through theft, reverse engineering, international espionage, and often unfairly advantageous joint co-development, the PRC has developed into the world's fourth largest arms exporter. Its interests today are only in the most sophisticated of Russian weapons and technologies. On this front, China enjoys continued success in skillfully using its many and varied levers to extract concessions. As a base for co-development and shared funding, China's position has never been stronger, particularly as Russian military stockpiles (including some of its most advanced kit, like the T-90M main battle tank and AMN Armored Vehicles) have been decimated. Chinese intellectual theft and leveraging of its position vis-à-vis Russia may progressively erode the goodwill in the relationship.

b. In terms of arm exports, Russia and China are increasingly competing internationally, which may erode the relationship. This is because both countries share the same customer pool for their military equipment, mostly composed of countries who

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cannot buy Western weapons due to export restrictions or that cannot afford them. Accordingly, any increase in Chinese exports is likely to cause a decrease in Russian sales. Both nations are rapidly modernizing their military forces, which could trigger an arms race and foster mutual suspicions. Russia possesses advanced military technology, a critical asset for China. However, China's increasing reliance on Russian arms may raise concerns about strategic vulnerability. Conversely, Russia might worry about China's expanding military capabilities, potentially surpassing Russian strength and creating an imbalance within the partnership. Furthermore, the economic relationship between China and Russia exhibits significant asymmetry. While China is Russia's largest trading partner, Russia ranks much lower in China's trade relations. This disparity grants China considerable leverage, potentially leading to resentment or a sense of vulnerability within Russia. Should economic tensions escalate, they might spill over into the military domain, weakening the overall partnership.

36. **Lack of a Common Defence Policy.** China and Russia both value their strategic autonomy (as explained in the previous chapter). However, the lack of a common defence policy could lead to divergent military strategies, as both countries have their own national interests and may prioritize their own security concerns over collective military initiatives. This can result in limitations on the extent to which they fully align their military strategies and operations. For example, China's increasing naval presence in the Arctic, an area of strategic importance to Russia, could cause friction. Similarly, Russia's actions in Central Asia, a region where China's economic and strategic interests are expanding, might lead to competitive rather than cooperative dynamics. Furthermore, each country may have different priorities when it comes to their military capabilities and defence strategies. This can result in variations in the allocation of resources, levels of engagement, or willingness to cooperate on certain military projects. Differing priorities can limit the extent to which their military alignment translates into concrete collaboration.

37. **Risk of Abandonment and Entrapment.**

a. A central challenge in the Sino-Russian military relationship is the dual risk of abandonment and entrapment. Both countries are acutely aware of the dangers of being left unsupported in a crisis (abandonment) or being dragged into a conflict due to the other's actions (entrapment). The risk of abandonment is particularly salient in the context of their independent foreign policies. While they share common adversaries and strategic objectives, both China and Russia prioritize their national interests. Conversely, the risk of entrapment is evident in scenarios where one country's actions could compel the other to respond, potentially leading to unwanted escalation. For example, China's assertive policies in the South China Sea and East China Sea could draw Russia into regional conflicts that it might prefer to avoid. Similarly, Russia's aggressive stance in Eastern Europe could compel China to take sides, thereby jeopardizing its broader strategic interests.

b. To date, Russia has been cautious in expanding relations with Asian states to avoid controversies involving China, leading to its marginalization in some regional matters. For example, Russia has remained silent on China's conflicts in the East and

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South China Seas and has limited its relations with Vietnam due to the 2001 Sino-Russian treaty. China, on the other hand, has adjusted its One Belt One Road initiative to accommodate Russian sensitivities, emphasizing cooperation rather than competition with Russia's Eurasian Economic Union. Despite some policy dilemmas, such as Russia's interventions in Ukraine and Syria, China has shown understanding of Russia's broader goals and has accepted Russian actions to some extent. The killing of a Chinese national by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has further justified China's support for the anti-terrorist struggle.

c. Successful military cooperation relies on a high level of trust and effective communication between the two parties. Any breakdown in trust or miscommunication can hinder the coordination and effectiveness of their military alignment. Building and maintaining trust is an ongoing process that demands continuous efforts from both sides. According to this assessment, the strategic trust between the two countries has currently reached a high level. However, vulnerabilities stemming from delicate cultural ties and reliance on the personal relationship between the two presidents could potentially reverse this trend in the future. Russia is apprehensive that China's evolving calculations could result in abandonment, particularly given Moscow's pivot to the East, which underscores the need to develop its sparsely populated Far East. Additionally, mutual mistrust regarding each other's motives, coupled with concerns about Russia assuming a subordinate role, complicates the assessment of their future military alignment.

d. Differing perceptions of escalation dynamics further exacerbate the probability of misalignment in case of regional tension. While the military alignment enhances deterrence, Russia's emphasis on using force or coercion contrasts with China's more cautious approach focusing on defensive deterrence and limited strikes. This misalignment in strategy and decision-making can impact their coordination in crisis or conflicts. There are many issues both small and large which may drive Russia and China apart. Arguably, it is the opposition to the Western world order which holds them together; without this, the structural issues of power disparity, regional competition and disagreements over specific dimensions of the partnership could erode the relationship or pull it apart all together.

Conclusion & Recommendations for the Alliance

38. The autocratic leadership for China and Russia will strongly influence the direction and intensity of their partnership for the next 20 years. The formal treaties in place provide ample flexibility for China and Russia to align strategic priorities where convenient, distance themselves when necessary, but quickly form an offensive or defensive military alliance, if desired. Both countries apply a whole-of-government approach to deception and misinformation. They will deliberately mislead and mask their true intentions to gain an advantage over NATO or respective spheres of influence in Central and East Asia. These efforts may not be coordinated, but are mutually supporting. Russia and China's weaponization of the law is part of their national strategies to maintain domestic stability and sow discord between members and partners of the Alliance. **Regardless of what we call their relationship, it does not change the quantifiable actions taken by China and Russia to undermine the RBIO.** Whether they identify as being

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in a friendship, a partnership, or an alliance, the potential consequences for NATO and the RBIO remain. Their consolidated, assertive actions pose the greatest risk to international peace and security. As the future operating environment grows in complexity, so too will non-state actors and proxy threats enabled by the Sino-Russian partnership. By 2049, China aspires to be a global superpower capable of surpassing the U.S. in strategic reach and capability. Since the CCP's strategic planning is long-term, Western responses must also be strong, coordinated, and long-term. A collective response from the Alliance must remain on the straight and narrow democratic path even if results from sanctions are not immediately apparent.

39. How China and Russia manage their relations, be it in Europe, Central or East Asia, is a major factor influencing NATO's diplomatic and military instruments of power. How NATO reacts to Sino-Russian failures, such as the collapse of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad regime, must reinforce democratic principles while highlighting the failure of those autocratic leader's empty promises. Moscow's disastrous war in Ukraine has weakened its presence, power, and reputation around the world. Despite these setbacks, Russia remains a powerful adversary propped up and empowered through direct Chinese intervention. Russia's role as a junior partner will continue to grow further enabling China's national aspirations in Central and East Asia. The Sino-Russia partnership is proving most beneficial for China in East Asia, but could easily expand to Africa, beyond it's military base in Djibouti. The US and it's Indo-Pacific allies and partners will be pre-occupied with Chinese aggression in the South China Sea while Russia remains a regional threat to NATO. NATO must closely monitor this partnership, strengthen the Alliance to persevere against Sino-Russian efforts to fracture member nations, and build partner for peace coalitions to maintain a balance within the RBIO. A well-trained military capable of defeating an adversary is just as important an instrument of power as economic sanctions and de-escalation through diplomatic channels.

40. NATO should seek a common foreign policy that counters Sino-Russian efforts. The EU could be a valuable ally to contain Sino-Russian adverse actions. In contrast to NATO, the EU is capable of imposing sanctions. Although the EU is not able to be a strategic counterweight in the power struggle of geo-strategic balance, sanctions could be a valuable tool in countering the strategic challenges the West is facing. Therefore, an increased and intensified NATO-EU cooperation should not be neglected when trying to assess further preventive measures in the future.

41. To counter Sino-Russian malignant behavior, NATO must increase efforts to reach out to potential partners worldwide to establish mutual relations and dialogue. Opening up and expanding NATO partnership platforms such as the NATO-African Union (AU) cooperation, Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), Partnership for Peace (PfP) nations and Indo-Pacific partners could increase mutual trust and expand dialogue.

42. NATO needs Chinese experts within strategic and operational commands to inform ongoing work-strands with feasible, credible and effective options. Greater interaction, or hiring, with Indo-Pacific partners and allies will quickly fill this gap.

43. Russia and China manipulate international law or use lawfare to their advantage, frequently abusing their position as permanent members of the UN Security Council. To counter

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this, NATO Allies need to understand and explore the opportunity of lawfare in the interest of the Alliance. Increased diplomatic alignment between NATO nations is indispensable. In the interest of predictability and stability, diplomatic channels such as the NATO-Russia council could be reinvigorated. Furthermore, it may be useful to think of the creation of a respective council for a NATO-China line of communication to keep dialogue open, misunderstandings kept minimal, and to de-escalate potential conflicts.

APPENDICES:

1. Sino-Russian Military Exercises
2. List of Acronyms
3. Future Scenarios
4. Bibliography