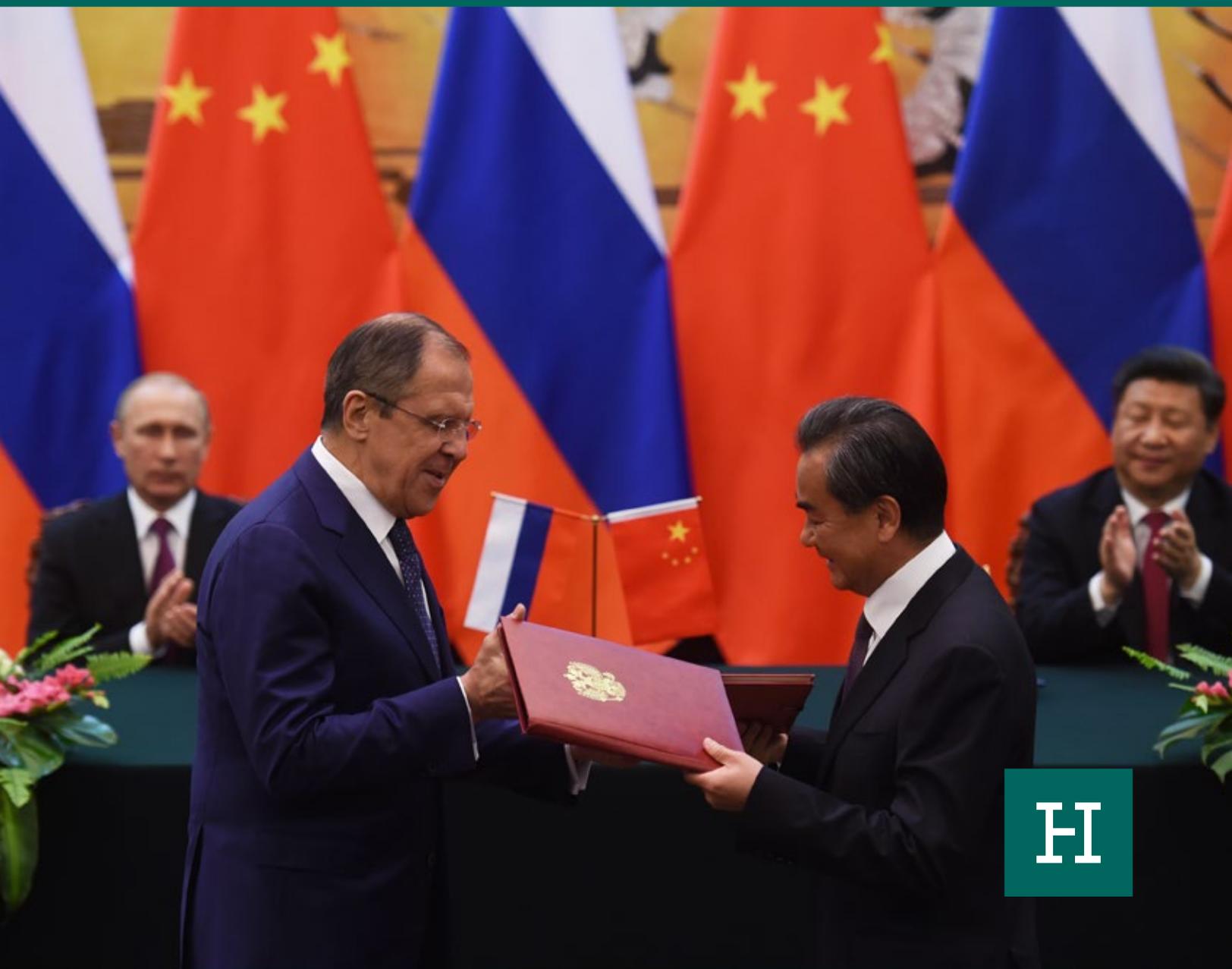


The Expanding China-Russia Defense Partnership

DR. RICHARD WEITZ, SENIOR FELLOW AND DIRECTOR,
CENTER FOR POLITICAL-MILITARY ANALYSIS



This report is adapted from testimony provided by Dr. Richard Weitz before the United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission on March 21, 2019, titled “An Emerging China-Russia Axis? Implications for the United States in an Era of Strategic Competition”

Highlighted quotes have been edited for clarity.

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Hudson Institute

1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Suite 400
Washington, D.C. 20004

P: 202.974.2400
info@hudson.org
www.hudson.org

Cover: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi exchange documents as Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping look on during a signing ceremony in Beijing’s Great Hall of the People on June 25, 2016. (Greg Baker/AFP/Getty Images)

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AUTHOR



Richard Weitz is a Hudson Institute senior fellow and the director of the Center for Political-Military Analysis. His current research includes regional security developments relating to Europe, Eurasia, and East Asia as well as U.S. foreign and defense policies.

Before joining Hudson in 2005, Dr. Weitz worked for shorter terms at the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Defense Science Board, Harvard University, and the U.S. Department of Defense. Dr. Weitz is a graduate of Harvard University (Ph.D. in Political Science), Oxford University (M.Phil. in Politics), the London School of Economics (M.Sc. in International Relations), and Harvard College (B.A. with Highest Honors in Government), where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. He is proficient in Russian, French, and German.

Dr. Weitz has authored or edited several books and monographs, including *Promoting U.S.-Indian Defense Cooperation* (2017); *Enhancing the Georgia-US Security Partnership* (2016); *Parsing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises* (2015); *China and Afghanistan After the NATO Withdrawal* (2015); *Reforming U.S. Export Controls Reforms* (2015); *Turkey's New Regional Security Role: Implications for the United States* (2014); *Rebuilding American Military Power in the Pacific* (2013); *Global Security Watch—China* (2013); *War and Governance: International Security in a Changing World Order* (2011); *The Russian Military Today and Tomorrow* (2010); *Global Security Watch—Russia* (2009); *China-Russia Security Relations* (2008); *Mismanaging Mayhem: How Washington Responds to Crisis* (2008); *The Reserve Policies of Nations* (2007); *Revitalising U.S.–Russian Security Cooperation: Practical Measures* (2005); and two volumes of *National Security Case Studies* (Project on National Security Reform, 2012 and 2008).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	6
The Deepening China-Russia Defense Relationship	8
Russia’s Role in China’s Military Modernization	10
Joint Military Exercises and China-Russia Knowledge Sharing	12
Looking to the Future: Will There Be a China-Russia Mutual Defense Alliance?	14
The Implications for NATO, the U.S., and Allies	16
Policy Recommendations	18
End Notes	19

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last three decades, China and Russia have developed an increasingly close military relationship built on arms sales, joint military exercises, and other mutual defense ties. Moscow has supported Beijing's military ambitions by providing sophisticated weapons platforms to the People's Liberation Army (PLA). These weapons transfers have bolstered China's air defense, anti-ship, and other critical capabilities in significant ways. In particular, they have enhanced the PLA's capability to threaten foreign navies and air forces in the waters and airspace near China. Most recently, the S-400 surface-to-air missile batteries and Su-35 fighter planes that Russia sold to the PLA could target drones, jets and ballistic missiles over much of the western Pacific. Meanwhile, the joint drills and other Sino-Russian military engagements have allowed the PLA to learn valuable skills from the more combat-experienced Russian armed forces.

What could the future of China and Russia's defense partnership entail? Both Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin seek a closer defense partnership, which could come in the form of more extensive exercises or defense industrial collaboration. Furthermore, Chinese-Russian military action may come in the form of a combined effort to suppress an Islamist insurgency in a Central Asian country, using a sectoral approach of concurrent but separate military operations.

Yet the Sino-Russian security relationship is limited in important ways. It is noteworthy that Beijing and Moscow do not fully endorse each other's recent military moves to advance their contested territorial claims. Beijing has not overtly endorsed Moscow's annexation of Crimea or creation of separation regimes on Georgian territory, while China's expansive claims in the South and East China Seas have not received formal Russian diplomatic support. Both countries are concerned by the risk of becoming entangled in each other's military conflicts with third parties.

The United States and its allies must nonetheless plan for future military contingencies in which China or Russia could exploit U.S. conflicts with one of them to achieve gains at U.S. expense. In the case of a NATO-Russian conflict in Europe, U.S. allies in Asia will need to prepare for Chinese opportunistic aggression, while the converse would prove true regarding Russia during major Sino-U.S. confrontations in Asia. The Russian government has already displayed its proclivity—in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria—to employ military force to achieve strategic targets of opportunity. The Chinese government could well make similar calculations in the future.



Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy members and Russian Navy members attend a drill during the China-Russia Joint Sea 2019 naval exercise at a port on April 30, 2019 in Qingdao, Shandong Province of China. (VCG via Getty Images)



THE DEEPENING CHINA-RUSSIA DEFENSE RELATIONSHIP

The Sino-Russian defense relationship falls into three broad categories: arms sales, military exercises, and other forms of interactions such as meetings, declarations, and exchanges. This latter group has become more institutionalized and better integrated. The senior civilian and military defense leaders of China and Russia now meet frequently in various bilateral and multilateral formats. They issue numerous joint statements on various security issues, including missile defense, the militarization of space, transnational terrorism, and regional security questions such as the Korean conflict. Regarding the reasons for their deepening defense ties, a combination of reduced bilateral military tensions, overlapping external security concerns, converging leadership perceptions, and harmonious defense economic

conditions have driven the growing Chinese-Russian military collaboration that we have seen in recent years.¹

Since the Soviet Union's disintegration in the early 1990s, China and Russia have overcome many of their Cold War-era tensions. The two governments negotiated an end to the boundary disputes, demarcating the last segments of their 2,600-mile frontier in 2008. The Soviet military withdrawals from Afghanistan, Vietnam, and other regions, reinforced by decreased Soviet military capabilities, removed a major source of Chinese threat perceptions regarding Moscow. Several arms control agreements and security confidence-building measures have also reduced binational security tensions.

The popular agitation against China that was prominent two decades ago in the Russian Far East, whose inhabitants feared Chinese immigration and territorial acquisition, has almost vanished from sight. Russian analysts have concluded (or claimed) that China's improving standards of living, demographic challenges, and other developments have reduced earlier incentives that Chinese nationals may have had to move to the Russian Far East. Indeed, while many Chinese visit Russia, few stay to work for any length of time.² In any case, the Chinese and Russian governments have used censorship and other means to suppress public allusions about possible future threats from the other country.

Meanwhile, Chinese, and especially Russian officials, have expressed concern about variously common threats, including those generated by what they have called "the three evil forces" of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. Their joint statements regularly reference purportedly threatening U.S. policies and capabilities such as U.S. military space activities, U.S. unilateral sanctions taken without UN Security Council approval, and the alleged use of misinformation, democracy promotion, and other non-kinetic tools to try to change their regimes.

**JOINT STATEMENTS ISSUED
BY CHINA AND RUSSIA
REGULARLY REFERENCE U.S.
MILITARY SPACE ACTIVITIES,
U.S. ACTIONS TAKEN WITHOUT
UN SECURITY COUNCIL
APPROVAL, AND THE ALLEGED
USE OF MISINFORMATION AND
DEMOCRACY PROMOTION.**



RUSSIA'S ROLE IN CHINA'S MILITARY MODERNIZATION

For three decades, the Russian government has provided sophisticated navy, air, and air defense platforms to the People's Liberation Army (PLA).³ Their partnership resulted from fortuitous military-technological conditions in the early 1990s. Russia inherited an enormous quantity of excess Soviet-era weapons platforms at the same time that Western governments imposed arms sales embargos on the PLA over its role in forcefully suppressing the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. As a result, China spent billions of dollars on Russian arms over the next decade.⁴

Following a few years of slack sales, Russian arms exports to China rebounded after Moscow's illegal annexation of Crimea and proxy war in Ukraine resulted in additional Western sanctions on the Russian defense industry, such as the U.S. Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). In order to acquire additional Russian arms on more favorable terms, China has been exploiting Russia's struggling economy and need for visible foreign support due to its isolation by the international community over Ukraine.

The Russian military transfers have proven especially important for augmenting China's air defense, long-range sensor, and anti-ship capabilities. They have increased the PLA's ability to threaten U.S. forces operating in the Pacific in line with China's goal to deny foreign navies access to waters and airspace Beijing considers strategically important. China's incorporation of advanced Russian air defense platforms such as the S-300 and S-400 have enabled PLA surface vessels to become less dependent on land-based air defense systems, while the PLA's acquisition of Su-35s makes the PLA better able to launch long-range precision strikes against U.S. surface warships.⁵

**WESTERN SANCTIONS
AGAINST THE RUSSIAN
DEFENSE SECTOR WILL
BECOME LESS EFFECTIVE
IF THE RUSSIAN MILITARY
CAN INCREASINGLY ACQUIRE
DEFENSE TECHNOLOGY
FROM CHINA'S MILITARY-
INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX.**



JOINT MILITARY EXERCISES AND CHINA-RUSSIA KNOWLEDGE SHARING

During the past fourteen years, the Chinese and Russian militaries have engaged in many bilateral and multilateral exercises, sometimes with Central Asian partners within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Since they began in the mid-2000s, these drills have increased in frequency, scope, and complexity.

The joint China-Russia military exercises provide benefits to both countries that contribute to their security partnership. They help the Chinese and Russian armed forces to improve their tactical and operational capabilities, enhancing their ability to pursue unilateral and joint operations, and increase

their interoperability. Chinese and Russian representatives have cited the advantages of exercising with foreign countries to learn new tactics, techniques, and procedures.⁶ In this regard, engaging in major multinational military exercises is especially important for the PLA, which has not fought a major war in decades. For example, the PLA can garner insights from the Russian experience in Syria on how to deploy brigade-sized forces that integrate air and ground elements along with special operations forces, as well as issues related to expeditionary logistics and protecting bases in foreign countries.⁷

The Sino-Russian joint shows of force also aim to deter potential threats, such as Islamist terrorists trying to destabilize Central Asian governments, as well as reassure those governments. In this regard, the joint exercises attempt to communicate the message to third parties, especially the United States, that Russia and China have a genuine security partnership and that it extends to cover Central Asia (a region of high priority concern for Moscow and Beijing), as well as possibly other areas such as Northeast Asia. The recently expanded geographic scope of Sino-Russian military exercises suggests the two governments are more openly signaling support for each other's security priorities to one another as well as third parties.

Another goal of these exercises is to affirm the two countries' commitment to military cooperation as an important dimension of their evolving relationship, notwithstanding their lack of a formal defense alliance. The recurring exercises and other joint military activities have a related mutual reassurance function, informing Beijing and Moscow about the other's military intentions toward one another. This was most evident in last year's Vostok exercise, when the Russian Eastern Military District, responsible for military planning for possible war scenarios with China, for the first time conducted its large quadrennial military exercise with PLA participation.

Despite these reciprocal benefits, these exercises have not yet established a solid basis for a sustained major joint Sino-Russian military operation. Even in the SCO context, China and Russia lack the interoperability or integrated command, control, and support mechanisms required to conduct an effective combined military campaign. The

Chinese-Russian drills do not rehearse integrated military operations to the same degree as, for example, the United States does with its closest military allies. The exercises the Chinese and Russian armed forces undertake without foreign participation are also considerably larger than their joint drills with one another.

At best, the Chinese and Russian armed forces can now better de-conflict any parallel operations in a combined military campaign such as might occur in a joint counterterrorist or peacekeeping mission in a nearby country. For instance, they could employ a sectoral approach in which they would conduct concurrent but geographically separate operations in a common military campaign, as might occur in a joint effort to suppress a major Islamist insurgency in a Central Asian country. Even so, if these two countries' exercises grow further in scope and complexity, they will expand the Sino-Russian capacity for future joint operations.

RUSSIAN MILITARY TRANSFERS HAVE AUGMENTED CHINA'S AIR DEFENSE, LONG-RANGE SENSOR, AND ANTI-SHIP CAPABILITIES, INCREASING THE PLA'S ABILITY TO THREATEN U.S. FORCES IN THE PACIFIC.



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: WILL THERE BE A CHINA-RUSSIA MUTUAL DEFENSE ALLIANCE?

There is some indication that China and Russia might coordinate armed aggression to achieve the national goals of one or both countries but also substantial evidence against such a contingency. Both governments deny intent to establish a mutual defense alliance or that their bilateral and multilateral military cooperation is directed against any country. However, Russian and Chinese officials, including their presidents, have advocated strengthening their defense partnership further. In the future, they could rehearse more integrated operations in their exercises, conduct more extensive collaborative defense R&D, or pursue a joint missile defense system. Greater defense collaboration

would make the two countries more formidable military rivals of the United States and its allies.

In the past, the main focus of Chinese and Russian security attention was primarily directed at different areas, with the notable exceptions of Central Asia and Northeast Asia. More recently, they have more directly supported each other against third parties, primarily through diplomacy but also through military activities. As noted, their combined exercises establish the basis for more effective joint military actions in diverse geographic regions in the future.

Unlike the earlier Soviet-era bilateral defense treaty signed between Beijing and Moscow, however, their July 2001 friendship and cooperation treaty lacks a mutual defense clause in which both parties commit to providing military assistance in case the other is attacked by a third party. The 2001 treaty establishes a basis for extensive bilateral security and defense collaboration but does not mandate joint military action against a third party. Its five core principles include “mutual respect of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual noninterference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence.” Through a mutual non-aggression clause, Beijing and Moscow commit not to employ or threaten the use of military force against each other: “The contracting parties shall not enter into any alliance or be a party to any bloc nor shall they embark on any such action, including the conclusion of such treaty with a third country which compromises the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of the other contracting party. Neither side of the contracting parties shall allow its territory to be used by a third country to jeopardize the national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of the other contracting party.” The treaty extends their earlier nuclear missile non-targeting pledge to include mutual adoption of a “no first use” nuclear weapons posture toward each other. Furthermore, the parties commit to supporting arms reduction and confidence-building measures along their joint border. Article 9 specifically provides for holding immediate mutual consultations “when a situation arises in which one of the contracting parties deems that peace is being threatened and undermined or its security interests are involved or when it is confronted with the threat of aggression.” Article 10, meanwhile, calls for regular meetings “at all levels” to allow both sides to exchange views and “co-ordinate their stand on bilateral ties and on important and urgent international issues of common concern.” The treaty’s initial duration is twenty years, but the text allows for automatic five-year extensions unless either party objects. Beijing and Moscow could amend their friendship treaty to incorporate collective defense provisions, such as those found in the U.S. security treaties with Japan and South Korea, but have not yet given any indication that they will do so.

Despite their generally harmonious regional security stances, Beijing and Moscow have not fully backed the others’ territorial claims. For example, Moscow has not completely endorsed Beijing’s territorial claims in the South or East China Seas. Meanwhile, though Beijing has not joined Western condemnation of Russian actions in Georgia and Ukraine, it has not completely supported them either. The presumed reason for this stance is Chinese aversion to separatist movements, whether in Abkhazia, Novorossiia, and South Ossetia or in China’s own territories of Tibet, Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong. Both are concerned about being entrapped into a conflict with a third party by the other’s unilateral actions. Beijing does not want to become entangled into a military confrontation with the United States because of belligerent or unintentional Russian missteps in the Middle East or Europe. Similarly, Moscow does not want to be forced to take sides if China clashes with other strategic Russian economic and military partners such as Vietnam or India.⁸ The two countries have essentially agreed to disagree on these issues, a stance made easier by the fact that neither sees the other partner’s support as critical for achieving its territorial objectives, even in the case of armed aggression.

**GREATER DEFENSE
COLLABORATION BETWEEN
RUSSIA AND CHINA WOULD
MAKE THE TWO COUNTRIES
FORMIDABLE RIVALS OF THE
U.S. AND ITS ALLIES.**

These contradictory pressures mean that Chinese and Russian responses regarding aggression by the other will depend considerably on the conditions prevailing at the time. However, their national security communities would be tempted to exploit U.S. preoccupation with parrying aggression by one party to advance their own ambitions.



THE IMPLICATIONS FOR NATO, THE U.S., AND ALLIES

The United States and its allies must therefore prudently plan for future military contingencies in which Russia and China will exploit U.S. conflicts with one of them to achieve gains at U.S. expense. In the case of a NATO-Russian conflict in Europe, U.S. allies in Asia will need to prepare for Chinese opportunistic aggression, while the converse would prove true during Chinese-U.S. conflicts in Asia. The Russian government has already displayed its deft proclivity—in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria—to employ military force to achieve strategic targets of opportunity. The Chinese government could well make similar calculations in the future.

Greater alignment between the two countries in the security realm could pose additional challenges to the United States,

its NATO allies, and other regional partners. For example, Western sanctions against the Russian defense sector will become less effective if Russian military importers can increasingly acquire defense technology from China's improving military-industrial complex. Though striving to decrease their reliance on foreign products, Russian military manufacturers would likely consider buying some Chinese defense technologies in cases where the PRC sellers could offer superior products to those manufactured in Russia. Before the Ukraine conflict ended easy Russian access to Western defense items, the Russian government encouraged its military to buy NATO military goods that were better or cheaper than national versions.

In Northeast Asia, the growing Sino-Russian defense partnership has complicated U.S. military planning with Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) as well as worsened the regional security environment. Beijing's and Moscow's vigorous opposition to the deployment of advanced U.S. missile defenses in South Korea has illuminated how they perceive increased ROK-U.S. military ties as a potential threat. Their preferred resolution of the Korean conflict is the removal of all U.S. military forces from the Korean Peninsula and the end of the U.S. defense alliance with the ROK.

**THE U.S. AND ITS
ALLIES MUST PLAN FOR
OPPORTUNISTIC AGGRESSION
IN WHICH CHINA EXPLOITS
NATO-RUSSIA TENSION OR
RUSSIA TAKES ADVANTAGE
OF U.S.-CHINA CONFLICT.**

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Sino-Russian defense cooperation will likely deepen in coming years due to their already rich network of common security institutions and connections, the mutual benefits they gain from cooperation, and their lack of alternative security partners. It would take a major and improbable shock to break the defense alignment between their current national security establishments.

U.S. government agencies should closely monitor the Chinese-Russian defense relationship since it has the potential to be one of the most significant international security developments at this time. Until recently, the United States has shown little concern about a potential combined military threat from China and Russia, instead concentrating on the threats posed by their individual actions rather than any joint efforts. This has begun to change in both the executive and congressional branches, as seen in recent U.S. national security documents and congressional attention on the implications of the Sino-Russian defense partnership, a direction that should be sustained.

U.S. and allied governments also need to comprehensively assess combined actions by Beijing and Moscow that can negate U.S. conventional military advantages and impede U.S. use of global commons and U.S. international power projection. For example, U.S. and allied intelligence agencies should devote adequate resources to monitoring Sino-Russian arms sales, military exchanges, and other interactions. The European Union, and especially Asian security partners of the United States, need to follow U.S. leadership in paying more attention to the implications of the growing Sino-Russian defense partnership.

Instability in U.S. foreign policy, especially regarding critical U.S. security allies, can lead the leaders of China and Russia to value their alignment even more as an element of stability and predictability in an uncertain world. Strains in U.S. alliances encourage Chinese and Russian mischief making designed to weaken these partnerships. For example, both Beijing and Moscow hope to exploit potential South Korean-U.S. divergences regarding North Korea to decrease their joint military activities, with one goal being the removal of all U.S. forces from the Republic of Korea.

Western defense sanctions could be designed to deny Beijing and Moscow military technologies that they could obtain from the other to avoid counterproductively strengthening their defense industrial ties. In this regard, Washington should continue to pressure the EU to maintain its arms embargo on Beijing. Furthermore, one benefit of the congressionally enacted CAATSA sanctions is to discourage China from purchasing Russian military technologies.

**U.S. AND ALLIED
GOVERNMENTS MUST
ASSESS COMBINED ACTIONS
BY BEIJING AND MOSCOW
THAT CAN NEGATE U.S.
CONVENTIONAL MILITARY
ADVANTAGES AND U.S.
INTERNATIONAL POWER
PROJECTION.**

END NOTES

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1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W. Suite 400, Washington, D.C. 20004
202.974.2400 www.hudson.org