

# UNAVOIDABLE CLASHES: EXPLORING THE IMPLICATIONS OF A CHINA-RUSSIA ALLIANCE ON GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS

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## Introduction

The first conflict between China and Russia is over Central Asia. One of the main programs of China's Belt and Road Initiative includes its inland Silk Road crossing Central Asia. Russia never lets China have dominance over post-Soviet countries. The next confrontation is the economic interests of Russia in Southeast Asia. Russia's profitable energy interests in Southeast Asia may bother China to have dominance over the South China Sea. The third issue is that Russia keeps selling military armaments to India and Vietnam that causes a threat to China as China does not get along well with neither of them.

Relations between China and Russia had entered a new stage. They both chose a rapprochement policy toward each other. Since 2014, the strategic partnership has been steadily strengthened. US primacy in the international order was seen as contrasting their national interests, and US foreign policy towards China and Russia was accepted as a threat to regime survival to the autocracy of both China's President Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin. The US offshore balancing strategy makes the case easier to cooperate. NATO's expansion towards Russia and Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy towards China created a chance for another cooperation. "Economic synergies – China wants Russia's energy resources, Russia seeks Chinese investment – is another important driver in the relationship (Storey, 2021:3)". Additionally, the personal affinity of Xi and Putin, the Russian leader, led to closer relations between governments. Since 2013, both leaders have met more than 30 times. The Chinese leader called Putin his "best friend"<sup>2</sup>. In 2019, Vladimir Putin

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/25/why-are-russia-and-china-strengthening->

said that the two countries “enjoy an unprecedentedly high level of trust and cooperation. This is an allied relationship in the full sense of a multifaceted strategic partnership.” Then he revealed, “We are now helping our Chinese partners create a missile attack warning system. This is very important and will drastically increase China’s defence capability. Only the United States and Russia have such a system now”<sup>3</sup>.

Officially, Russia and China refer to their relationship as a comprehensive strategic partnership of cooperation. While some observers have described Sino-Russian relations as an alliance or a *de facto* alliance, Moscow and Beijing scrupulously avoid that term. Their joint statement on 28 June 2021, marking the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation, stressed that Russia-China relations do not constitute a Cold War-style military and political alliance (Storey, 2021:3).

The Russian Foreign Minister also confirmed that “neither Russia nor China is planning to create a military alliance”<sup>4</sup>.

Sino-Russia relations are rich in mutuality, and they feel supportive of each other, but they do not have a clear intention to ally. The reason why is the research question of this paper. Why is it impossible for China and Russia to ally? What are the sources of confrontations? Why are these conflicts inevitable? The answers to these questions thoroughly explain the true nature of Sino-China relations. In addition, this research paper analyses how much the strategic interests of the states match with each other. By answering these questions and analysing the nature of Sino-Russian relations we will be able to evaluate the prospects of this cooperation.

The topic is not new and there is a significant number of scholars and research papers on this topic. Some scholars are defining Sino-Russian relations as a security cooperation. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) reflects the security priorities of the states for Eurasia.

Not only is China unable to contest Russia’s status as a prominent player in security matters, but Beijing also shares common concerns with Moscow on security problems in Central and South Asia, including extremism,

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3 “Valdai Discussion Club session,” President of Russia, October 3, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61719>

4 “Russia, China not planning to create military alliance, Lavrov says,” TASS, November 2, 2019, <https://tass.com/politics/1086469>.

terrorism, illicit trade, gun-running, and drug smuggling. Given the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) coalition's planned withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan and the reduction of US security cover in Iraq and Syria, China and Russia have intensified their dialogue on security cooperation (Arduino, 2019).

The next group of scholars argues that Sino-Russian relations are based on a trade bloc rather than on alliances or security cooperation. They believe that China and Russia are economically interdependent with each other and must maintain cooperation for their own sake. "China and Russia are major economic partners, increasingly linked by trade and investment: in 2017 Chinese-Russian trade rose 20.8% to more than \$84 billion, and China had been Russia's biggest trade partner for eight years running (Xia, 2018)". These relations are going smoothly without interruption, but as mentioned, they are not thinking about fully allying.

Other research papers have analysed some confrontations in Sino-Russian relations. However, all conflicts that hinder allying have rarely been discussed in one a single paper. In particular, the recent world affairs connected with Russia and China are affecting their relationship and the conflicts are seemingly forgotten, but they are still among them as inevitable issues. The paper will discuss those issues and analyse why they are inevitable and how they hinder the process of allying. The issues that will be discussed in the paper are Central Asia and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the strategic interests of Russia in Southeast Asia, Russia's economic relations with India and Taiwan in terms of exporting military armaments and border conflicts, and so on.

Although Moscow and Beijing may have overlapping interests and objectives, they also possess distinct national interests and priorities that can give rise to instances of discord and antagonism. A potential area of contention between Moscow and Beijing pertains to their individual relations with the United States. While it is likely that both nations perceive the United States as a significant strategic adversary, it is plausible that each of them holds divergent perspectives regarding the most effective approach for confronting American hegemony. For instance, the prioritized objective of Moscow appears to lie in diminishing the influence of the US within Europe and the Middle East, while Beijing directs its attention towards establishing its position in the Asia-Pacific domain and challenging American predominance on the global economic stage.

In conjunction with their distinctive approaches towards the United States, Moscow and Beijing may possess divergences with regards to other

regional and global concerns, including territorial conflicts, commercial strategies, and geopolitical affiliations. Russia and China have a well-established historical record of diplomatic frictions regarding their territorial border and may hold divergent perspectives on the optimal approach required to manage the current turbulence in Syria or the prevailing circumstances in North Korea. The collective perception from Moscow and Beijing may suggest that the United States serves as a shared opponent; nevertheless, their respective individualistic national interests and priorities may, at times, generate discrepancies and even friction between them.

There are several reasons why Moscow and Beijing would be at odds. Initially, the two have historical and cultural differences. Russia and China possess different historical and cultural heritages that potentially influence their perceptions and preferences, leading to distinctive worldviews. An illustration of the distinction between Russia and China in terms of their cultural and political traditions is noteworthy given Russia's prolonged exposure to European influence and consequent perception of affiliation with the Western world, unlike China which has evolved a distinct cultural and political identity independent of Western influence. Russia has a substantial and enduring legacy of European cultural influence that can be traced back to its infancy as the nexus of the Eastern Slavic social order during the medieval period.

Throughout its history, Russia has undergone significant transformations under the influence of diverse cultural and political factors. These have included the Mongol Empire, the Byzantine Empire, and the Orthodox Church, among others. Throughout contemporary times, Russia has developed a multifaceted affiliation with the Western world, engaging in a cyclical pattern of adoption and dismissal of Western ideologies and establishments. During the 18th century reign of Peter the Great, Russia experienced a significant process of Westernization. Conversely, in the course of the 20th century Soviet regime, the country embraced an unequivocally anti-Western stance. China, conversely, is characterized by a distinct cultural and political heritage that has developed independently from that of the Western world. The history of China spans over five millennia and has been moulded by a diverse range of philosophical and religious traditions, notably Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. China is renowned for its rich legacy of centralized governance and hierarchical societal formations, both of which have had a profound impact on the nation's political and economic frameworks. The divergent worldviews and priorities between Russia and China are occasionally attributed to the distinctive historical and cultural disparities between them. As an illustration, it is plausible that Russia

perceives itself as an integral component of the Western realm and places emphasis on fostering collaboration with Europe and North America. In contrast, China could possibly consider itself as a separate civilization with its exclusive identity and interests. These divergences may become visible in domains including global diplomacy, fiscal strategy, and local safeguard concerns, subsequently resulting in possible contradictions or strains in the relationship between the political establishments of Moscow and Beijing.

The next conflict arises between their strategic interests. Although Russia and China may perceive the United States as a strategic adversary, their approaches to counteracting US power and influence may diverge, as mentioned . The primary strategic concerns of Russia are directed to sustaining its standing as a prominent global power, safeguarding its geographical sovereignty, and fostering a dependable security framework in its proximate vicinities. Russia, throughout its history, has endeavoured to exercise its authority and control over adjacent territories and demarcated regions, including Ukraine, Belarus, and Central Asia, as a means of achieving its objectives. Russia endeavours to sustain its military presence in regions such as the Middle East and Europe, with the aim of asserting its capacity to exert both power and influence.

In contrast, China's foremost objective is focused on sustaining its economic expansion and securing the availability of essential resources and markets across the global arena. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China is deemed to be an integral component of its strategic interests. The primary objective of this initiative is to establish a vast network encompassing both trade and infrastructure projects that will serve as a conduit for connecting China with key markets in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. China's strategic objectives encompass the safeguarding of its territorial claims within the South China Sea, alongside ensuring stability on the Korean peninsula.

Although Russia and China consider the United States as a strategic adversary, their discrepant strategic objectives can occasionally result in discord between them. For instance, the already mentioned goal of Russia to sustain itself as a dominant global entity may lead the country to attribute higher priority to Europe and the Middle East instead of deeper cooperation efforts with China in other geographical regions, specifically in Asia. In a similar way, China's emphasis on attaining economic expansion may prompt a preference for prioritizing economic linkages with the United States as opposed to strategic collaboration with Russia. The impact of strategic interests on the dynamic of Moscow-Beijing relations is significant. Although individuals or groups may possess certain common interests, their varying priorities and objectives have the potential to result in divergent policy decisions, and in

some cases, even lead to conflict.

## Central Asia and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Central Asia is one of the main reasons why Russia cannot ally with China. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, post-Soviet countries, namely, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, have been under the influence of Russia. Russia has so many strategic interests in the region. "Russia's fear of China's economic dominance in Central Asia, where Moscow tries to maintain its influence and its privileged role, has now become a well-established fact (Ferrari and Ambrosetti, 2019)".

The Chinese influence on Central Asia began in 2013 when the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched. The only thing that kept the countries from direct and tough conflict is that the interests are a little bit different. Russia seeks only its political dominance in the region. As the countries are underdeveloped and developing in economic terms, Russia is not able to obtain significant profit from these countries. However, China came up with its BRI, the region is economically attractive to China and China's influence is increasing step by step. Therefore, the confrontation is present but not so critical. Nevertheless, this conflict is becoming increasingly tougher. China's influence in the region is growing and its economic influence is impacting the political and social sectors of the region.

Both China and Russia officially state that there are no conflicts over Central Asia. Russia's top diplomat, Sergey Lavrov, said, "We do not consider China a competitor. We are strategic partners, and the plans of Russia and China regarding that region (Central Asia) and overall, regarding the Big Eurasia do not contradict each other"<sup>5</sup>. The academic literature highlights both parties' interests to find common ground and resolve conflicts. Although it is acknowledged that Russia has been forced to give up some of its influences in Central Asia to China, the dominant narrative about the Russian and Chinese presence in the region is based on the underlying premise that the two countries have divided the functions equally in which China focuses on economic pursuits and Russia serves as the region's security provider (Wilson, 2021). Even though, there are few signals of official discontent between Russian and Chinese authorities over their dealings in Central Asia, time is running out for Russia.

With fewer alternatives, an increasingly defensive Russia faces a

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<sup>5</sup> See "<https://tass.com/economy/1043332/>"

surging China. Russia may theoretically choose to link itself more closely with the West or at the very least strive to heal tensions.

China's economic interests in Central Asia have become increasingly multifaceted. Access to Central Asian energy and raw materials and minerals is an important goal for China, as indicated in the pipelines that transport oil from Kazakhstan, and gas from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Additionally, Central Asia is viewed as a strategic and vital corridor for the transmission of goods from China to Europe within the BRI, which has led to Chinese interest in a number of infrastructure projects in the region, including the construction of roads and railways (Wilson, 2021).

The economic impact of China is now seen in the amount of debt that the five countries received. "Increasing volume of debt in Central Asia is an important political problem as indebtedness increases political dependence on creditors. China remains the main source of loans in the region. Its share in the external debt of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan equals 45% and 52%, respectively, or more than 20% of their GDP. The situation is better in resource rich countries. Loans from China account for 16%-17% of GDP of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, while the indicator of Kazakhstan is the lowest and equals 6.5%"<sup>6</sup>.

China's role in the import and export of the region has increased significantly. China is the number one trading partner of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and two of Kazakhstan in terms of imports. As mentioned at the beginning of the section, China's dominance in the economy is acceptable for Sino – Russian relations. What made the relations tougher is the increase of China's political and social influence.

China's military and security-related activities had begun to upset Russia's dominance. Central Asia is a market for both China and Russia when selling armaments. They also have joint military activities in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This same organization provided China with the opportunity to conduct military and security-related activities. "The system college of the Shanghai Participation Association (SCO) was propelled in 2010 as another stage for collaboration in the field of training and work force trade (Sulimanov and Beloglazov, 2018)". Although Russia was the main seller of arms to Central Asia until 2010, this number began changing gradually to China's side. "China provided 1.5 percent of Central Asian arms

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<sup>6</sup> Ver "<https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/the-risks-of-the-high-government-debt-for-central-asia/>"

imports between 2010-2014, this figure had increased to 18 percent of the total in the 2015-2018 time periods. While Uzbekistan purchased more arms from China than from Russia during the entire 1991-2018 period, between 2014-2018 both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan bought more arms from China than Russia (Wilson, 2021)".

China's increase in the military sphere in Central Asia can be explained not only by numbers but also by the quality of the arms. China exports more advanced military technologies than Russia. China creates an opportunity to intervene in its military to the region for the purpose of protecting its firms, infrastructures, and others. The social life of the population of Central Asia has already been deeply linked with China. The technologies, networking, telecommunications, and all mechanisms of factories are designed with Chinese products. In this field, Russia has already lost Central Asia to China.

Therefore, the next step for China is to fully decouple Russia from Central Asia, and Russia never would never agree with that. So, the confrontation emerges as inevitable, and the future of Central Asia is highly dependent on this rivalry.

## Strategic interests of Russia in the Asia-Pacific region

One of the reasons for the Sino-Russian rapprochement is the security concerns of both countries in the Asia-Pacific. Both China and Russia have many strategic interests in the region, and they have a mutual enemy – the United States. The Asia-Pacific area is the epicentre of the rising imbalance between China and Russia. The impoverished and sparsely inhabited Russian Far East collides with an increasingly powerful growing China here. Other but equally informative instances of how a variety of practical concerns are addressed between the two nations may be found in bilateral relations. "Its main interest in the region appears to be avoiding antagonizing China and protecting this bilateral relationship (Rumer, 2017)". Since the mid-2000s, Russia has attempted to extend its position in the Asia-Pacific region.

The objective is to boost Russia's dominance in the area, which it regards as the world's future economic and political focus. This aim may also be regarded as a response to the United States' regional rebalance and China's rise. The main goal of the Russian strategy in the Asia-Pacific area is to maintain its national security. In comparison to China, Russia's enormous, sparsely populated Far East is a disadvantage. China has never been formally identified as a security threat by Russia. However, it is a component of the Russian mentality, as evidenced by military assets prepared to confront a

large opponent. Russia as a country has a Western orientation. Russia's ability to expand its influence is hindered by the Asia-Pacific environment. Like in other regions of the world, Russia has experienced difficulties in making and retaining allies in this region. Russia's foreign policy in the area is mostly focused on bilateral ties with other major nations, especially with China.

The environment in the Asia-Pacific region is very similar to that in Central Asia in terms of Sino-Russian relations. The confrontation is growing with the rising influence of Russia in the region. This rising influence is seen in arm sales. Since 2000, Russia has become the region's largest arms supplier with sales valued at US\$10.66 billion (the United States is second at US\$7.86 billions)<sup>7</sup>.

Although China is increasing its market share of defence sales in Southeast Asia, it remains far behind Russia. Between 2000 and 2020, China's defence sales to Southeast Asia were valued at only US\$2.78 billion. In the regional arms market, Russia has two distinct advantages over China. First, Russian defence companies have a better reputation than their Chinese counterparts for the quality and reliability of their weapons systems, as well as after sales services such as technical support, maintenance, and the supply of spare parts. Second, regional states with maritime territorial and jurisdictional disputes with Beijing in the South China Sea – Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia and especially Vietnam – have avoided procuring arms from China (Storey, 2021)

China's strategic interests in the region are much greater than those of Russia. The core of all territorial disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea is strategic interests. After a "century of humiliation" during which external forces controlled the Asia-Pacific area, China is re-emerging as a major power. China has grown increasingly assertive in its pursuit of historical claims, notably in the South China Sea, since 2007. It is critical for China to maintain its image as a peacefully emerging power and "responsible stakeholder." Southeast Asian countries as well as Asia Pacific countries feel Chinese primacy as a threat, and in most cases, they must cooperate with the US. The only thing that alleviates the tensions with Russia is that China is feeling the pressure of the US. Nearly all countries in the region are balancing with the US and China needs someone to be supported by or at least there is no need for another enemy at this right moment. However, Russia is the main arm supplier of India and Vietnam and states in the South China Sea. While there are several territorial disputes with these countries, it is natural

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<sup>7</sup> See The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

that China-Russia relations face conflicts. These conflicts are inevitable until Russia stops arms deliveries, which would be very harmful to its economy.

## Conclusion

Sino-Russian relations are in a new stage, and all tensions and confrontations have been neglected by both sides. They feel that they need more support rather than additional foreign issues. Neglecting is seen as good relations to scholars and world leaders. In fact, those neglected tensions and confrontations in Central Asia and the Asia-Pacific region never allowed the countries to ally. They would not have cooperated if there had not been a mutual enemy. The world community may witness another big conflict between China and Russia for regional hegemony.

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## ABSTRACT

The current relations between China and Russia are the result of the rapprochement policies of both countries. Shared fears about US hegemony, mutual economic benefits, and strong links between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin escalated Sino-Russia relations into a new stage. Russia needs regional security in Southeast Asia, and even though the strategic interests of China and Russia do not match over the region, they are both eager to contain the US. Recent Russia – Ukraine border issues are well-matched with China – Taiwan issues that also make the states feel mutuality between them. The results of the two issues may be the same. Moscow is making sure as time goes by that rapprochement with the West is impossible, Russia is going to suffer from economic sanctions, and the West has already begun decoupling. Despite all the partnerships and mutuality, China and Russia are still not allies. The inactive confrontations between the two outnumber all of the abovementioned positives.

## KEYWORDS

Rapprochement policy; Regional power; Alliance; Conflicts; Strategic interest

*Received in March 31, 2023*  
*Accepted in August 07, 2023*