

Theories of International Relations and Prospects of a Military Alliance Between Russia and China¹

Anna A. Kireeva

MGIMO University

Abstract. This article seeks to explain why there is no formal military-political alliance between Russia and China. The conclusion of such an agreement would be logical given the expanded cooperation between the two countries, including in the military sphere, which pushes the relationship very close to an alliance, and at the same time exacerbates tensions with the United States. By employing International Relations theory, the author highlights the balance between benefits and costs, which is not conducive to the creation of a formal bloc, the numerous unit-level factors that inhibit such an alliance, coexisting convergent and divergent interests, the asymmetry of the capabilities of the two countries, and the interdependency in their bilateral relations. As a result of analysing the key characteristics of the strategic partnership, the article demonstrates that Russia–China relations conform to the notion of alignment structured around the system-level goal of promoting a multipolar or polycentric world order and a set of common principles. Russia–China relations entered a new stage in their development in 2014, a stage that is characterized by closer political, security and economic cooperation. Against the background of strategic competition with the United States, Russia and China have intensified military cooperation. While the global interests of the two states are much alike, their regional interests frequently overlap or diverge. As a result, the two countries are not interested in being drawn into each other's conflicts as, despite the deterioration of relations with the West, it remains an important partner for both Russia and China. It is instructive that Moscow and Beijing balance Washington mostly individually, and they are deemed quite capable by their leadership to conduct military action under most likely scenarios falling short of full-scale war. Adding to the potential costs of an alliance is the reduction of foreign policy autonomy. The growing asymmetry of complex power and economic relations, coupled with the modernization of the People's Liberation Army and the gradual reduction of China's dependence on Russia in military technologies and components predetermine the increasing likelihood that a Russia–China alliance would become more asymmetric in the future, notwithstanding the fact that it would be fairly symmetric at first. This would it turn exacerbate the risks of Russia transforming into a subordinate player in the long term. At present, a strategic partnership makes allows Russia and China to pursue their goals

¹ English translation from the Russian text: Kireeva A.A. 2020. Budushhnost' rossijsko-kitajskogo sojuznichestva v kontekste teorii mezhdunarodnyh otnoshenij. *Mezhdunarodnye Protsessy*. 4(59). P. 84-114. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17994/IT.2019.17.4.59.6>.

while not bearing the costs of an alliance. However, the deepening strategic confrontation between the United States and China, together with the persistent conflict in US–Russia relations may draw Russia and China closer together.

Keywords: Russia, China, Russia–China relations, China–Russia relations, Sino–Russian relations, military alliances, alignment, strategic partnership, theory of international relations, the United States, the West, Eurasia, East Asia, Eurasian Economic Union, Belt and Road Initiative

Russia–China relations, which were marked by a high degree of interaction even before the escalation of the conflict between Moscow and the West, have reached qualitatively new levels since 2014. Political contacts have intensified, military cooperation has deepened, and numerous deals and joint economic projects have been announced (Russian–Chinese Dialogue: The 2016 Model). At the plenary session of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2015, President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin stated, “As for the People’s Republic of China, the level, nature and confidence of our relations have probably reached an unprecedented level in their entire history.”²

Against the backdrop of deepening bilateral cooperation, the discussion about whether the Russia–China strategic partnership should be defined as an alliance has been brought up once again. Several Russian observers have already started to call the relations between the two countries a “de facto alliance” – essentially a union (Karaganov 2017; Kashin 2019b) that has not been contractually formalized as such. President Putin has even weighed in on the issue, referring to China as a “natural ally” in October 2014.³ Articles started to appear in Russian and Chinese newspapers and magazines calling for the legal formalization of the alliance (Tavrovksy 2014; Korolev 2018: 1–2). Chinese political scientist Yan Xuetong, for example, noted that both countries face threats from the United States, albeit in different regions. Without an alliance, he argued, Russian and China are unable to support each other and further strengthen relations.⁴ The Russian expert in Asian studies Y. Tavrovsky has called for cooperation to be codified at the level of a military-political alliance in response to the infringement by Western countries of Russia’s interests. In his opinion, a legally formalized agreement would allow the countries to strengthen their positions on the international stage, increase trust, prevent China from making any territorial claims with regard to Russia, guarantee the accelerated development of Russia through Chi-

² Vladimir Putin. Plenary Session of the 19th St. Petersburg International Economic Forum. *President of Russia*. 19.07.2015. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49733> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

³ Meeting with Premier of the State Council of China Li Keqiang. *President of Russia*. 14.10.2014. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46783> (accessed: 30.10.2019).

⁴ Xuetong Y. I Don’t Get Why Russia Doesn’t Insist on a Formal Alliance with China. *Kommersant*. 17.03.2017. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3243633> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

nese financing, and stop the West from “internationalizing” Russia’s natural resources (Tavrovsky 2014).

The issue of a Russia–China alliance is logical, as alliances are formed first and foremost to counter threats, and only indirectly function to achieve specific goals (Liska 1962: 12). Russia and China face increasing pressure from the United States, seeing it as an obstacle to the realization of their interests and the key strategic goal of building a polycentric world order. According to A. Lukin, China is a more reliable partner than the countries of the West, since it does not try to push an ideological agenda. And Moscow acts similarly towards Beijing (Lukin 2018:189–190).

When analysing Russia–China relations, researchers primarily pay attention to the comprehensive development of political and economic relations, cooperation in the security sphere, interaction on key regional and global issues, and military-technical cooperation. They also note the disagreements that arise between the two countries, primarily economic, and point to areas where their interests in Eurasia and Asia intersect and diverge (Voskressenski 2012; Lukin 2013; Voskressenski 2015; Korolev 2015; Wishnick 2016; Lukin 2018; Kashin, Lukin 2018; Korolev 2018; Korolev, Portyakov 2018; Sutter 2018; Weitz 2018; Wishnick 2018; Kashin 2019; Kireeva 2019; Korolev, Portyakov 2019; Ma, Zhang 2019). Analyses of security cooperation have led several experts to the conclusion that military ties between Russia and China are so deep that a military-political alliance is merely a formality at this point (Korolev 2018: 15–16; Kashin, Lukin 2018: 631).

Vladimir Putin’s description of Russia–China relations in October 2019 as “an allied relationship in the full sense of a multifaceted strategic partnership” further cemented this conclusion. The Russian President also noted that Moscow was helping Beijing create a missile attack warning system that would “drastically increase China’s defence capability.”⁵ The new stage of bilateral military cooperation that began in 2018–2019 is marked by its focus, among other things, on strategic weapons. This is yet another reason to assert that Russia and China carry out interaction at the highest level, something that is characteristic of international unions (Kashin 2019b). At the same time, however, none of the bilateral documents that have been signed between the two countries contain any obligations to protect each other in the event of possible aggression. The Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development adopted in June 2019 notes that the countries are guided by the following principles: the refusal to establish allied relations; non-confrontation; and non-direction against third countries.⁶

⁵ Vladimir Putin. Valdai Discussion Club Session. *President of Russia*. 03.10.2019. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61719> (accessed: 30.10.2019).

⁶ Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development. *President of Russia*. 05.07.2019. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5413> (accessed: 30.10.2019).

Modern research does not contain detailed explanations of why Russia and China, despite the objectively high level of cooperation, are in no hurry to formalize an alliance based on legally binding obligations. Papers that have appeared typically put this down to the fact that both sides are interested in developing a partnership with the West. Obviously, any alliance that is specifically targeted against the United States would rule out such a possibility. Adopting bilateral legal guarantees would thus limit Moscow and Beijing's room for maneuver (Lukin 2013: 332; Lukin 2018: 104, 191). Other reasons given for the refusal to form an alliance include the differences in economic models between the two countries and the complementarity of their economic interaction, caused by different interests, negative historical memory and disagreements in the interpretation of joint experiences among the people of Russia and China (Korolev, Portyakov 2019).

A number of studies examine the extent to which military cooperation between countries corresponds in practice to that of military-political alliances, without actually offering answers to the question of why countries do not formalize obligations (Korolev 2018). At the same time, Kashin and Lukin state that there has been no political decision to form an alliance on the part of the Chinese and Russian leadership, although they do not rule out the possibility of such a decision if a global armed conflict involving the United States were to break out (Kashin, Lukin 2018: 631).

In general, the literature on the current state of Russia–China interaction lacks broader theoretical foundations, and it mostly ignores the modern theory of military-political alliances. Such theoretical grounding would add certain clarifications to the explanations of why the parties have not yet adopted allied obligations towards each other. The present article aims to fill this gap and analyse the main parameters of the Russia–China strategic partnership, using the theoretical developments of Glenn Snyder and other authors as a basis. As such, it will help discern just how stable the current model of bilateral relations is and explain what is preventing the sides from formalizing a military-political alliance based on legally binding obligations.

1

Before delving into the history of Russia–China relations and applying the theory of military-political alliances to it, we will first try to place military-political alliances as a form of interaction into the context of a wider range of cooperative associations. This is the purpose of this section. Further, we will consider the main approaches to the study of alliances in international relations theory, their key characteristics, and the possible reasons for forming symmetrical and asymmetrical formats of cooperation.

The academic literature on the theories of alliances can trace its roots to the realist school of international studies. Neorealism proceeds from the premise that the global system is anarchic, and the main concern of the state is to secure its own security. Balancing is one of the options available to states that are exposed to constant external threats. Internal balancing involves building up one's own military potential, while

external balancing is about joining alliances to counter opponents (Waltz 1979). Military-political alliances are formed both in polycentric systems, where leading players combine strategies of confrontation and balancing coalitions in their relations with one another, and in hegemonic and bipolar systems (Istomin, Baykov 2019: 35).

Alliances help states build a foreign policy vector based on the threats they face and the kind of help they can expect from other players. Stephen Walt defines an alliance as formal or informal cooperation between two or more sovereign states. This entails obligations between countries and the provision of certain benefits for each side, and the end of the alliance or failure to fulfil obligations is fraught with costs. States are more likely to pursue a policy of power balancing in relation to states that pose a threat to them than they are to join them. The level of threat is influenced not only by the combined power of a potential adversary, but also by its geographical location (that is, how near or far the country in question is), its offensive military potential, and its intentions (Walt 1987: 1–5).

A seminal work in the study of alliances is that of Glenn Snyder. Snyder understands alliances differently than Walt, describing them as formalized associations aimed at the use of armed force in conditions established by the allies against countries that are not part of the alliance. The main function of this cooperation format, according to Snyder, is to combine efforts in order to more successfully repel threats from adversaries and ensure their own security. Other advantages of alliances include: reducing the likelihood of attacks against allies; ensuring that an ally does not get too friendly with an opponent; eliminating the possibility of an ally attack; and increasing influence over the politics of allies. Additionally, the very fact of such an association implies that the participants will support each other on a wide range of foreign policy issues in addition to collective defence, even if this is not explicitly stated in the official alliance treaty. Entering into an alliance also involves certain costs. The most significant of these is the risk of losing autonomy, which could include the obligation to engage in hostilities in the interests of an ally, the risk of being involved in a conflict that it wants no part of, the risk of being part of a competitive alliance that limits the choices of partners in the future. Accordingly, the potential gains have to outweigh the costs for an alliance to be worth it (Snyder 1997: 4–12, 43–44).

A distinctive feature of military-political associations within an anarchic international system is that countries cannot be forced to comply with their obligations, which means that there are risks an ally will not fulfil its side of the deal. These risks increase in a polycentric system: the formalization of allied relations reduces uncertainty, but does not remove it altogether. Thus, all alliances are characterized by a dilemma associated with the risk that an ally may rescind on the agreement in the event of a conflict, as well as with the danger of being dragged into a conflict on principles that the country does not share (Snyder 1997: 17–18, 165–200).

Entering into an alliance implies that the state deliberately narrows its foreign policy options in return for greater security. It may be forced to adopt a course determined by an ally or, conversely, refrain from pursuing a policy that would best serve its

national interests (Dian 2014: 4, 8–12). Alliances can also arise without written commitments, although in such cases a verbal agreement is necessary and must be consistently supported by activities that demonstrate the country is fulfilling its obligations, or else the other parties may start to doubt the expediency of such an alliance (Korolev 2018: 4). Thus, agreements between states that fix the parameters of military-political interaction in the case of conflicts and the direct practices of cooperation are important for the healthy functioning of an alliance (Istomin 2017: 94).

The decision to join an alliance is influenced both by the variables that characterize the international structure and by those that determine the situational context of the strategy chosen by the state – the interests, power and degree of mutual dependence of the partners. Commonality of interests often serves as a prerequisite for rapprochement, and the formalization of an alliance usually leads to the partial adoption of the other sides' strategic goals, even if it did not pursue these goals in the past. The ratio of power (primarily expressed in their military potentials) is a key variable in the decision to form an alliance. Finally, interdependence can manifest itself in both the economic and the security sphere. The latter is determined by the degree to which their interests diverge, how likely an armed conflict is, and the ratio of their military potentials to that of the enemy. The degree to which states depend on each other determine whether an alliance is symmetrical, involving countries with comparable strength which have equal obligations, or asymmetrical, in which the expectations of a stronger and weaker state differ. In the latter case, this typically means a larger player exerting dominance over the smaller player (Snyder 1997: 12, 20–31). The purchase of advanced weapons or military technology creates incentives for joining an alliance, while having a fully autonomous military-industrial complex capable of implementing advanced developments, on the contrary, allows the state to maintain foreign policy autonomy (Dian 2014: 9–11).

Neoclassical realism makes a significant addition to the definitions presented above. In addition to the structure of the international system as an independent variable and the strategy chosen by the state as a dependent variable, neoclassical realism adds intermediate characteristics that reflect the influence of domestic politics (unit-level intervening variable). This variable can change how countries perceive external threats and influence the choice of strategy (for example, to pursue a power balancing policy, or to join a stronger side) (Schweller 2006).

The present article is based on the concept of alliances developed by Glenn Snyder. The latter, based on the realist school of thinking, also takes the variables conceptualized within the framework of the neoliberal and constructivist schools into account (for example, coordinating positions in the formation of alliances and their transformation, the level and nature of interdependence between countries). It is the most complex theory explaining the formation and transformation of military-political alliances. Snyder's theoretical approach corresponds to the goal of our study – to explain why Russia and China have never formalized collective defence obligations.

Also important for the purposes of this study, in addition to a systematic review of the theoretical literature, is the generally accepted conceptualization of the modern nature of Russia–China relations reflecting the features of the present stage of cooperation. The prevailing opinion in the literature is that the strategic partnership between Russia and China is not the same as a full-fledged allied relationship (Lukin 2013: 332; Korolev, Portyakov 2018; Lukin 2018: 190–191), and a number of researchers describe it through the concept of alignment (Kashin 2019; Korolev 2015; Korolev, Portyakov 2018; Weitz 2020; Wilkins 2012: 67). This idea is associated with the formation of expectations about which states will support them, oppose them or remain neutral in the future. At the same time, rapprochement can take various forms, including the most institutionalized version – a formalized alliance.

The implementation of a formalized alliance depends on how the states understand each other's interests, potentials and policies, including their obligations within the framework of alliances. Such features as the presence of a common enemy, a common ideology, ethnic homogeneity, and the ability to improve security where there are unequal capabilities can lead countries to expect support from a partner. Perceived support from another power can be enhanced through joint actions, such as joint exercises, common military planning, diplomatic statements and agreements, and the formation of an alliance. Forms of rapprochement can be transformed in accordance with the dynamics of power and interests (Snyder 1997: 6–7).

There are several variations of rapprochement that can allow states to find more flexible opportunities for cooperation than formalized obligations in the form of a military-political alliance. One alternative to the latter is a strategic partnership – the structured cooperation between states to develop a more successful response to security challenges than each of the partners could provide by themselves. In these circumstances, foreign policy rapprochement is aimed more at the implementation of common goals than against a threat from a particular state. Strategic partnerships are characterized by less stringent codification of cooperation compared to alliances and lower costs of fulfilling one's obligations, which allows states to maintain significant freedom of action (Wilkins 2012: 53–59, 67–69).

At the same time, a characteristic feature of strategic partnerships is structured cooperation: regular visits, intergovernmental relations, joint military exercises, etc. In many cases, they are accompanied by deep economic and military-technical cooperation. The partnerships concluded by China are noteworthy for their emphasis on cooperation in areas where the interests and goals of the parties coincide, primarily in the economic sphere, while not touching upon areas of contradiction and conflict. Regular interaction helps to develop more reasonable expectations and reduce risks in partnership relations. An empirical analysis of partnerships concluded by China shows that the country is guided by pragmatic interests, primarily the strategic and economic importance of states, rather than by ideological considerations. China is also interested in the extent to which potential partners are prepared to support its foreign policy strategy and thus contribute to the implementation of China's strategic

imperatives (Struver 2017: 31–65). China has made full use of the system of partnerships it has building up with dozens of countries since the early 1990s on the basis of consultation, cooperation and the search for mutual benefits to reduce the level of confrontation and significantly increase its own security. At the same time, the term “partnership” is neutral – it does not discount the possibility of problems and friction, or that countries may both compete and cooperate with China. The forms, functions and content of these partnerships vary by country (Portyakov 2013: 42–48).

The theoretical considerations outlined above informed the design of the empirical study: a description of areas of converging interests and the key parameters of Russia–China relations in the political and military spheres, with a subsequent explanation of why rapprochement has not transformed into formalized obligations to ensure collective defence. In order to determine the extent to which concluding an alliance is necessary for maintaining the security of states, an assessment of the benefit–cost ratio of forming such a partnership, as well as its how it is treated in discussions within the political and expert elites of the two countries (an analysis of the domestic political variable) will be carried out. After that, we will consider the variable interests identified by Glenn Snyder, the balance of power and the degree of interdependence in Russia–China relations in order to determine which cooperation format is most likely.

2

Interaction between Russia and China today can be defined as a profound rapprochement, characterized in terms of a strategic partnership.⁷ The reestablishment of relations between that began with President of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev’s visit to China in 1989 was marked by the signing of an agreement by the sides to not engage in confrontation, to resolve disputes through negotiations and to develop multifaceted cooperation. In a 1992 declaration, the parties agreed to consider each other friendly states and develop relations of good neighbourliness, friendship and mutually beneficial cooperation. The joint declaration of 1996 stated the goal to develop “relations of equal and trusting partnership aimed at strategic interaction in the 21st century.” At the same time, the sides stressed that cooperation is not directed against third countries and does not imply the creation of an alliance. In 1997, Russia and China set the common goal of building a multipolar world order. In 1996–1997, the Shanghai and Moscow agreements were signed on strengthening confidence-building measures in the military sphere and on the mutual reduction of armed forces on the borders between China and four former Soviet republics (Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan).

⁷ For more on the main trends in the development of Russia–China relations and the problems they face, see: (Lukin 2013; Voskressenski 2015; Lukin 2018; Kireeva 2019).

The 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation became the main document that laid the foundations for multi-format cooperation. The Treaty defines relations between the two countries as a “strategic cooperative partnership of equality and trust.”⁸ In 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was established by Russia, China, and the countries of Central Asia. As a result of lengthy negotiations in 2004, an agreement was signed on the border of the eastern part of the SCO, which was a contributing factor to the settlement of the border issue between the countries. In 2005, Russia and China reiterated the need to create a more just world order, and in 2010, they put forward an initiative to create a “new security structure” in the Asia-Pacific (Lukin 2013: 299–354; Voskressenski 2015: 34–46).

Russia–China relations moved to a completely new level in 2014. The strengthening of bilateral interaction following the aggravation of Moscow's relations with the West led to a never-before-seen intensity of bilateral cooperation. These dynamics were reflected in the Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the Development of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.⁹ In May 2015, the two countries signed a statement on cooperation to link the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Silk Road Economic Belt as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁰ In 2016, the Russian and Chinese leadership adopted a joint statement on strengthening strategic stability, which noted the importance of various types of weapons other than the nuclear variety in maintaining global security.¹¹ Bilateral relations are officially designated as a comprehensive equal partnership and strategic interaction.”¹²

In the 30-plus years since relations were established, contacts between official representatives of Russia and China have been institutionalized. Meetings between the leaders of the two countries have been held annually since 1996, with the location alternating between Russia and China; they also sit down together four to five times a year at international forums and conferences. In addition, the prime ministers of the two countries meet on a regular basis, as do the five intergovernmental commissions, and interdepartmental and interregional contacts are developing at a rapid pace. The high level of trust between the Russian and Chinese leaders is what has allowed bilat-

⁸ The Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation. *President of Russia*. 16.07.2001. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/3418> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

⁹ Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the Development of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. *President of Russia*. 20.05.2014. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/1642> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

¹⁰ Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on cooperation in linking the construction of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt. *President of Russia*. 08.05.2015. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/4971> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

¹¹ Joint statement of the President of the Russian Federation and the Chairman of the People's Republic of China on Strengthening Global Strategic Stability. *President of Russia*. 25.06.2016. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5098> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

¹² Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development.

eral cooperation to flourish, with foreign policy coordination tighter than it has ever been (Lukin 2018: 128–134).

There are a number of reasons that explain the strategic partnership between Russia and China. First, Russia and China are united in their calls for a polycentric world order as a desirable variant of the global system. Both countries seek to act as independent centres of power within a more pluralistic and democratic system of international relations. Moscow and Beijing would like to see an international order in which they, along with other non-Western countries, would not be subordinate to the United States and its allies, but would be equal in status.

Second, both countries emphasize respect for the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries. A by-product of this is the rejection of the unilateral actions of the United States and the desire to impose an America-centric order that does not allow other countries to realize their potential and economic goals. The burgeoning Russia–China partnership was a reaction to the negative changes in the international environment caused by the diminishing role of international law and the United Nations. In addition to criticizing US interventionism, both Russia and China are also suspicious of the US-built network of alliances. The policy of the Trump administration to contain Russia and China only served to bring the countries even closer together (Lukin 2013: 329–334; Voskressenski 2015: 34–46; Kashin, Lukin 2018: 615–617; Lukin 2018: 190; Ma, Zhang 2019: 27–29; Russian–Chinese Dialogue: The 2016 Model 2019: 22).

In a 2016 joint statement, Russia and China accused the United States and its allies of trying to ensure their own security at the expense of other countries and seeking to achieve military superiority that would allow them to use force to further their interests. They also expressed concern about the deployment of the US missile defence system in Europe and Asia, as well as about the militarization of space.¹³ Washington's actions as seen as blocking the creation of a single, open, transparent and equal security architecture in the Asia-Pacific (Streltsov, Kireeva, Dyachkov 2018: 116–117). Both Russia and China are concerned about the United States stepping up its capabilities near their borders (Sutter 2018: 9). They would like to create a pluralistic order in Asia that reflects their vision of a polycentric international system and the principle of non-alliance (Wishnick 2018: 375–378). The joint statement of the leader of the two countries that was adopted in June 2019 stated that Russia–China relations continue to develop against the background of the turbulence of the world order, growing competition and the destruction of the arms control regime, and act as a stabilizing factor in the international system.¹⁴

¹³ Joint statement of the President of the Russian Federation and the Chairman of the People's Republic of China on Strengthening Global Strategic Stability.

¹⁴ Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development.

In addition to the coinciding positions noted above, Russia–China cooperation is also based around a shared interest in reforming global governance institutions and the modern financial and economic system in order to increase the role of non-Western countries. Cooperation within the framework of BRICS and the G20 is seen as a key element in the achievement of these goals (Russian–Chinese Dialogue: The 2016 Model: 4–12; Kashin, Lukin 2018: 617). The positions of Russia and China converge regarding the unacceptability of destroying the existing system of agreements in the field of arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, and the need for a multilateral treaty on the non-deployment of weapons in near-Earth orbit. The two countries oppose protectionism, unilateral political blackmail, monetary diktat in trade and economic relations, sanctions, trade wars, interference in Venezuela's internal affairs, unilateral actions against Iran, and international terrorism, and call for resolving the Syrian conflict through political and diplomatic means and supporting nation-building in Afghanistan.¹⁵ Russia and China also criticize the policy of the United States on the information space, viewing the internet through the prism of national security (Sutter 2018: 9).

Another area in which the interests of Russia and China coincide is the closeness of their positions on how to settle the problem on the Korean peninsula. In this regard, they launched a joint roadmap initiative to resolve the differences between North Korea and the international community.¹⁶ At the same time, Russia and China criticized the deployment of the American THAAD system in South Korea, and they have been conducting joint “Aerospace Security” exercises on air and missile defence since 2016 (Kashin, Lukin 2018: 622–623). The Russian and Chinese leadership have deliberately tried to minimize differences of opinions throughout the entire period of the development of their relations (Korolev, Portyakov 2019).

The complementarity of Russian and Chinese interests is determined by geostrategic considerations. Russian foreign policy and its integration initiatives are heavily focused on Eurasia, while China is mostly concerned with East Asia. Cooperation between the two sides is a result of the threat they face from the same adversary in their priority regions of interest (Silayev, Sushentsov 2018: 10–19). In Central Asia, the interests of Russia and China coincide on the key issues of maintaining political stability, keeping secular regimes in power, and accelerated economic development in order to stabilize the region (Kashin, Lukin 2018: 630). In addition, as far as China is concerned, cooperation with Moscow is necessary for the implementation of its policy of reforms and openness, and for the creation of a favourable external environment

¹⁵ Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development; Joint Statement by the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on Strengthening Global Strategic Stability in the Modern Era. *President of Russia*. 05.06.2019. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5412> (accessed: 30.10.2019).

¹⁶ Joint Statement by the Russian and Chinese Foreign Ministries on the Korean Peninsula's Problems. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*. 04.07.2017. URL: http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/kp/-/asset_publisher/VJy7lg5QaAll/content/id/2807662 (accessed: 11.04.2019).

for economic growth. To this end, Beijing had developed relations with all the world's leading powers (Ma, Zhang 2019: 28–29).

Successfully linking the EAEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt would allow Russia and China to form a cooperative order in the vast Eurasian space, achieve synergy of integration efforts, form common rules of the game, and help bring about indivisible security. The promotion of the concept of a Greater Eurasian Partnership afforded Russia the opportunity to act as an independent integration centre and take advantage of China's eagerness to implement bilateral and multilateral projects. For Beijing, cooperation with Moscow and its partners allows it to promote its initiative in the region with far greater success (Eurasian Integration Economic Belt 2016: 13–14, 120–125; Russia–China 2018: 90–92; Ma, Zhang 2019: 27).

The high degree of military-technical cooperation and military ties between the two countries testify to the depth of the strategic partnership. In 1993, the ministries of defence of Russia and China entered into an agreement that saw the development of contacts between the military departments of the two countries at the level of their leaders, chiefs of the General Staff, the Security Council of the Russian Federation and the State Council of the People's Republic of China.¹⁷ An average of 20 to 30 events are held each year between the Russian and Chinese militaries, including joint exercises and training sessions. The statements made following bilateral consultations show growing concern regarding the threat posed by the United States, respect for each other's views on the deterioration of the security situation, recognition of the need to find joint responses to challenges, etc. Russia and China shy away from naming each other as a security threat during contacts with third countries and in the public domain (Korolev 2018: 6–8).

In 1992, China and Russia signed a Military-Technical Cooperation Agreement, thus marking the beginning of large-scale interaction. The expansion of military contacts between the two countries and the reduction of tensions on the border following the agreements of 1996–1997 have led to more sophisticated types of military equipment being supplied to China, with the sale of weapons eventually giving way to the transfer of licenses and designs for Chinese orders. The development of military-technical cooperation in the 1990s allowed China to re-equip its armed forces and take a massive step forward by one or two generations of military equipment (Kashin, Gabuev 2017: 1–23; Kashin, Lukin 2018: 618–620).

Cooperation stalled somewhat in the mid-2000s due to the fact that Russian military-industrial complex was flooded with internal orders, the country was busy diversifying its export partners, and there was a growing risk of China copying Russian technologies without a license. In 2014–2015, military-technical cooperation was

¹⁷ Agreement between the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Defence of the People's Republic of China on Military Cooperation. *Official Internet Portal of Legal Information*. 11.10.1993. URL: <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&nd=102026598&rdk=&backlink=1> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

given a new impetus when China signed contracts for the purchase of at least six divisions of the S-400 long- and medium-range anti-aircraft system to the tune of more than \$3 billion, and 24 Su-35 fighters worth \$2 billion. The development of the Chinese military-industrial complex allowed Russia to provide the latest prototypes of its weapons to the country, although this meant that Moscow was risking having a smaller share in the Chinese market in the long-term. New supplies will act as a deterrent for China's potential adversaries on its periphery in terms of the cost of participating in hostilities, thus reducing the threat of the United States resorting to military action (Kashin, Gabuev 2017: 1–23; Kashin, Lukin 2018: 618–620).

Joint Russia–China Peace Mission ground exercises have taken place since 2005, with Maritime Interaction exercises being added to the calendar in 2012. The scale of both has increased significantly over time, and their geographical scope has also increased. In 2015–2019, maritime exercises were held for the first time in the Mediterranean, South China and Baltic seas. Such a plan of interaction has allowed the parties to increase consistency in areas such as communications, planning, logistics, intelligence, and interoperability. It is through these exercises that China has been able to interact with one of the most experienced military powers in the world, providing it with combat mission training in remote regions where Chinese ships do not typically go. The joint exercises have also served to build mutual confidence between the Russian and Chinese militaries, reaffirm their friendly intentions towards one another, and gain a better understanding of their combat capabilities (Weitz 2018: 42–44).

In 2018, China and Mongolia took part in the largest strategic exercises in modern Russian history – Vostok 2018. The participation of Chinese detachments made it possible for the sides to work out technical issues of military cooperation, even in the absence of agreements on collective defence. The conditions for the formation of an alliance were thus in place, should such a decision be made.¹⁸ All this has led military experts to conclude that, in terms of the level of cooperation between the Russian and Chinese militaries, the countries had already moved beyond the point at which a military-political union is typically formalized (Korolev 2018: 15–16; Kashin, Lukin 2018: 631).

On July 23, 2019, Russian and Chinese long-range strategic aircraft made their first ever joint patrol. The expanding forms of cooperation is particular noteworthy against the backdrop of the growing tensions not only between Russia and the United States, but also between China and the United States. For Moscow, long-range strategic aviation is a key tool for projecting its power in the Asia-Pacific. What is more, there are plans to renegotiate the Military-Technical Cooperation Agreement that has been in force since 1993. The new version is expected to reflect the increased engagement that we are witnessing today (Kashin 2019a).

¹⁸ China Takes Part in the Vostok Russian Strategic Exercise for the First Time. *Vedomosti*. 20.08.2018. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2018/08/20/778598-kitai> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

The statement made by Vladimir Putin in October 2019 that Russia was assisting China in the construction of a missile warning system is further evidence of Russia–China relations reaching a completely new level. Such a system would allow it to deliver a retaliatory strike before the enemy’s nuclear weapon is able to the country. A single Russian–Chinese system with a common command was never on the cards, although current cooperation allows the two countries to exchange radar data in real time. Such integration means a reduction in the warning time of a missile strike thanks to China’s stations in the south and southeast (for Russia) and Russia’s radars in the north (for China) (Kashin 2019b).

Against the background of the aggravation of the confrontation between Russia and China on the one hand, and the United States and its allies on the other, the further expansion of military cooperation between Moscow and Beijing may see it seep into new areas. Such areas, according to experts, include strategic missile defence, hypersonic technologies, the construction of nuclear submarines, strategic command-post exercises (Kashin 2019b), joint research and development in the field of military-technical cooperation, the exchange of intelligence on US plans and actions, etc. (Russian–Chinese Dialogue: The 2019 Model: 20).

Thus, there are objective reasons and long-term grounds for the rapprochement between Russia and China. It is based on the proximity of strategic interests of the two countries. The strategic partnership allows them to back each other up in the confrontation with the United States in the diplomatic, military and economic spheres. The development of cooperation during the 1990s and 2000s and the never-changing priorities created an atmosphere of trust between the leadership of the two countries, with each convinced of the intentions of the partner and the predictability of relations. Specifically, it was expected that the sides would not separatist forces in each other’s territories or the hostile policies of third countries. The fact that Russia and China share a border, combined with the high level of cooperation between the two countries, effectively excludes the possibility of either state being strategically encircled (Lukin 2013: 329–334). The countries continue to be each other’s most important border partner, and this is why stable and good neighbourly relations are so important for their foreign policy and security. Such a relationship guarantee a more stable basis for relations with the West and allow them to keep smaller armed contingents on the common border (Voskressenski 2012: 3–4; Ma, Zhang 2019: 28).

3

Based on the established terminology, Russia–China relations cannot be referred to as an alliance, as there are no formalized agreements between the two on joint defence and mutual security obligations. The 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and

¹⁹ Vladimir Putin. Valdai Discussion Club Session. *President of Russia*. 03.10.2019. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61719> (accessed: 30.10.2019).

Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation states that the parties will not resort to the use of force or the threat of force, will not target strategic nuclear missiles against each other, will not enter into any alliance that would compromise the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of the other party, will hold contacts and consultations in order to eliminate threats caused by situations in which one of the parties deems that peace is being threatened and undermined or its security interests are involved.²⁰ Thus, the document establishes obligations of non-aggression and mutual consultations that go beyond the guarantees typically included in such agreements. However, it does not contain the obligation to defend each other in the event of an armed attack, which is a hallmark of alliances (Korolev 2018: 5).

Based on publicly available information, we cannot say either way whether Russia and China have mutual obligations that could be equated with a defence pact. What distinguishes the Russia–China partnership from the military alliances that the United States has built with a number of European and Asian states is that it is both free from formal agreements on joint actions, and does not confer any obligation to provide assistance in the event of a conflict. And it is the latter that causes us to question the stability of mutual guarantees (Istomin 2017: 103).

This situation is explained by the **benefit–cost** ratio of an alliance for both Moscow and Beijing, which would suggest that it would not be in the best interests of either to sign one. In terms of benefits, an alliance would increase the potential of both sides for deterring the United States. In addition, it would reduce the likelihood of the other side cosying up to the United States, eliminate the threat of hostile actions, and give greater influence over its foreign policy actions. At the same time, Russia and China must also take the costs of an alliance into account, specifically: the risk of being dragged into a confrontation they have no interest in being part of; the strengthening of the US network of alliances in response to the aggravated security dilemma; and the limited autonomy of their respective foreign policies due to the need to coordinate it with the other side.

Russia and China noted specifically when forming their strategic partnership that the relations being built were not directed against third countries. The reason at the time was that Western states were not seen as a serious adversary with whom cooperation was out of the question. On the contrary, the interests of both Moscow and Beijing were in line with the political, economic and technological rapprochement with the West, as it also contributed to their development (Shi 2017). The creation of an anti-American alliance would only be possible if the threat from the United States would necessitate a complete severance of relations with the country and its allies (Lukin 2013: 332; Lukin 2018: 104).

²⁰ Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation. *President of Russia*. 16.07.2001. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/3418> (accessed: 30.10.2019).

Right now, the benefits of forming an alliance do not outweigh the costs associated with ensuring their security. Neither country currently sees the threat posed by the United States as serious enough that they cannot deal with it independently while maintaining the current level of coordination. Despite the current souring of Russia's relations with the United States and NATO, its nuclear shield and advanced weapons – some of which have no analogues in the world – ensure that a direct military clash is exceedingly unlikely. Russia is the only country with global strategic potential that is on a par with that of the United States and is capable of delivering a nuclear retaliatory strike, which significantly reduces the risk of a conventional war (Korolev 2015). Russia's foreign policy focuses primarily on the post-Soviet space and relations with the European Union. Economic ties with Europe, although weighed down by the sanctions, remain significant for Russia's development. And they are almost irreplicable in terms of technology. Russia is also interested in diversifying its foreign policy and foreign economic relations in Asia, developing cooperation with Japan, South Korea, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), India and other countries (Lukin 2018: 191; Ma, Zhang, 2019: 33–35).

For China – whose development model is based on attracting foreign investment, borrowing technologies and exporting finished products – cooperation with the West plays a significant role, despite the trade war with the United States and the restrictions imposed by the United States and the European Union on technology transfers. Russia is a far less attractive economic partner for China if energy exports are taken out of the equation. There is no way it can replace ties with the West.

Chinese investors are more interested in investing in other markets (Lukin 2018: 191; Ma, Zhang 2019: 31, 35). Due to the peculiarities of the business climate in Siberia and the Russian Far East and the shortcomings of the legal environment – not to mention the lack of adequate funding – cross-border cooperation with Northeast China has, with the exception of local trade, developed poorly. It has thus far failed to become a driver for economic development and increased interaction between the two countries (Shi 2017). The difficulty attracting Chinese investment into the Russian Far East can be attributed to the region's somewhat backward development: the limited domestic market; the lack of labour resources; the underdeveloped transport and production infrastructure; high costs; and the lack of modernized border crossings (Zuenko 2020). Turning the situation around is a long-term undertaking.

It will take some time to expand domestic demand and build a more balanced economic model in China that combines domestic and export demand. In any case, these trends do not imply that the country should turn its back on its foreign economic aspirations. What is more, the implementation of the Made in China 2025 programme, the aim of which is to catch up to the world's leading countries in terms of technological development, is complicated by significant restrictions and cannot be fully realized without cooperation with the West, especially the United States (Made in China 2025 2016: 37–42).

In terms of military planning, Beijing has, in addition to its defensive goals, set itself the task of building up its potential for victory in localized hi-tech wars, with a particular emphasis on naval clashes.²¹ Even more than Moscow, it strives to block the access to its periphery for potential adversaries. The Trump administration's designation of Russia and China as strategic adversaries²² and the related policy pursued by the United States has led Moscow and Beijing to see containment as the main goal of Washington's strategy towards them. Beijing is particularly concerned by the attempts to undermine its technological development (Kashin, Lukin 2018: 616–617).

That said, both Russia and China remain open to dialogue with the West, as illustrated by Moscow's desire to work with the United States on arms control issues,²³ as well as by the trade talks between Washington and Beijing that led to the signing of an agreement on the first stage of a "trade deal" in January 2020.²⁴ It is the United States that is most significant for China, not only in terms of economic ties, but also strategically in terms of discussions on the global and regional order (Lukin 2018: 191; Charap, Drennan, Noel 2017: 25). China is more interested than Russia in maintaining a working relationship with the United States and does not want to be seen as a revisionist power (Sutter 2018: 10). Beijing is still interested in reforming the international order and global governance institutions in a way that would give developing countries a more prominent place in them. Despite the unilateralist approach of the Trump administration and the unprecedented tensions in US–China relations, China is ready to work with other countries to preserve the world order. It is vital that the United States and China find a new stability in their relations for the future world order to not be mired in confrontation (Chen, Zhang 2020: 23–24). Chinese experts repeatedly emphasize that its cooperation with Russia is not directed against third countries (Feng 2018; Ma, Zhang 2019: 34–35).

According to Chinese researchers Feng Yujun and Shang Yu, the benefits of a possible alliance with Moscow are difficult to adequately assess. They may even turn out to be illusory due to the complexity of modern international interaction. Meanwhile, the price that China would have to pay in terms of worsening relations with the United States would be very specific, and an escalation of the confrontation would be difficult to control. It is unlikely that Washington will ease the pressure on either country. Despite the burgeoning Russia–China strategic partnership, the United States is suc-

²¹ Full Text: China's Military Strategy. *Ministry of National Defense. The People's Republic of China*. 26.05.2015. URL: http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2015-05/26/content_4586805.htm (accessed: 11.04.2019).

²² National Security Strategy of the United States of America. *The White House*. 17.12.2017. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

²³ Putin: Russia is Prepared to Open Dialogue with US on Issues of Stability. *RIA Novosti*. 05.12.2020. URL: <https://ria.ru/20200205/1564280094.html> (accessed on April 9, 2020).

²⁴ Economic and Trade Agreement Between the Government of the United States and the Government of the People's Republic of China. *Office of the United States Trade Representative*. 15.01.2020. URL: https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/files/agreements/phase%20one%20agreement/Economic_And_Trade_Agreement_Between_The_United_States_And_China_Text.pdf (accessed: 09.04.2020).

cessfully implementing measures directed against Russia in Europe (for example, its increased military presence in Central and Eastern Europe), and against China in Asia (the deployment of the THAAD complex in South Korea, and its operations to maintain freedom of navigation in the South China Sea).

The model of confrontation that would emerge as a result of the formation of a Russia–China alliance would do little in terms of helping to better solve global problems (climate change, the scientific and technological revolution, the stability of the global financial system, etc.). It would not strengthen global and regional stability; quite the contrary, it would weaken it. And there is no reason to believe that such an alliance would help smooth over the issues in China or Russia's bilateral relations with the United States. As far as Beijing is concerned, further rapprochement with Moscow in the military sphere would not prompt the United States to ease its pressure on China (Feng, Shang 2018).

Further, Moscow and Beijing do not actively seek to prevent the other side from establishing friendlier ties with Washington, much less form an alliance on this basis. Russia–China interaction is developing on a pragmatic and non-ideological basis, which certainly cannot be said about their respective relations with Western countries. Moscow views Beijing as a more reliable partner than Washington, since the latter poses an existential threat due to its propensity for liberal interventionism. In this regard, at the present juncture, it is difficult to imagine a situation in which Russia would prefer to build relations with the West against China. The reverse situation is equally unrealistic due to the depth of contradictions between China and the United States (Russian–Chinese Dialogue: The 2016 Model: 23; Lukin 2018: 189–190).

The threat of Russia or China carrying out an attack on the other side is far too outlandish to take seriously. The military planning of the two countries, while not ruling out various possible developments in the international situation, focuses on potential scenarios involving the United States, NATO and the United States' allies in Asia. While certain groups in Russia still fear an attack from China or moves to expand its territory, experts are not convinced (Larin 2017; Larin, Larina 2018; Korolov 2015; Lukin 2018: 162–165). According to Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) data for October 2019, China tops the list of countries with which Russia enjoys friendly relations (45% of respondents), while only 7% saw the country as a threat.²⁵ A July 2018 Public Opinion Foundation poll indicated that 62% of Russians consider China to be a friendly state, while 16% see it as unfriendly; 55% believe that the rise of China does not pose a threat to Russia's interests, compared to 26% who believe that it does; 20% are of the opinion that it is more important to strengthen relations with the West, whereas 29% believe that strengthening relations with China is more imperative, and 29% think that relations need to be strengthened with both.²⁶ Russia continues to

²⁵ Friends and Enemies. *VCIOM*. 28.10.2019. URL: <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=9971> (accessed: 10.04.2019).

²⁶ Russia and China: Positions in the World. *Public Opinion Foundation*. 11.07.2018. URL: <https://fom.ru/Mir/14063> (accessed: 10.04.2019).

enjoy significant superiority in terms of strategic potential. Alarmist statements about the risks of demographic expansion are not backed up by data, which indicates an absence of large-scale migration flows. There are approximately 330,000 Chinese nationals living in Russia, accounting for just 3% of all foreigners residing in the country (Lukin 2018: 162–165, 189–190).

Thus, Russia and China consider their potentials to be sufficient to ensure their own security and conduct an armed struggle in the most likely scenarios by themselves. Accordingly, the advantages offered by an alliance are not compelling enough to pursue the matter further. Quite the opposite – the countries would likely incur huge costs as a result of a possible aggravation of the confrontation with the West and the breakdown of economic and technological cooperation in the event that an alliance is formalized. Forming an alliance to prevent other risks, such as the rapprochement of their partners with the United States, or military actions of Moscow or Beijing, is out of the question.

4

The lack of objective prerequisites and the fact that there are structural risks that prevent the formalization of military-political obligations in the field of collective defence superimposed onto the views of the political elites in Russia and China, as well as on a number of their domestic political features. Neither the Russian nor the Chinese leadership seek to conclude an alliance at the official or any other level (Fu 2016; Lukin 2018: 128).²⁷ Most Russian observers consider the existing cooperation mechanisms to be sufficient to overcome the current security challenges and do not see the need to form a full-fledged alliance. Chinese experts note that both the elites and society are in favour of this kind of relationship between the two countries, and it is thus the best option. They believe that Moscow and Beijing will continue to be neither allies nor enemies for the foreseeable future (Russian–Chinese Dialogue: The 2015 Model: 7–8; Ma, Zhang 2019: 33).

Moscow's strategic culture is marked by great power aspirations that encourage it to pursue an independent foreign policy (Charap, Drennan, Noel 2017: 25–26). In a February 2019 message to the Federal Assembly, Vladimir Putin said that Russia had traditionally acted as an independent state on the world stage, adding that “this is a given. It will either be that, or will simply cease to exist.”²⁸ This assertion is incompatible with the reduction of autonomy that would necessarily come from the formalization of an alliance.

²⁷ Vladimir Putin: “We do not have a military alliance with China and we do not plan to create one.” See: Vladimir Putin's Annual News Conference. *President of Russia*. 19.12.2019. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62366> (accessed: 10.04.2019).

²⁸ Presidential Address to Federal Assembly. *President of Russia*. 20.02.2019. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59863> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

What is more, the discussion continues in Russia around the nature of the threat that the West poses to Russia. For example, the Russian expert S. Karaganov argues that the United States and Western countries should be categorically positioned as strategic opponents of Moscow (Karaganov 2018). At a January 2019 press conference, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov noted that the current aggravation in Russia's relations with the West is a result of Washington's desire to impose its will on the global community through force, economic pressure and propaganda and its unwillingness to "accept the reality of the emerging multipolar world." Despite this, Lavrov said that Russia was still interested in restoring normal relations with the United States and the European Union "on the principles of equality and mutual consideration of interests."²⁹ Another opinion is given by A. Dynkin, a full member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who emphasized that Russia's rapprochement with China would make the country a junior partner, or even a satellite, of a rising power should a bipolar America–China world order be established. In this respect, it would be in Moscow's interests to expand contacts with Europe.³⁰

In China, people do not look fondly on the historical experience of alliances with Russia. This was one of the reasons cited for the refusal to adopt formalized obligations on collective defence became a foundation of China's foreign policy. Under these conditions, China is not interested in forming an anti-Western alliance in any way, shape or form. Beijing hopes to develop relations with Russia in other formats so that the two countries can achieve their development goals and support each other more successfully, thus stabilizing the international system. According to the Chinese side, by deepening the partnership, Moscow and Beijing will demonstrate to the world how cooperation between leading powers should work, how to properly transition from mutual suspicion to trusting interaction, where countries minimize differences of opinion and develop cooperation in areas of mutual interest (Fu 2016). At present, neither Russia nor China has the desire or the ability to impose their will on the other as part of an alliance, much less lead one (Feng, Shang 2018). In the same vein, Chinese experts see deepening the partnership with Russia and India and filling these relations with substantive content, rather than the creation of a tripartite anti-Western alliance, as the most rational and viable strategy moving forward (Cheng, Feng 2016: 447).

Developments that could nudge Beijing towards an alliance with Moscow include a strategic confrontation with the United States and its partners in the Indo-Pacific, a break, however unlikely, in economic relations with Washington, or possible difficulties in the implementation of its own economic and technological strategy as a result of the West's policies. Chinese observers see the US strategy of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific and the restoration of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between the United

²⁹ Press Conference with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov. *International Affairs*. 16.01.2019. URL: <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/21422> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

³⁰ Dynkin. A. The Window for Reaching Agreements is Closing. *Kommersant*. 25.02.2019. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3874100> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

States, Japan, Australia and India as a policy aimed at containing China, obstructing the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, and complicating China's cooperation with its neighbours.³¹

The actions of the United States increase the security risks for Beijing in adjacent maritime spaces and destabilize the situation in the South China Sea. Despite these negative intentions, Chinese experts believe that the inconsistency of Washington's actions in its dealings with its allies and partners, and the fact that it (or any other country, for that matter) is prepared to enter into an outright military confrontation with China, will lead to the Indo-Pacific strategy suffering the same fate at the Obama administration's policy of strategic rebalancing to Asia. It will fail to achieve these goals, especially if China is shrewd enough to maintain good relations with traditional friendly countries.³²

Chinese observers view the trade war with the United States as part of a multi-component confrontation in which economic tools make up just a part of the American strategy (Sheng 2018). Its goal is to contain the growth of the Chinese economy. In addition to issuing ultimatums to China regarding its trade and industrial policy and introducing sanctions and other anti-competitive measures against Chinese businesses, the United States is stepping up the pressure in relation to security issues in the Indo-Pacific through coordination with allies and partners, intensifying the arms race, undermining China's nuclear potential and carrying out high-profile military manoeuvres.

In terms of political issues, the subject of China's relations with Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong are high on the US agenda, as is the issue of human rights, all of which are sore spots for the Chinese leadership. Washington also imposes restrictions on the number of Chinese nationals that can enter the United States to study, as well as on scientific, technical and humanitarian contacts. It also conducts a propaganda campaign in the media. According to Chinese experts, the actions of the United States pose a threat to Russia's economic security, and create challenges for China in the financial, energy and food sectors. The United States is pursuing a policy of decoupling with China in almost all areas, including joint value chains and technology transfer (Russian–Chinese Dialogue: The 2019 Model: 17–22).

Nevertheless, China believes that the potential damage for its economy as a result of tariffs being introduced on all its exports would definitely be felt, but it would not be critical.³³ At the same time, US consumers will also bear significant costs. In these con-

³¹ Chen D. What China Thinks of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. *The Diplomat*. 28.04.2018. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/what-china-thinks-of-the-indo-pacific-strategy/> (accessed: 11.04.2019); Fang L. Indo-Pacific Strategy Will Likely Share the Same Fate as Rebalance to Asia-Pacific. *Global Times*. 03.12.2017. URL: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1078470.shtml> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

³² Ibid.

³³ According to a November 2019 report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the hit to the Chinese economy will total approximately 1.1% of the country's GDP. IMF data for October 2019 projected that China's real GDP would decline by 2% in 2020, 0.8% by 2023, and 1% in the long term. These projections are based on

ditions, Beijing is not ready to make concessions on its fundamental interests, security or sovereignty. Chinese experts believe that these facts bring Russia and China closer, both economically and politically. That said, what interests the two countries right now is expanding investments, implementing joint projects, establishing scientific and innovative partnerships and enhancing transregional cooperation – in other words, they want to deepen existing relations (Russian–Chinese Dialogue: The 2019 Model: 17–18, 22; Sheng 2018).

The issue of trust in Russia–China relations deserves separate attention here. For Russia, the matter is complicated by the differences in the demographic and economic potentials of the two countries, the disagreements in the interpretation of certain historical events, and China's interest in developing Russian natural resources. The level of distrust is gradually decreasing as the countries step up their mutual cooperation – for example, the people in the Russian Far East see China as an opportunity for development, rather than a threat (Larin 2017: 52–65). The negative historical memory, particularly in China, regarding the settlement of border issues with the Soviet Union continues to influence the countries' perceptions of one another. However, the leadership of both states is attempting to smooth over the differences, for example, by shifting the focus to cooperation against a common enemy during the Second World War (Korolev, Portyakov 2019).

A large number of agreements on economic cooperation have been signed since 2014, although many of them remain on paper only. The gap between the expectations of the Russian side of an influx of Chinese capital into the country and reality is huge (Ma, Zhang 2019: 30–31). What is more, cultural and civilizational differences, combined with China's dissatisfaction with the unpredictability of Russia's foreign policy and Russia's dissatisfaction with China's pragmatism, as well as the growing concerns in Moscow about what Beijing really wants to get out of the relationship, could feed mutual distrust in the future (Karpov 2018). The Chinese side often expresses its disappointment over the fact that many in Russia still talk about the so-called “Chinese threat” (Ma, Zhang 2019: 29), and the country is often criticized in the Russian media.

5

Let us now consider the key variables that Glenn Snyder singles out as determining the relations between parties and which could influence the decision to form an alliance, namely, balance of interests, balance of potentials and interdependence. These

the trade tariffs introduced in 2018–2019 and do not take the effects of the possible implementation of the first phase of the US–China trade deal, or the possibility of the United States imposing high tariffs on all Chinese goods, into account. Furthermore, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is not factored into these projections. See: OECD Economic Outlook. OECD. 2019. 2(106). Paris: OECD Publishing. P. 16–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9b89401b-en>. URL: https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/oecd-economic-outlook-volume-2019-issue-2_9b89401b-en (accessed: 10.04.2019); G-20 Report on Strong, Sustainable, Balanced, and Inclusive Growth. 2019. *International Monetary Fund*. P. 24. <https://www.imf.org/external/np/g20/pdf/2019/101119b.pdf> (accessed: 10.04.2019).

indicators affect the strength of a country's position when negotiating with a partner, the benefit–cost ratio of an alliance

The presence of coinciding, divergent, and sometimes antagonistic **interests** is normal for relations between great powers. An analysis of the preferences of Russia and China demonstrates that their interests coincide on a wide range of issues, including strategic issues, as well as a number of areas in which their interests diverge. Russia is involved in conflict situations primarily in Europe and the post-Soviet space, while China is involved in East Asia. The countries can adopt a neutral stance on issues that affect the key interest of one of the sides but do not correspond to those of the other. This is precisely what China did with respect to the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, and Crimea and Ukraine in 2014. Beijing's policy in this respect is dictated by the fact that it has no desire to risk its relations with the world's leading power for the sake of issues that have nothing to do with its core interests. What is more, the separatist movements in China (in Tibet and Xinjiang) and the Taiwan issue mean that it would be setting a dangerous precedent if it were to express support for Russia's actions (Korolev, Portyakov 2018: 431–437; Charap, Drennan, Noel 2017: 26–27).

Beijing is concerned about many of Moscow's unpredictable and risky moves (such as its military operation in Syria) (Wishnick 2016: 18). For a long time, China's more restrained position, which rules out the possibility of an open confrontation with the West, allowed it to bear lower political, economic and military-strategic costs (Voskressenski 2015: 51). China is also actively expanding economic cooperation with Ukraine and other post-Soviet states, as well as with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, as such cooperation helps to further the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (Russian–Chinese Dialogue: The 2018 Model: 111). Another area of potential disagreement is the issue of the nuclear arms control regime, as China does not feel it is appropriate to participate in it (Lukin 2018: 169).

In the same vein, Moscow is not interested in supporting Beijing in its conflicts in the South China and East China seas. Nor is it ready to risk its partnerships in Asia by distancing itself from China's problems with Vietnam, India and Japan. Further, Russia does not support the creation of artificial islands and building a military infrastructure on them, advocating the peaceful resolution of conflicts on the basis of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Moscow calls for the speedy adoption of a legally binding code of conduct in the South China Sea, and opposes interference in ongoing disputes by third countries (Kashin, Lukin 2018: 621,624; Wishnick 2016: 7; Korolev, Portyakov 2018; Klein 2014: 18–19; Sutter 2018: 11). With the exception of the last point, Russia's position is far closer to that of Vietnam than to China. Beijing has repeatedly criticized Moscow for cooperating with Hanoi in the development of energy on the contested shelf. Russia and China also disagree on the desired political configuration in East Asia. Beijing has designs on becoming the dominant power on the continent, while Russia wants to strengthen its position as a centre of the regional system. Other than criticizing the actions of the United States and taking part in the

creation of a joint road map on the Korean issue, China rarely expresses any kind of interest in coordinating with Russia on regional issues (Klein 2014: 18–19).

Russia and China are also competitors in the Eurasian space. The goal of the Belt and Road Initiative is to create an integration space the way China sees fit. It involves the use of Chinese equipment, components, services and labour, thus helping China increase its role in value chains and realize its economic and foreign policy interests. Beijing focuses on bilateral ties. Russia on the other hand is interested in multilateral cooperation that does not undermine the development of integration in the EAEU. It seeks a more even distribution of gains, which would help improve the competitiveness of the EAEU's member states.

Consequently, the question of the real outlines of the joint EAEU and Silk Road Economic Belt, as well as the coordination of the two countries within the framework of Greater Eurasia, has not yet been clarified. For example, Russia and its partners are not prepared to agree to the creation of the free trade zone advocated by China, as it would undermine the competitiveness of their economies (Syroezhkin 2016: 37–55; Russian–Chinese Dialogue: The 2018 Model: 90–92; Economic Belt of Eurasian Integration 2016: 14–15; Ma, Zhang 2019: 31). China calls for liberalizing economic ties and eliminating restrictions to the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, which explains its negative attitude towards the protectionist policy of the EAEU (Lukin 2018: 169).

In general, the economic interests of the two countries diverge quite often. Russia would like to move away from the model of energy supplies and imports of finished products, while China, on the contrary, is satisfied with the existing structure of interaction. In this regard, projects in non-resource sectors are moving along rather slowly (Korolev, Portyakov 2019). Chinese President Xi Jinping's concept of a “community of common destiny for mankind” as the ideological justification for his foreign policy creates a difficult choice for Moscow: Is it ready to support China's push for a leading role in Asia and in the world as a whole (Russian–Chinese Dialogue: The 2018 Model: 115–117)?

A comparative analysis of the **potentials** of the two countries gives us a mixed picture, and one that favours Moscow less and less. The level of development of the Russian military-industrial complex is noticeably superior to that of China, and it enjoys serious advantages over its strategic partner in terms of air defence, certain areas of radar technology, aircraft engine building, and submarine building. Advanced Russian weapons have no analogues in China; however, the accelerated modernization of Beijing's military potential has allowed it to catch up to Russia in terms of a number of types of military equipment (for example, shipbuilding, multiple-launch rocket systems, and various types of electronic components), and even surpass it in certain areas (for example, unmanned aerial vehicles). The modernization of the People's Liberation Army of China, the military reforms launched in 2015, and the purchase of Russian weapons systems have allowed China to expand its opportunities for participating in an increasing range of military missions (Kasin, Gabuev 2017: 17–23).

In terms of economic potential, 2018 data suggests that China's GDP was eight times higher than that of Russia in dollar terms (\$13.6 trillion compared to \$1.7 trillion), and six times greater in terms of purchasing power parity (\$25.4 trillion compared to \$4 trillion). Chinese economic growth may have slowed somewhat to 6–7% against the backdrop of the 2014–2015 recession in Russia and its gradual recovery subsequently widened the gap in absolute economic performance.³⁴ Meanwhile, the ability of the countries to finance the military budget also depends on the size of the economy. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Russia's defence spending in 2018 was \$61 billion, compared to China's \$250 billion. However, this equates to 3.9% of Russia's GDP, and 1.9% of China's.³⁵ China's military expenditure has far exceeded Russia's for some time now. And while Beijing's strategic potential lags far behind that of Russia and the United States (Korolev 2015), it is only a matter of time – assuming the current situation persists – before it starts to develop its own advanced technologies. The question is: To what extent will the military-industrial complex be able to achieve a technological breakthrough in key areas of military modernization? And in what timeframe?

In the 2020s, Russia will likely still have the military-strategic tools to build relations with China on an equal footing, despite the disparity of their respective economies. What is more, Beijing's ability to cope with structural challenges and actually reach a new level of technological development is still in question (Russian–Chinese Dialogue: The 2018 Model: 105). That said, the disequilibrium of economic potentials leads to an asymmetry in the overall power of the two countries. The Chinese side has paid increasing attention to this aspect since 2014, pointing out that Russia should meet China halfway in terms of its interests, especially in economic matters.

The nature of Russia and China's **interdependence** is also changing. With the growing asymmetry of economic relations, China is reducing its dependence on supplies of Russian equipment and components. Military-technical cooperation with Moscow allows Beijing to resolve issues connected to the disproportionate development of various branches of the military-industrial complex and the lag in the production of a number of critical components. Large-scale supplies concern finished military equipment only, that is, no transfer of technologies or licenses takes place. In addition, smaller R&D agreements are being concluded.

As Chinese industry develops, Russia's share in it – and its importance as a supplier – is gradually decreasing, although the most recent contracts are important in terms of increasing the combat capability of the People's Liberation Army of China in the South China and East China seas, as well as in Taiwan. China has reached the stage where it can upgrade and modernize its military equipment without Russia's involvement, although it will take time (Kashin, Gabuev 2017: 17–23). That said, Beijing is

³⁴ Indicators. *World Bank*. URL: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

³⁵ SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, 1949–2018. *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*. URL: <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

likely to be interested in military-technical cooperation with Moscow in a number of areas in the medium term. The transition of the two countries to more complex forms of industrial and technological cooperation, such as the development of artificial intelligence, laser weapons, robotics, and hypersonic technologies, is constrained by a lack of trust due to the low level of intellectual property protection (Russian–Chinese Dialogue: The 2017 Model: 28–29).

Even maintaining the current level of military-technical cooperation does not create the necessary incentives for a Russia–China alliance, as it suits both sides perfectly the way it is. The fact that China is actively modernizing its armed forces means that Beijing is unlikely to be interested in any security guarantees from Moscow, even if a conflict with Washington does break out. It is simply out of the question that China will depend significantly on Russia in the security field.

In terms of economic interaction, there has been no significant change here, despite the noticeable expansion of cooperation and the emergence of various sectors in the 2010s. An imbalance in the trade turnover between the two countries is observed. Two thirds of Russia's exports to China are natural resources (mainly energy products and timber), which are exchanged for manufactured goods and high value-added products. Beijing has been Moscow's number one trading partner since 2010. In 2019, its share in Russia's trade turnover totalled 16.6%, compared to just 4% in 1999.³⁶ Meanwhile, Russia accounted for just 4% of China's foreign trade in the same year (good for 11th place).³⁷

Trade patterns are unlikely to change in the short term, and the challenge posed by the uneven economic relations to the Russia–China partnership will only worsen moving forward (Ma, Zhang 2019: 30). According to the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, the total volume of Chinese direct investments in Russia amounted to \$11 billion as of the end of 2018, while Russian investments in China amounted to just \$1.1 billion. The majority of Chinese investments goes into energy resources, agriculture and forestry, construction, the production of building materials, trade, the light and textile industries, household appliances and services.³⁸ According to the Russian Ambassador to China Andrey Denisov, as of the end of 2018, the total volume of all types of accumulated Chinese investments amounted to approximately \$30 billion.³⁹ Outside the energy sector, the Russian economy experiences difficulties attracting large-scale investments from China. While Chinese investments have appeared in new areas in recent years (for example, in the automotive industry, petro-

³⁶ Foreign Trade Customs Statistics. *Federal Customs Service*. URL: <http://stat.customs.ru/apex/f?p=201:7:1212342542464258::NO> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

³⁷ Russia–China Trade. 2018. *Trade Representation of the Russian Federation in China*. URL: http://www.russchinatrade.ru/ru/ru-cn-cooperation/trade_ru_cn (accessed: 11.04.2019).

³⁸ Russia–China Investment Cooperation. 2020. *Trade Representation of the Russian Federation in China*. URL: <http://www.russchinatrade.ru/ru/ru-cn-cooperation/investment> (accessed: 11.04.2019).

³⁹ Russia's Ambassador to China: Russia–China Cooperation is a Stabilizing Factor in Today's Turbulent World. *Interfax*. 09.01.2019. URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/interview/645268> (accessed: 10.04.2019).

chemicals, and household appliances), economic relations between the two countries have not diversified significantly.

Technological cooperation mostly takes the form of the transfer of Russian developments to be used in Chinese production and the further transfer of technology. It often happens that Chinese companies engage Russian R&D directly. At the same time, Beijing has shown little interest in Russian proposals to set up joint hi-tech companies in areas where China is on the cutting edge, but Russia lags behind. That said, China still has some way to go to catch up with Western countries in terms of the level of technological development in most areas, and the quality of its hi-tech products, when the price increases are taken into account, is often below the required standard for Russian industry (Russian–Chinese Dialogue: The 2018 Model: 109–115; Karpov 2018). In its interactions with external partners, China is primarily interested in selling finished products manufactured by its national tech companies (such as Huawei and ZTE), thus securing a higher position in value chains (Dian, Menegazzi 2018: 74–75).

Russia–China relations are thus marked by increased asymmetry in economic relations and growing imbalances in political and economic cooperation. Further, there is a risk that Moscow could become dependent on Beijing both economically and technologically if the current trend towards the expansion of China's share in Russia's foreign activity persists in the long term, and if Russia opts to prioritize technological interaction with China (for example, in fifth-generation mobile communication technologies) (Russian–Chinese Dialogue: The 2018 Model: 109–112; Charap, Drennan, Noel 2017: 27–30; Karpov 2018; Sutter 2018: 9).

* * *

Theoretical advancements in the study of military-political alliances provide convincing grounds for explaining why Russia and China have not formalized collective defence obligations. Experts note that the prospects for an alliance between the two countries come down to weighing the benefits and costs of legally securing mutual guarantees, which are determined by the balance of converging and diverging interests, the nature of military and related potentials, and the degree of interdependence between the two sides. These variables are vital, both in terms of the prospects for a potential alliance, and in terms of how symmetrical such an alliance would be, what positions the parties would take within it, and how this configuration could change in the future.

Since the 1990s, Russia and China have developed a close relationship that reached a new level in the latter half of the 2010s, as tensions with the United States escalated. The two countries share common interests on a wide range of global issues, as well as a number of differences at the regional level. They have achieved a high degree of political coordination and deepened trade and investments ties. The parties are prepared to work together in areas that are sensitive to national security. This much is clear from the dialogue between the Russian and Chinese militaries, joint exercises of the armed forces, and the development of military-technical cooperation.

As a result, the bilateral strategic partnership is a highly structured example of rapprochement. Many experts see the strengthening of this partnership as a sign that Russia–China cooperation is moving towards what is traditionally seen as an alliance. Such developments are in many cases spun as desirable or expected. At the same time, both countries want to keep their options open in terms of possible interaction with third countries. Russia and China are highly dependent on cooperation with Western partners to achieve their development goals.

Our analysis revealed four groups of reasons that prevent Russia and China from forming a military-political alliance in the accepted understanding of the term. *First*, the advantages of this form of interaction are not attractive enough to the parties, who feel that they are able to ensure their own security and counter existing threats by themselves. *Second*, a Russia–China alliance would create significant risks of a further aggravation of the confrontation with the West, and a break in economic and technological cooperation with the most developed countries of the world. *Third*, the strategic culture of Moscow and Beijing encourages them to avoid actions that would limit their autonomy on the international stage, which is precisely what an alliance with another major power would do. *Fourth*, both Russia and China are concerned about being dragged into a conflict they would prefer to avoid.

For Russia, the risks of entering into an alliance with China are even more grave given the growing asymmetry of the economic potentials of the two countries and the growing imbalance of economic relations with China. The latter factor in particular increases the danger of Moscow becoming economically and technologically dependent on Beijing if its relations with the West do not improve. Russia's importance as a supplier of equipment and components for the Chinese market will in all likelihood start to fade. If the Russian economy fails to achieve sustainable growth and modernization, the alliance would likely tip in Beijing's favour (even if, to begin with, it would be balanced due to Russia's superior military potential). One of the biggest risks of forming an alliance with China is that Russia may be forced to support China in its confrontation with the United States in East Asia and be drawn into the conflict in the South China Sea. Cooperation with India and Vietnam would also likely suffer. Looking at potential worst-case scenarios, this could undermine Moscow's independence in Asia (Lee, Lukin 2016: 3–4) and call into questions the prospects for its turn to the East.

Unreserved support on the part of Russia for the Belt and Road Initiative without the establishment of the Greater Eurasian Partnership could lead to the erosion of the EAEU and its subordination to Chinese plans. Ultimately, this will contribute to the formation of an open hierarchical order in Asia and Eurasia, but one in which China will enjoy the leading position, and Moscow will be a significant but subordinate player.

These obstacles are unlikely to go anywhere soon, and will thus continue to block full-fledged treaty obligations in the sphere of collective defence in the future. Russia and China's current goals are best served if the existing formats of interaction are preserved. They leave the door open for further building cooperation without formal agreements. It seems likely that Russia and China will only move towards formal allied

relations if the threat from the United States becomes so great that the elites of these countries have no choice but to significantly reduce the level of interaction with the West and conclude a military-political alliance. Despite the escalation of tensions in Moscow and Beijing's relations with Washington, such a scenario still seems unlikely. The key factors that may lead to a further deepening of the strategic partnership between Russia and China and a revision of the format of their relations, including the possible establishment of an alliance, are: a growth in strategic competition between China and the United States in the economic, technological and military-political spheres; the ongoing weakening of the interdependence between the world's biggest economies (decoupling); and the desire of the United States to limit China's cooperation with the West and its Asian allies while stoking the flames of the tensions in US–Russia relations.

About the Author:

Anna A. Kireeva - Associate Professor, Department of Asian and African Studies; Research Fellow, Center for Comprehensive Chinese Studies and Regional Projects, MGIMO University, 76 Prosp. Vernadskogo, Moscow, 119454, Russian Federation. E-mail: a.kireeva@my.mgimo.ru

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