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The Context of Russo–Chinese Military Relations

Stephen Blank

ABSTRACT Russo–Chinese relations in all their aspects are immensely important for Asian and global security. This article focuses on regional trends in their military relations and finds them to be much more complicated and ambivalent than both Moscow and Beijing would have us believe. Although both sides profess ever-greater identity of interests, and some Russian writers have even postulated a security community between them, the facts show much more Russian ambivalence about Chinese probes against Japan and Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, Russia is driven by its standing vis-à-vis the United States more than by regional considerations in its China policy and is thus vulnerable to Chinese influence to reverse previously held policies, in this case selling China newer and better weapons systems than it sells to India. Accordingly, these trends bear careful scrutiny because of their profound implications for both countries, Asia, and the world.

KEYWORDS arms sales; China; defense; India; naval drills; Russia

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No single article could do full justice to the range of issues raised by or related to the totality of Russo–Chinese relations or, for that matter, to the exclusively military dimension of those relations. Nevertheless, because of the immense importance of both the military and overall substance of these relations, this article attempts to clarify certain trends in Russo–Chinese military relations and their context. Adding to the difficulty of this task is the wide range of analyses of these specific and general relations. The following two analyses, the first by Mikhail Troitsky of the Moscow State Institute for International Relations and the second by Jeffrey Mankoff of the Center for Strategic and International Relations, highlight the chasm between competing interpretations of this relationship.

Troitsky argues that Russia and China are close to finalizing a security community, maintaining that Russia could not, in any case, counterbalance China and—despite some concerns about Chinese international strategy (e.g., China's growing involvement in the Arctic)—this security community represents a major feat of Russian diplomacy.¹ In this context, Troitsky defines a security community thusly,

A security community is a group of states that refrain from counterbalancing—that is, trying to weaken—one another unless there is a clear and contingent reason to do so. Participation in such a community allows countries to economize the resources that

would otherwise be spent on hedging against the risk of mutually hostile policies. Members of a security community agree to derive no long-term benefit from diminishing the power of other members and are able to give each other credible reassurances to that effect.²

It therefore follows that neither Beijing nor Moscow seeks to gain advantages at the expense of the other; that they both have given each other credible assurances of their benevolent intentions toward each other; and neither engages in balancing behavior against the other. Thus their cooperation is mainly, if not exclusively, directed against U.S. power, policy, and values that both governments believe deny them their rightful standing and power in world affairs.³

Furthermore, the two countries have been conducting ever-larger military exercises marked by an increasingly higher degree of interaction. Arms sales to China, described below, now total almost \$2 billion annually. Joint sincere efforts are being made to strengthen humanitarian contacts, ties between public organizations, and cooperation in education. Government officials of the two countries publicly profess that the “Chinese threat” is a myth that benefits mainly the United States. Russian and Chinese leaders have repeatedly said that their political relations are based on trust and that their countries would never regard each other as foes. The topic of possible threats from China is taboo for Russian officials participating in public discussions.⁴

Mankoff’s view is utterly at odds with this almost idyllic vision. Despite the visible signs of Russo–Chinese amity, Mankoff finds it to be something of a façade. He observes that,

Moscow touts its partnership with Beijing mostly to prove to the rest of the world that Russia still matters, while China views it as a low-cost way of placating Russia. Lacking much of a common agenda, cooperation is limited to areas where their interests already overlap, like bolstering trade. In the parts of the world that matter most to them, Russia and China are more rivals than allies. . . . Nor does sporadic cooperation between the Russian and Chinese militaries alter the fact that China’s assertiveness worries Russia as least as much as it worries the United States. Russian military commanders acknowledge that they see China as a potential foe, even as official statements continue to focus on the alleged threat from the United States and NATO. In July 2010, Russia conducted one of its largest-ever military exercises, which aimed at defending the sparsely populated Russian Far East from an unnamed opponent with characteristics much like those of the People’s Liberation Army.⁵

Indeed, this operation, Operation Vostok–2010, culminated in the simulated launching of a tactical

nuclear weapon against the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) forces. More recently, in July 2013, Russia conducted land and maritime exercises with China; in between, it engaged in a so-called snap inspection (although this is very doubtful since 160,000 men do not move out of their bases all at once under the best of circumstances) of the entire Eastern Strategic Direction’s forces—the largest military exercise in the Russian Federation’s history. This exercise comprised 130 combat aircraft, 70 ships, 5,000 tanks, and 160,000 troops mustered, allegedly, against a Japanese invasion. Since it is virtually inconceivable that Japan would invade Russia or even the Kurile Islands, whatever suspicions Moscow has about Japanese intentions also serve as a useful camouflage for its anxieties about China that it dare not express publicly.⁶

Given this analytical chasm, what can we make of these military relations and how do we explain recent bilateral exercises and arms sales? Close examination of the overall relationship, including this specific dimension, suggests the rightness of Mankoff’s views. Indeed, Troitsky’s contention arguably represents part of Russia’s intention to portray these ties in their most favorable and optimistic light insofar as public fora are concerned. In fact, Troitsky’s approach arguably is part of the very phenomenon he is at pains to decry in this relationship; namely, a hedging, balancing strategy. As others have noted, Russian threat perceptions where China is concerned are dealing with “the threat that dare not speak its name.”⁷

Therefore, from Russia’s standpoint, this partnership has definite political purposes and gains. For Russia, since 1991, as a neighbor of China whose power vis-à-vis China has steadily declined, friendship with China is a *sine qua non* regardless of the form of Russian governance. Since 1991 until now, Russia’s Far East has been what specialists call an economy of force theater; that is, a theater of potential military action that would have to defend itself with its own (and visibly insufficient) means if it were attacked by China or anyone else in East Asia. Therefore, because Russia could not until recently afford major defense investments in its Far East, friendship with China was essential. And, once it became apparent that both China and Russia shared a common antipathy to U.S. interests and values of promoting democracy, by force if necessary—at least as they saw it—this partnership grew and will

continue to grow as long as both sides remain authoritarian regimes apprehensive about liberalism or liberalization in any form. In addition, that China has hitherto appeared as a successful, growing authoritarian state where the party has maintained control while driving enormous economic growth has only enhanced its geopolitical appeal to Russia and even led some members of the elite to espouse following the Chinese model—although it is doubtful that they either understand it or would find it palatable.⁸

None of this has ever fully obscured the inherent Russian strategic dilemma in the Far East; in fact, the overall growth of Chinese power in all of its dimensions has become increasingly problematic for Russia. Those trends clearly negate the possibility of a security community between Russia and China and contradict the notion at its heart. Similarly, Moscow's continuing insistence that any future arms control negotiations be multilateral (i.e., include China), certainly belies any idea of Russian elites believing in the inconceivability of a Chinese attack or even use of nuclear weapons against Russia.⁹ Thus, despite Chinese President Xi Jinping's statements in Moscow that the bilateral relationship is "the most important one in the world and also the best one between major powers" and "that it serves as an important guarantee of international strategic balance" and similar Russian statements, major strategic divergences between them can be readily discerned.¹⁰ Indeed, Chinese experts' and officials' private conversations about Russia are far less Pollyannaish and betray a considerable deficit of trust between the two sides.¹¹ Moreover, this relationship both partakes of and is a primary cause of East Asia's remaining the most militarized area of the world according to many commentators and that Asian nations, if they are not engaging in outright arms races, are presenting a good facsimile of such a race—not least because of China's overweening assertiveness.¹²

For example, a recent Russian study by Alexei Arbatov, Vladimir Dvorkin, and Sergei Oznobishchev points out that all the forms of Chinese combat operations, including the use of short-range nuclear forces (SNF), are listed by China as measures of defense under the rubric of "active defense"—which they claim is a screen for actual offensive operations.¹³ Arbatov, Dvorkin, and Oznobishchev additionally argue that China has many more nuclear weapons than is believed and may well be preparing

a genuine first-strike capability and overall offensive posture.¹⁴ Furthermore, throughout Asia, including Russia, China is the only nuclear power that has not declared the size of its nuclear weapons inventory; it also remains the only such power that can rapidly effectuate a major nuclear buildup. This alarms every one of its neighbors, not least Russia. The continuing rumbling in Russian military–political circles either to repudiate or globalize the INF Treaty (Intermediate Nuclear Forces) clearly is based on anxiety about Chinese missile and nuclear capabilities. Indeed, many U.S. intelligence analysts believe that Moscow's Yars-M (or RS-26) missile, although classified as an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), is actually an intermediate-range nuclear missile that violates the treaty but is classified otherwise to conceal that fact.¹⁵

Accordingly, Russia's recent defense policies, including its large-scale long-term rearmament program clearly have China, as well as other potential threats, in mind. Russia's military and government demonstrate through exercises, procurement, and force structure trends that they consider China to be a potential threat to Russian interests from the Arctic to the Russo–Chinese border.¹⁶ Even after joint exercises with the PLA, Russian authorities went out of their way to tell Japan that the exercises were not directed against them (China clearly spurns making such reassurances). Indeed, these exercises may represent efforts to preserve a strategic equilibrium with China and the United States even as Russia pursues independent diplomacy with all parties to avoid becoming a "junior partner"; it wishes to remain a "great power."¹⁷ Markku Salomaa, Chairman of Finland's Foundation for Foreign Policy Research, notes that the reorganization of the Russian Army into brigades during 2008–2012 did not occur in the Eastern Military District, suggesting an expectation of larger-scale conventional conflict there.¹⁸

Exercises like Vostok–2010 that culminated in a simulated nuclear strike on a PLA ground offensive into Russia remind China of Russia's nuclear potential and capability. Moreover, evidently the Eastern Military District (EMD) will be the first to get new weapons systems as they become ready.¹⁹ Recent press reports about the rearmament of the navy, air, air defense forces, and so on suggest that this renovation of the EMD's capabilities is proceeding apace.²⁰ Vasily Kashin recently observed that,

At the same time, the analysis of data concerning the supply of new weapons to the Russian Armed Forces indicates that the Eastern Military District has one of the highest rates of rearmament in the country. Prompt redeployment of troops from the European part of Russia to its Far Eastern regions is one of the key scenarios used in large-scale war games in the country. Most of press statements on espionage cases issued by the Federal Security Service (FSB) concern China. In addition, Russia obviously limits Chinese investments in certain strategic sectors of its national economy. Clearly, all precautions taken by Russia are associated not with a direct but potential threat to its interests, sovereignty and territorial integrity that may come from China. And yet, even a potential Chinese threat is a significant factor in Russia's foreign and defense policy.²¹

And, because of the growing economic–political significance of the Asia-Pacific Region (APR) and the growing likelihood of strong tensions between China and the United States or members of the U.S. alliance system like Japan, Russia is quickly building up its Pacific Fleet. Russia is doing so not because Moscow has aggressive designs in the APR, quite the contrary.

Russia is not interested in escalating tensions in Asia Pacific because such a scenario would pose a serious threat to its own national security. On the contrary, the presence of a third, neutral naval power in the region might become a restraining factor in a possible standoff between the USA and China.²²

In 2011, Dmitry Gorenburg of the Center for Naval Analysis observed that Russian naval construction did not aim at the United States but rather at China. Russia is not building ships to destroy U.S. attack submarines and aircraft carriers but rather is building SSBNs (Ships, Submersible, Ballistic, Nuclear), frigates, and corvettes (i.e., multipurpose ships). Its Pacific Fleet will be the country's main fleet whose central mission will be to defend against Chinese aggression—although the fleet may be billed for political purposes (as are Russian exercises) as being against Japan. But a Japanese attack on Russia or the Kurile Islands is almost inconceivable.²³ While subsequent developments suggest a somewhat more anti-American orientation (e.g., upgrading Akula-Class nuclear attack submarines), those vessels are also useable against the Chinese navy.²⁴ More recently, Adm. Viktor Chirkov, commander in chief of the Russian navy, announced that Moscow is considering forming permanent squadrons in both the Pacific and Indian oceans—the two areas where China has demonstrated its naval power.²⁵

A recent Japanese assessment also ties Russian naval exercises in the Pacific, including those with

Japan in 2012 and 2013, to Russia's heightened sense of concern about the Chinese naval threat. Therefore, Russia is also planning to deploy the first two Mistral-class amphibious assault ships to its Pacific Fleet as well as Borei-class SSBNs with nuclear weapons. The Russian exercises since 2011 also display greater ambition to conduct joint air, land, and sea operations. While this desire to conduct joint operations pervades the defense establishment and is recognized as an essential future capability, its prominence in the Pacific is worthy of note.²⁶

Recent Chinese naval policy and foreign policy in both the South China Sea and the East China Sea—where Beijing is making visibly aggressive naval and other military–political gestures toward Japan and Southeast Asian states—can only aggravate Russian suspicions. And, the attitude of Chinese naval media, if not the government, is even more aggressive. At the end of the recent Russo–Chinese naval exercises, the Chinese fleet sailed for the first time through the La Perouse (or Soya) Straits north of Japan. One naval report justified this visible effort to intimidate Japan, saying that “the Chinese Navy not only has a manifest right to accomplish a complete breakthrough of the so-called ‘first island chain,’ but also an inescapable obligation to ensure national security.”²⁷ This article then became even more belligerent about the United States and Japan, but no Russian could read this language with equanimity or complacency. The author stated,

In terms of the relationship between naval capabilities and intentions the logic that China presents should be that it is in keeping with common sense that China is working hard to address the issue of capabilities and is not qualified yet to discuss its intentions. If anything, it is that more powerful maritime force and its system of allies and minions that should take the initiative to explain their intentions to China because their capabilities are obviously making China nervous. China will interpret as malicious any move that ignores its security concerns or even any move that takes “island chains” which are based on an exceedingly arrogant concept for granted. The Chinese Navy is already capable of crossing the Soya Strait and any strait that passes through a so-called “island chain” on a regular basis. What it should address next is to complete the regularization of its presence. This is an irreversible trend. If someone does not like what he sees, he should adjust his focus, and do so quickly.²⁸

This is not an isolated case. Rear Adm. Yang Yi recently wrote that China must have a navy stronger than that of Japan and that Japan must accept this. Allegedly China needs such a navy to prevail in an

informatized local war, but he gave no reason why Japan or any other interested power should accept this outcome of a stronger Chinese navy or worse, of its prevailing in conflicts with Japan or other powers, or its stated motive.²⁹ We see similar attempts below in discussing the recent joint naval exercise where Chinese analysts sought to co-opt Russia into China's aggressively anti-Japanese policies. This kind of belligerent language, increasingly used not only in naval rhetoric but in actual Chinese policy statements and documents, is clearly a product of China's internal political evolution. We find all too many similar examples in Russian rhetoric and policy for the same reasons.

But, it is that very fact of the two states' essential political trajectories that suggests continuing ambivalence between them. The very nature of these two states' economic-political systems inhibits the realization of a genuine security community because they are both authoritarian "state-capitalist" systems whose fundamental nature is to eschew foreign influences and cooperation. These systems are inherently exclusionary, promoting their goals at the expense of others, making cooperation intrinsically difficult.³⁰ Moreover, the term "security community" has a very specific meaning for Western audiences and in Western literature of which Troitsky is undoubtedly aware. That term, originally developed by Karl Deutsch in the 1950s and subsequently elaborated on in the international relations literature, denotes a community of states with a common commitment to democracy and liberalism and for whom it is inconceivable that they will attack each other. This concept, originated by Karl Deutsch, may be defined in the following manner,

The concept of the security community was created by Deutsch et al. "as a contribution to the study of possible ways in which men some day might abolish war." Their seminal work defined a security community as "a group of people" integrated by a "sense of community," that is, "a belief on the part of individuals in a group that they have come to agreement on at least this one point: that common social problems must and can be resolved by processes of 'peaceful change.'" Peaceful change was in turn defined as "the resolution of social problems, normally by institutionalized procedures, without resort to large-scale physical force."³¹

MILITARY POLICY AND EXERCISES

How, then, do we explain signs of growing amity between the two militaries? Russia's government and

military allegedly follow a balanced China policy. President Putin has denied any China threat and said that Russia hopes to "catch the wind from China's sails."³² Meanwhile, defense relations have, in fact, evidently greatly improved since 2010. We can see the difference in comparing the nuclear outcome of Vostok 2010 with the more recent 2013 naval exercises.

From July 5–12, 2013, the Chinese and Russian navies participated in a joint exercise—"Joint Sea 2013"—in the Sea of Japan that was clearly intended to send signals to the United States and Japan. For China, it was an opportunity to extend its naval capacities, while for Russia this exercise, like its 2012 predecessor, afforded Moscow an opportunity to study the Chinese navy up close. For example, this exercise apparently was the largest one in the history of these exercises from China's standpoint and the first one where its fleet had to supply itself exclusively from what it carried.³³ One Chinese commentary stated that while the drill was "an ordinary" one for China as part of its national security interests and international status, "The drill has let other countries know about the military strength of China and Russia."³⁴ Another Chinese commentary observed that the exercises were "not for show."³⁵ Moreover, Chinese reports state that these exercises are only the first in a program that will be developed, normalized, and institutionalized.³⁶

Equally noteworthy is that the exercise reflected enhanced Chinese (and Russian) naval capabilities to conduct not just various kinds of search and rescue operations but actual combat operations. Therefore, both navies turned on their radars, including fire control and missile guidance radars, sonar, photoelectric communications, and antisubmarine and air defense equipment.³⁷ As one Chinese account put it, the drill involved ship anchorage defense, joint air defense, maritime replenishment, passing a sea area under threat from enemy submarines, joint escorting and rescue of a kidnapped vessel, strikes at maritime targets, joint maritime search and rescue, live fire use of weapons, and a parade.³⁸

Militarily, Chinese commentators repeatedly proclaimed their satisfaction with the improved trust, coordination, cooperation, and integration of both fleets.³⁹ Whereas the earlier joint naval exercise in 2012 had involved only counterterrorism and piracy, this one marked a major step up for the Chinese in that they were able to either conduct or observe fleet

air defense, antisubmarine warfare, and surface warfare.⁴⁰ China may have learned more than did Russia from this exercise, while Russia gained enhanced presence, status, and opportunities for showcasing its weapons.⁴¹ And, of course, Russia did get another chance to see how China conducts military operations at sea.

This exercise, therefore, marked a major step forward—at least as reflected in the Chinese media—in the mutual trust, coordination, and consensus of the military and political leadership in both Russian and China. Variations on this theme appeared in virtually every Chinese commentary on the exercise. One Chinese report extolled such joint exercises as a “hallmark of the across-the-board, broad-scope, multi-tiered, pragmatic cooperation between the two militaries at a critical time in their ongoing force development.”⁴² Chinese reports also piously maintained that the purpose of the drills was to safeguard peace and that they were not directed against any third party.⁴³

This is quite literally unbelievable given the aggressive naval moves that China has made in the last year against Japan and the aggressive demonstration of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) sailing through the La Perouse Strait between Hokkaido and Russia—a clear sign of hostile intent and a show of force.⁴⁴ Some Chinese officers even seemed to want to publicize this drill as a sign of Russian support for China’s position on the disputed Diayoutai (Senkaku) Islands—although it is hardly likely that Russia, which is currently seeking a rapprochement with Japan, would militarily support China on that issue.⁴⁵ Possibly the most striking example of this Chinese effort to portray a Russo–Chinese entente on Japan came from the Shanghai-based expert Feng Wei. He stated that if China and Russia joined hands, this would shake the foundation of the U.S.–Japan alliance. Contending that not only are Russia and China drawing closer together, he also claimed that—despite the statement by the director of Russia’s Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev—Russia would not take sides in the dispute over these islands. Further, the March 2013 communiqué about President Xi Jinping’s visit to Moscow stated that both sides would back each other in territorial and sovereignty issues.⁴⁶ In other words, these Chinese assertions about the relationship have been belied in reality.

The reality is much different: there are no signs of Russian support for China against Japan here or in the South China Sea—quite the contrary.⁴⁷ But such statements and the Chinese fleet’s actions, as well as the agenda of this exercise, demonstrate a conscious effort to coerce Russian support or at least a show of it to intimidate Japan and possibly the United States. Thus, while the benefits of working closely with China are evident to Russia, so, too, are the risks to Russia from too close an association with China—especially if a Chinese crisis with Japan gets out of hand. In this connection, it should be noted that the Russian commentary was much more restrained—although it praised the execution of the mission and the coordination it revealed. Typically, since these exercises are also seen by Moscow as showcases for its equipment, Russian commentators pointed out that Chinese air defense ships are equipped with Russian air defense weapons that they are capable of using effectively. Furthermore, they raised the possibility that this exercise was deliberately tied to Russian exercises in the Russian Far East (Maritime Province-Primorye) using S-400 Air Defense and Pantsir-S air defense missile-gun complexes against enemy aircraft.⁴⁸ It is probably not a coincidence that immediately after the end of this exercise, President Putin ordered the so-called snap exercise involving thousands of Russian forces in the Far East, including an ostentatious air and land movement of forces hundreds if not thousands of miles to threatened Russian lands. That, too, was an unmistakable signal—but to China as much, if not more than, to Japan.

These exercises also clearly illustrated the risks to Russia. While Russia gains status and an opportunity to sell China more weapons, China’s navy gains experience in performing complex military and logistical operations far from home and in the use of weapons. Chinese sources are well aware that China has no allies and that Russia is not an ally, although they are trying to persuade it to become one and some in China are calling for an alliance. That means that there are many fewer opportunities for such exercises by the two navies together than the U.S.–Japanese alliance or the U.S.–Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance provides for its members because they engage in large-scale genuine exercises that simulate conflict scenarios and do so regularly. In addition, these two U.S. alliances can engage in more

frequent, sophisticated, and lifelike war exercises that resemble actual combat operations.⁴⁹ Therefore, the PLAN may need more and almost certainly garners greater benefits from such exercises than does Russia.

At the same time, Chinese analysts hail these exercises as a response to the U.S. strategy of rebalancing its forces in the Asia-Pacific region (supposedly squeezing Russia's strategic space while also seeking to contain China). These same analysts draw the conclusion that Russia and China should become allies; this is also an increasingly common refrain among many Chinese elites who see the United States as an enemy.⁵⁰ In other words, we perceive efforts—although perhaps not a coordinated strategy (at least in public)—by Chinese analysts to try to get Russia to make a greater commitment to backing China's ambitions—something many Russian analysts have worried about for years. Moscow may be inclining more closely to China, especially as it feels pressure from the United States on a host of human rights and geopolitical issues. Nonetheless, the Russian exercises in the Far East and the steadily accelerating reinforcement and reform of Russian armed forces in the Far East demonstrate how Russia is pushing back against Chinese efforts to subordinate Russia to its political objectives.

ARMS SALES

If we look at the totality of Russo–Chinese military relations (e.g., arms sales), as well as exercises, we see that—at least on selected issues—China appears to have been able to gain support for at least some of its objectives that are not altogether in Russia's best interests or that reverse past Russian policies. New trends in Russian arms sales reflect China's growing power vis-à-vis Russia. One may even argue that increased Chinese purchases from Russia not only reflect Chinese needs (e.g., inability to build competitive aircraft engines), but also Russia's arms sellers' need for funds. Thus, those purchases actually are (concealed) subsidies to Russia's rearmament program.⁵¹ Obviously, Russia is not the only beneficiary of these sales. Nonetheless, the new trends in arms sales reflect China's growing power vis-à-vis Russia. Sales of aircraft engines and, most recently, advanced fighter planes and submarines total \$2 billion annually since 2011. The latest sales of 24 Sukhoi Su-35 multi-role combat jets and 4

Lada-class diesel submarines to China are particularly egregious examples of this trend and represent the most significant transfer of Russian weaponry to China in a decade. Like earlier Russian sales, they expanded Chinese military capabilities that could possibly then be used against Russia.

In March [2013], Russia agreed to sell 24 Sukhoi Su-35 multi-role combat jets and 4 Lada-class diesel submarines to China on the eve of newly installed President Xi Jinping's first official visit to Moscow. Although details of the sale have yet to be worked out, observers say that it will represent the most significant transfer of Russian weaponry to China in a decade. The Su-35, a fourth-generation stealth fighter, is superior to any plane now in China's arsenal, while the Lada is a more advanced, quieter version of the Kilo-class sub it already possesses. Together, the two systems will provide the Chinese with a substantial boost in combat quality.⁵² Sales of aircraft engines and, most recently, advanced fighter planes and submarines total \$2 billion annually since 2011.

The Su-35, a fourth-generation stealth fighter, is superior to any plane now in China's arsenal, while the Lada is a more advanced, quieter version of the Kilo-class sub it already possesses. Together, the two systems will provide the Chinese with a substantial boost in combat quality.⁵³ More dangerously, these sales could seriously destabilize Asian security as they greatly improve Chinese capabilities and, therefore, could incite an arms race in Asia. For example, China has also coveted several divisions of the advanced S-400 air defense missile and SU-35 fighter since at least 2009.⁵⁴ But, Chinese acquisition of the S-400 would cause further headaches for India, Japan, and the United States.⁵⁵ If China acquired S-400s, it would then have hitherto unavailable ballistic missile defense capabilities, potentially generating an arms race with India, which relies on ballistic missiles to deter China. The S-400 would also cover the Senkaku Islands and increase the pressures on U.S. and Japanese air capacities, given hardened Chinese air defenses and soft U.S. air bases.⁵⁶ In addition, China's acquiring the S-400 would be a major blow to Taiwan's defense and security (if not that of other Asian states) and give China uncontested air superiority over all of Taiwan's territory. That, in turn, would probably lead Taiwan to seek new, advanced air capabilities, offsetting indigenous systems like cruise or ballistic missiles, or new U.S. systems.⁵⁷ Combined with land- and sea-based fighters, this weapon system could give China the confidence to go for sustained aerospace dominance over Taiwan, which might

deter the United States from intervening should China invade that island.⁵⁸

These sales will surely increase Taiwanese, Japanese, and other allied pressure on Washington to provide yet more weaponry, triggering a classic Cold War–style arms race in the region. They certainly work against Russo–Indian relations and Indian security in the context of mounting Indo–Chinese tensions. Russia’s arms sales to China also aggravate India’s situation as they reverse Russian policy of not selling to China better weapons than it sells to India.⁵⁹ As the Indian journalist Manoj Joshi writes,

New Delhi could also lose out in the emerging Russian–Chinese arms transfer relationship. So far, India has held the technological edge in terms of the quality of its fighter aircraft. The SU-35 will begin to tilt the balance against us, unless we pay for the expensive upgrade of the SU-30MKI or begin receiving the Russian fifth-generation fighters in significant numbers. The Chinese–Russian entente could also mean that there could be an agreement for the supply of Russian engines for Chinese–designed and –built fighters, which would make them much more capable than they are at present.⁶⁰

The Amur is far more silent and powerful than India’s Kilo-class submarines. Nor can India’s SU-30MKI match China’s future SU-35, which has a higher thrust engine and more sophisticated radar, avionics, and weapons.⁶¹ Furthermore, the Indian Rafales to be acquired from France are apparently no match for the SU-35s; accordingly, this sale may “shoot down the value of Rafale for India.”⁶² And, China will probably acquire many more than just the initial 24 SU-35s (previous fighter sales have followed this path).⁶³

These sales aggravate existing arms races in Asia among China and its neighbors like Taiwan, Japan, Southeast Asian governments, and India, who all feel threatened by China’s burgeoning military power. They should also give Russia pause to think about the wisdom of creating a potential Frankenstein on its borders. Therefore, India is the loser in the growing China–Russia energy ties. New Delhi could also lose out in the emerging Russian–Chinese arms transfer relationship. So far, India has held the technological edge in terms of the quality of its fighter aircraft. These sales also aggravate India’s existing defense woes. Not only do these sales presage a possible turn against India by Russia in favor of China when it comes to the sale of advanced Russian equipment, they could, as noted above, alter the

regional strategic balance between India and China to India’s disadvantage. Thus, they bring home the risks India runs by relying so much on Russian arms sales in particular and foreign arms imports in general. Since India’s defense reforms to upgrade its own capacity to be a competitive arms producer have faltered, India will probably turn even more to other sellers like the United States, United Kingdom, Israel, and France to keep its weapons competitive with those of China and Pakistan. But dependence on foreign providers is an inherently constraining process for any state and now that India is experiencing serious economic difficulties along with the lack of success of its defense industrial reform, New Delhi will face serious strategic quandaries going forward. While this may provide Washington with opportunities for more sales to India, the inherent and long-standing obstacles to that outcome are also formidable and by no means gone from the scene.⁶⁴

In addition, these current and past sales also clearly target the new U.S. rebalancing toward Asia that involves major redeployments of U.S. forces to the Asia-Pacific region and forging stronger ties among U.S. allies in Asia. China’s response is to continue its huge military development program—materially aided by Russian capabilities that it has either bought or stolen (this piracy being a major cause for the plunge in Russian arms sales from 2006–2010). These weapons and technology transfers enabled China to expand its capabilities against the United States and other Asian nations in every military domain: air, sea, submarine, land, space, and cyber war (where we clearly see the influence of Russia’s thinking).

These deals also represent another case where China has been able to reverse Russia’s policy of not selling weapons to China that are superior to the weapons Russia sells to India.⁶⁵ Beijing has induced Moscow to reverse its energy policies and build the East Siberia Pacific Ocean oil pipeline to it alone. Thus China obtains energy and other concessions in the Russian Far East (RFE)—this indicates that Russia’s determination to keep its independence in the RFE is apparently being undermined without Moscow fully realizing it.⁶⁶ As Manoj Joshi wrote,

In practical terms, China has worked out a series of energy agreements, which involve the doubling of oil supplies and the construction of a natural gas pipeline from Russia. Additionally, there were agreements on developing Russian coal resources for the benefit of the Chinese.

These supplies will not only boost China's economy, but also its energy security, since the supply chains will avoid the maritime choke-points dominated by the United States and its allies. Equally significant have been the two important arms sales agreements between the two countries—the first to purchase 24 Su-35 fighters and the second for 4 Lada class submarines—the first significant deals in a decade.⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

Moscow may be gaining increased freedom to maneuver, greater status, significant revenue from arms sales, and the expectation of major deals with China in the Arctic and RFE to develop its energy and other mineral holdings. It may also believe that it can exploit Sino-American tensions to bolster its position in Asia. But Moscow's real problem in Asia is not the PLA but Moscow's inability to develop the Russian Far East or offer Asia anything but guns and hydrocarbons. And, the presence of shale gas, liquified natural gas, and methane hydrates makes even that more questionable.⁶⁸

Russia has not advanced its real interests despite its professions to the contrary but, rather, has strengthened China and helped to further destabilize Asia. Moreover, China is now playing Russia's game. Going into the June 2013 Sino-American summit, both governments openly advocated a new model of bilateral relations. China evidently wants to pursue the hitherto unrealizable goal of a Sino-American G2. Coupled with the continuing disregard by the United States of Russia as a factor in Asian security as shown by Secretary of Defense Hagel's speech at the annual Shangri-La Defense Forum in Singapore earlier this year that omitted to mention Russia in a discussion of Asian security, these initiatives are neither evidence of China's "loyalty" nor of a desire to forge a genuine partnership with Russia. They do not augur well for Moscow.⁶⁹ A G-2 or anything resembling or approaching it threatens Russian interests, status, and capacity to develop the RFE.

The fundamental ambivalence of Moscow's military policy toward China becomes evident from this analysis of its exercises and arms sales that epitomize the dilemmas inherent in this ambivalence. Russia's exercises of July 2013 postulated the United States, Japan, and China as enemies—just as the Vostok-2010 exercises did. Russian security policy in the Asia-Pacific region proceeds from the initial premise that Russia has no friends, that every-

one is a potential enemy, and that Moscow must, accordingly, conduct a wholly independent policy in the region. Yet, at the same time, to safeguard its ever-more-authoritarian and arguably reactionary political-economic structure, Russia must ally with China against the United States on global issues. Since development of the Russian Far East is the precondition for an effective long-term Asian policy, however, Moscow *must* seek partners. Yet, truly lasting and effective partnerships are precluded because of the nature of Russia's economic-political system as suggested above.⁷⁰ That leaves only China—which is truly willing to commit huge resources to buy Russian energy and raw materials, a trend that Russian elites fear will consign Russia to being a raw-materials appendage to China. Similarly, China in Central Asia is steadily eclipsing Russia in the economic arena, leading to a situation whereby Moscow may end up in the long term as being the gendarme for China's investments there—hardly what Moscow wants for itself in Central Asia.

Russia's arms sales policy suffers from the same ambivalences. While Russia eagerly sells China ever-better systems, China persistently seeks offsets and shows a remarkable capacity to indigenize Russian systems, copy them, and then sell them abroad under Chinese "brand names." This piracy, to call it by its true name, has generated considerable tension in Russo-Chinese arms sales since 2007. China no longer needs weapons as such. Rather it seeks the technologies associated with them, the right to joint development and production, and Russian state-of-the-art weapons.⁷¹ China's main focus is evidently on thoroughly analyzing and copying foreign, not just Russian, technologies and systems to master the means of making its own weapons and, where feasible and advisable, exporting them in competition with Russia.⁷² While China has had to temporarily return to Russia, its demands and Russian accession to them improve Chinese military capabilities, stimulate Asian arms races, provide enormous opportunities for the United States and other arms sellers to displace Russia in India (as is now happening) while not materially enhancing Russian security or Asian stability.

Ashley Tellis of the Carnegie Endowment has tried to resolve the contradiction in Russian arms sales policy and its more general policy toward China. According to Tellis, Russia, like Japan, confronts

a rising China and therefore pursues “conflicting strategies.” In Russia’s case,

The way out appears to be continuing to sell raw materials to China, while restraining the impetus to part with its best conventional military technologies (as occurred in the 1990s); depending even more strongly on nuclear weapons; and seeking, to the degree possible, improved ties with India, Japan, Europe, and the United States.⁷³

Yet, the most recent trend finds Russia unable to sustain that policy while selling China weapons systems hitherto reserved for India. The same has occurred, as suggested above, in the RFE, where Moscow is ever-more-dependent on Chinese investment since others are not investing in the region. Russia’s larger dilemma is acute. Russia defines itself as a besieged fortress, yet needs and solicits foreign partnerships. But, it will not reform its system to provide (or enable) the conditions that would allow the country to develop more effectively or efficiently or that would encourage foreign investors to come in large numbers and provide the benefits such investment did in China. At the same time, to preserve that system, Russia must throw itself into China’s suffocating embrace even as it struggles to remain independent and find partners that obviously it does not trust and that cannot, therefore, trust Russia. As Asia becomes the most dynamic and potentially the most dangerous area in the world, this is not a situation that either we or Russia wants or should have to tolerate. While the other players, including China, have options, Russia has apparently failed to perceive that it is impaled on the horns of a dilemma of its own making.

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