“On the Verge of an Alliance”: Defining Contemporary China-Russia Relations

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Abstract: While being recognized as important bilateral relations in the contemporary world politics, China-Russia relations have not been sufficiently defined. The existing characteristics, found in both academic and journalistic accounts, range widely from some forms of alliance to competition or even rivalry. Such diversity of definitions not only obfuscates understanding of the actual dynamics of China-Russia relations, but also hampers grounding these important relations in international relations theory. This paper applies a set of empirical criteria of alliance to define how close the current China-Russia military relations approach the alliance conditions. Among the parameters studied are China’s and Russia’s motives to form an alliance, actual formats and content of military collaboration, and the degrees and features of institutionalization of inter-military contacts. It is demonstrated that China and Russia are “on the verge of alliance” – a condition when only minor steps are needed for a formal military alliance to materialize, but the occurrence of such steps is not guaranteed.
Introduction

China-Russia relations are often viewed as an important structure-forming element of the contemporary international system and as a potential (or actual) counterbalancing coalition against the U.S.-led unipolarity. It is even more so after Russia’s recent high-profile “Turn to the East” and the deterioration of Russia-U.S. relations as a consequence of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, and China’s “new assertiveness” in the South and East China Seas and the subsequent tensions in U.S.-China relations.

In this context, the shadow of some sort of “alliance” lingers in multiple assessments of contemporary China-Russia relations. Some prominent Chinese experts started unambiguously calling for comprehensive strategic alliance with Russia by arguing on the pages of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Party School’s internal publications that “China-Russia strategic relations are the most substantive ones,”¹ and elsewhere that “China will be unable to shift the world from unipolarity to bipolarity unless it forms a formal alliance with Russia.”² On the Russian side, in turn, some analysis also argued that “America cannot stop containing China. America cannot stop containing Russia. American cannot stop pushing China and Russia to a new political and military alignment.”³ A Russian sinologist, Alexei Voskressenski, described China-Russia relations as such in which the two countries “have always been exploring some form of alliance [emphasis added] with each other.”⁴ Western experts also attempted to present China-Russia relations as an “ominous anti-American alliance” that has power to considerably reconfigure international balance of power and severely harm the American interests.⁵ China-Russia relations have also been called an “alliance” in the studies of sales of arms from Russia to China.⁶ Wishnick argued that China-Russia relations had strategic and political foundations for an “incipient alliance” that, however, were countervailed by divergent interests over a range of issues setting limits to how close the two countries can be. Kuchins compares today’s China-Russia partnership with

¹ Yan Xuetong, “Zhong E ZhanlueGuanxiZui You ShizhiYiyi [China-Russia Strategic Relations are the Most Substantive Ones].” ZhengdangGanbuCankao, 2013, No. 4, 31-32.
the Sino-Soviet alliance of the 1950s and argues that the latter was tighter and deeper.\textsuperscript{7} It has also been argued that even though China-Russia defence relations have not reached a level of fully grown military alliance, they have profound impact on China’s foreign policy and are a key determinant of regional security in Asia.\textsuperscript{8}

Something understood as “alliance” has, therefore, often been used as a reference point for assessing where China and Russia stand in terms of bilateral military cooperation. None of these works, however, rigorously used an alliance framework, drawn from the alliance literature, or tried to systematically apply the empirical criteria of alliance to define China-Russia military interactions. The parameters of the above-mentioned “alliances” as well as how well contemporary China-Russia relations fit into them remain unclear. At the same time, the level of precision of historical parallels (e.g. comparisons with Sino-Soviet military alliance) does not allow seeing how and in what aspects today’s China-Russia relations close to or far from their 1950s’ version. Most glaringly absent are the systematic assessments of the degrees of institutionalization of China-Russia bilateral military contacts, regular military drills, and the mechanisms of inter-military consultations. Some studies focused on the amount and types of arms sold by Russia to China, and on various aspects of military modernization.\textsuperscript{9} Few, however, truly delved into the “nitty-gritty” of actual military cooperation between China and Russia to show in which way, if at all, China-Russia relations qualify as a “military alliance.” In other words, the important routinized inside of China-Russia military cooperation remains largely unknown, which limits our understanding of the general trajectory of development as well as the prospects of these important bilateral military relations.

In which way are China-Russia relations a military alliance, and where are China-Russia relations along the alliance–no alliance spectrum? This paper answers these questions and contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, it develops and applies the

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\textsuperscript{7} Kuchins, “Russia and the CIS in 2013,” p. 134.


alliance framework to post-Cold War China-Russia relations and defines these relations in categories amenable to international relations theorizing. Second, it presents the so far most detailed account of the actual workings of China-Russia military cooperation with special emphasis on the process of institutionalization and routinization of bilateral military contacts. This opens the underreported inside of such contacts and allows locating the dynamics of post-Cold War China-Russia military relations along the stages of alliance formation and consolidation, which makes predictions of future developments possible. Third, the empirical core of the paper consists of multiple original Chinese and Russian-language official documents, reports, and empirical studies that have so far been absent in the English-language studies of China-Russia military cooperation.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 1 draws on alliance literature to develop an empirically operationalizable analytical framework consisting of twelve observable criteria; it also explains why it is more useful to use the traditional alliance language to define China-Russia military relations. Section 2 projects the developed analytical framework onto the post-Cold War China-Russia military relations to show in exactly which aspects they qualify or do not qualify as an alliance. Section 3 concludes and suggests on the IR theoretical frameworks useful for the study of China-Russia relations.

1. Alliance framework and China-Russia relations

Of multiple definitions of interstate relations, only “alliance” is sufficiently elaborated in the IR literature and, therefore, is better translatable into a set of observable indicators that can be tested empirically. Not a problem-free term either, relative to other terms alliance is still a better reference point because at least there is a relatively agreed understanding in the IR literature of what it is and what it is not.

The theoretical definitions of alliance are fairly general. According to Walt, alliance is “a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states.” 10 Weitsman defines alliances even more broadly as “bilateral or multilateral agreements to provide some element of security to the signatories.” 11 In his seminal study Alliance Politics, Snyder provides a more precise definition: “alliances are formal associations of states for the use (or non-use) of military force, in specified circumstances,

against states outside their own membership.” 12 Snyder’s well-crafted definition, which emphasizes the formality of alliance and states that it is mostly about the use or non-use of military force, significantly narrows down the amount of security-related interactions between states that can fall under the category of alliance.

For the present study, particularly useful are empirical typologies of alliances that include some observable criteria that can be checked with data. Some typologies deserve special mentioning in this regard. Bruce Russett’s already dated but still relevant empirical typology of international military alliances consists of forty four characteristics that cover background and formation and include a block of variables describing intra-alliance relations, such as the kind and degree of integration and institutionalization, as well as the format and content of interstate contacts within an alliance.13 A battery of indicators grasping the degree of internal institutionalization of alliances can be found in the works by Brett Ashley Leeds and colleagues, especially her quantitative studies of alliance institutionalization and performance.14 Particularly useful in terms of outlining alliance criteria are quantitative datasets, such as The Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions (ATOP) project, which provides data regarding the content of the existing military alliance agreements signed by all countries of the world between 1815 and 2003,15 and the Correlates of War (COW) formal alliance dataset, which records all formal alliances, including mutual defense pacts, non-aggression treaties, and ententes.16 An extensive discussion of the ways these datasets have been developed as well as how to measure alliances is available in the literature17 and is skipped here, especially given that our approach is different from those used in the previous studies – this paper is an in-depth analysis of one case of China-Russia military relations from an alliance perspective. It utilizes the above-mentioned works and datasets to develop a framework most useful for such an analysis. Different approaches and sets of criteria are synthesized to highlight what we believe is the most important and, based on our knowledge of the current literature, most underreported aspects of contemporary China-Russia military partnership.

15 The Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions (ATOP) project dataset http://atop.rice.edu/
16 Correlates of War (COW) formal alliance dataset http://www.correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/formal-alliances
17 (articles discussing COW and other measures from my folder)
The relevant alliance characteristics can be grouped into two major clusters: first, factors of formation, or incentives, as described in the alliance theories. All bi- or multilateral alliances come into existence and become institutionalized for some reasons, and the recent enhancement of China-Russia military cooperation is not an exception, which is why one needs to look at the initial drivers that are behind it. The second cluster includes variables gauging the degree of institutionalization or, better to say, institutional foundations of inter-military consultations and operations. These expose the operational “mechanics” of China-Russia inter-military relations and show the degree of mutual commitments and inter-military trust. As such, the second cluster further breaks down into two levels: moderate institutionalization, or routinization of inter-military contacts, and deep institutionalization, which is a more advanced stage of alliance development and implies much higher demands in terms interoperability of military forces and compatibility of defense policies.

Factors of formation include three characteristics (causes of alliance formation) that originate from the balance of power considerations. The first cause comes from Kenneth Waltz’s structural realism and is the systemic power configuration. Waltz believed that post-Cold War unipolarity, as any other unipolarity, was self-destructive because under anarchy secondary states would inevitably start to try to undermine the hegemon’s (the U.S.’s) preeminence. Alliance formation (either through bandwagoning or balancing) is, therefore, a way to restore the balance of power condition. A later development of Balance of Power theory into “Balance of Threat theory” by Stephen Walt provided another cause of alliance formation – common threats faced by the potential allies. According to Walt, external “threats” are the main drivers of alliance behaviour. States form alliances to deal with the most threatening, not simply strongest, states. Further revision of Balance of Power and Balance of Threat theories is Randall Schweller’s “Balance of Interests theory,” which provides the third cause of alliance formation in our framework – common interests. Schweller believes that whether (and with whom) states establish alliances depends on states’ understanding of their mutual interests, rather than on perceptions of threats or power asymmetries. Status quo states align with each other because they share interests of

maintaining the existing world order and containing the revisionist states. Revisionist states, in turn, align with each other because they see more benefits in the changes of the system. The rise of a revisionist great power may trigger bandwagoning on the part of smaller revisionist states.

Moderate institutionalization is measured by six indicators that show how formal and how coordinated an alliance is during peacetime. The first one is the official alliance treaty or other agreement of military coordination in case of crisis or when either party is facing external attack or other kind of direct threat. Even though alliance treaties vary considerably in terms of precision and succinctness (some leave commitments vague and open to multiple interpretations, whereas others are more detailed and unequivocal), the existence of a treaty is considered important and is often the first thing to look at when assessing an alliance relation. The second indicator of institutionalization (fifth indicator in the framework) is the mechanism of official and regular inter-military consultations. Routinized deliberation among military officials during peacetime is likely to better reveal the true strategic intentions and expectations of the participants and enhance mutual understanding which can become a valuable asset for policy making in times of a crisis or when joint actions are needed. A step forward in terms of institutionalization is the establishment of regular exchanges of military personnel – the sixth indicator. Opening up military education institutions and programs to a foreign state (even though an ally) or directly training an ally’s military officers using one’s own military curricula shows that military cooperation is taken seriously. Moreover, active exchange of military personnel raises the level of compatibility in terms of military thinking, planning of tactical operations, and more general approaches to warfare.

The seventh indicator is exchange/cooperation in the sphere of military technologies, which is usually a very sensitive area of interstate relations. States use various arms embargoes to prevent potential adversaries from obtaining access to certain weapon systems. Even regular arms transfers are often subject to severe restrictions. Cooperation in the sphere of military technologies, especially joint design and production of arms or their components, increases mutual dependence, mutual trust, and levels of compatibility of military hardware, which may be crucial for allies in times of war when shared supplies of equipment, logistical and technological support can determine the alliance performance. Regular joint military exercises – the eighth indicator of the alliance framework – consistently held in different

regions also show the closeness of military partnership and strategic unity. They help achieve a certain degree of compatibility and interoperability of military forces, increase coordination, and practice joint command techniques. The ninth criterion – *inter-military confidence building measures* – might not be a necessary attribute of a regular military alliance and, moreover, all the above-mentioned indicators are in fact such measures, directly or indirectly. Nevertheless, singling out this criterion is justifiable in the context of China-Russia military relations, because the lack of “trust” has been accentuated by many commentators of the changes of China-Russia military alliance to materialize.\(^{22}\) In this light, the case of China-Russia relations invites checking the particular measures of trust and confidence building.

The remaining three criteria – *integrated military command, joint troop placement or mutual exchange of military bases, and common defence policy* – require extensive, and most likely costly, investment in joint action and indicate much deeper military institutionalization. Decisions to enter this deeper level of military institutionalization do not come easy and require considerable resolve on the part of the policy makers. States are unlikely to enter this stage of military institutionalization without strong incentives to do so, such as mutual and direct external treat, or strong belief that doing so will considerably facilitate the realization of certain national interests.

2. “On the Verge of Alliance”: Contemporary China-Russia Military Relations

As some experts observe, China-Russia relations now represent a pattern of bilateral relations in which the two countries emphasize issues that bring them together and, at the same time, avoid potentially contentious areas. This model of interaction has generated a self-sufficient mechanism of China-Russia strategic relations and strengthened its sustainable immunity against all sorts of perturbations.\(^{23}\) In this context it is important to show in an analytically rigorous way what exact criterial of alliance China-Russia relations possess and how far they went in terms of alliance formation.

2.1. Factors of Formation: Global Power Balance, Threats, and Interests

Empirical analysis of the formation factors requires exploring the impact of a potential alliance on the balance of power within the international system, analysing the compatibility

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of allies’ views of external threats, and demonstrating potential allies’ interests in revising the status quo.

**The distribution of material capabilities.** Material power balance is rarely sufficient for explaining states’ alliance behaviour, but it may be a place to begin the analysis. Polarity provides general incentives that structure the horizons of states’ probable actions. One of the most salient features of the post-Cold War international system has been the ultimate primacy of the United States in the global distribution of capabilities. Moreover, the alleged power gap was such that the U.S. represented a separate class by large margins. This power gap generated the unsurpassable power threshold that became one of the main explanations of why other secondary states do not form alliances to balance against the U.S.

Power poles, however, are defined not on an absolute scale but relative to each other and to other states. The analysis of the recent evolution of the most widely used measures of material capabilities – GDP and military spending – of China, Russia, the United States, and other countries shows that the observations and subsequent assumptions regarding the United States’ dramatic qualitative edge over other states becomes less pronounced. They, at best, grasped a very short period of post-Cold War history: from America’s triumphant emergence as the winner of the Cold War to the 9/11 terrorist attack – a period of American “hyperpower.” By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, however, the limits of American dominance became obvious, and the international system had, in a sense, moved “back to normal”, with the U.S. being a “regular unipole” – still possessing military supremacy vis-à-vis others but losing the unprecedentedness of dominance that would deter balancing by other major powers.

The relative weight of other major powers, most remarkably China, vis-à-vis the unipole increased substantially since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1991, the US’s total GDP was 16 times larger than China’s ($6.2 trillion and $379 billion). By 2013, China’s GDP increased 24-fold and became more than half (!) of the US’s ($9.24 trillion and $16.77 trillion), while the US itself demonstrated only a 2.7-fold increase of total GDP since 1991. Russia, aside from eight years of decline following the collapse of the Soviet Union, has been growing consistently over the last fourteen years: in 1999, its GDP fell to a meager $196 billion (post-Soviet low), but by 2013 it reached 2.1$ trillion, an 11-fold increase.24 In terms of military spending, the US still has the largest military budget in the world. However, it has been cutting its military spending substantially and consistently: in 2011, 2012, 2013,

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military expenditures in the US constituted $711.3, $684.8, and $640.2 billion, respectively. The second largest military spender now is China with its $188.6 billion in expenditure, followed by Russia, whose military budget reached $88 billion in 2013. In relative terms, over the last decade the US’s military spending, taking into account the recent budget cuts, grew only by 12%, whereas those of China and Russia grew by 170% and 108% respectively. In the Russian case, military spending grew proportionally from 3.5% of GDP in 2004 to 4.1% of GDP in 2013.

These figures do not necessarily indicate that other secondary states are going to surpass the US on quantitative indicators of military might very soon, or that the unipole is losing capacity for power projection. They do, however, make potential challengers more confident about their own capabilities, especially if those capabilities are put together. It seems that now, in contrast to early post-Cold War years, the power threshold created by the U.S. is less unsurpassable and potential alliances by major secondary states can become a pole that will have to be considered seriously.

**Mutual threats.** Even though the role of threats in alliance formation is not clear-cut, threats are considered one of the principal explanations of alliance behaviour. China-Russia shared view of security threats becomes strikingly obvious when it comes to the joint opposition to the U.S. National Missile Defense (NMD) agenda, joint resistance to the potential danger of the “West-led color revolutions” in Central Asia, issues of territorial integrity, and many other major issues of global politics.

Russia’s and China’s shared views of the role of the USA-USSR Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) and concerns about American NMD program can be traced back to the 1990s, as evidenced by multiple joint statements and declarations. According to the documents, China and Russia share deep concern about U.S.’s plan to build NMD, prohibited

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25 All military expenditure data is from SIPRI’s *Trend in World Military Expenditures*
26 Russia’s military budget has grown by 31% since 2008 and surpassed that of the UK and Saudi Arabia; over the last 16 years it increased almost 14-fold from $6.47 billion in 1999 to $88 billion in 2013.
by the ABM treaty, and believe that the “true goal of such a policy is to seek unilateral military and security dominance that will pose the gravest, adverse consequences to the security of Russia, China, other states, to the global stability, and the United States itself.”

They also agreed that the analysis of the current international realities reveals that the use of the alleged “missile threat” to the U.S. from “some countries” as a justification for the new NMD is “totally unjustified.” On 23 May 2008, the then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao reinstated the shared view on international issues, in general, and American NMD, in particular, by signing a “Joint Russia-China Declaration on Major International Issues”, which stated that “the creation of global missile defense systems and their deployment in some regions of the world … does not help to maintain strategic balance and stability and hampers international efforts in arms control and nuclear nonproliferation.”

New rounds of NATO expansion in 2004 and 2009, which were perceived in Russia as direct geopolitical threat, American “pivot to Asia,” which is seen by many Chinese as the creation of containment line against China in the Pacific using Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and the Philippines and, therefore, as a direct threat to China’s national security, and the U.S.’s support of regime change in the former Soviet republics and elsewhere, drew China’s and Russia’s views of external threats nearer. At one of the recent regular meetings between Defense Ministers of China and Russia, which unlike the formal meetings between top decision makers remain largely underreported in public media, the two parties issued a joint statement that glaringly flares out their shared view of external threats in which the shadow of the United States is omnipresent. Thus, on 18 November 2014 in Beijing, after recalling the long-standing tradition of “military comradeship” between the two countries, the Chinese Defense Minister, General Chang Wanquan, and his Russian colleague, Army General Sergei Shoigy, stated that both China and Russia are “concerned with the U.S.’s attempts to strengthen its political and military influence in Asia Pacific”, and that both countries must jointly resist the threat of “color revolutions,” which, according to both Defense Ministers, are “experiments of the Western, including American, spin doctors.” This new threat is believed to be growing, especially in light of the events in Ukraine and Hong Kong in 2014.

29 “Sovmestnoye Rossisko-Kitaikoye Zayavlenie.”
30 “Pekinskaya Deklaraciya”
and “might threaten China’s and Russia’s national interests.” Moreover, the main goal of China-Russia military cooperation in this context is to “form a regional collective security system.”

Joint policy of resisting the “U.S.-instigated color revolutions” in Central Asia and in other salient geopolitical surroundings of China and Russia, as well as in China and Russia themselves, also became the main leitmotif of regular Russia-China Consultations on Strategic Security Issues – a format of bilateral consultations that also often tends to slip from media attention. Thus, after one of such recent meetings on 25 May 2015 in Moscow, the Secretary of Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, and Chinese State Council representative, Yang Jiechi, made a statement that emphasized the common approach of China and Russia to the issues of international security and their shared strong interest in actively counteracting “color revolutions, attempts to interfere into domestic politics of sovereign states, and unilateral economic sanctions.”

Part of the actual realization of China-Russia joint strategy of preventing “color revolutions” is joint military drills in Central Asia within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) format, which goes beyond anti-terror measures and strategically aims at containing the growth of American influence in the region. As a rule, those military drills include practicing of the tactics of curbing potential political turmoil in Central Asia.

**Common interests.** The common geopolitical interests are closely linked to the shared views of threats. Even though when making joint formal statements Chinese and Russia leaders are careful not to explicitly identify common external threat, the overtone of such statements, also often overlooked in the West, made in the context of post-Cold War unipolarity shows that both China and Russia are not particularly interested in maintaining the unipolar status quo. The two countries never embraced unipolarity, and against the backdrop of the wars in the Balkans, the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM treaty, increasing American military presence in Central Asia, the U.S. operation in Iraq, and the above mentioned plans to deploy NMD in Eastern Europe, the revisionist anti-unipolarity moods in both China and Russia increased, as can be seen in multiple joint declarations and statements

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signed by the two countries and emphasizing the necessity of cooperation in promoting the principle of multipolarity. Thus, the “1994 China-Russia Joint Declaration,” signed by Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin, registers the nascent move of the international system toward multipolarity.34 The next Yeltsin-Jiang joint declaration, signed on 25 April 1996 in Beijing, further outlined the contours of desirable multipolar international system and identified potential unipolarity-related threats by stating that while the trend toward a multipolar world is developing, “hegemonism, power politics, pressure on other countries, and new manifestations of block politics still continue to occur.”35

In the subsequent years, Russian and Chinese leaders on multiple occasions and in numerous joint documents36 emphasized their shared desire for a more multipolar in which the voices of the “non-West” hold more sway. The above-mentioned Medvedev-Hu statement of 2008 contains explicit support for such multilateral formats as Russia-India-China, in particular, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), which are presented as being in contradiction to the U.S.-led unipolar world.37 On 24 October 2014, in his speech at the Valdai International Discussion Club in the city of Sochi, President Putin stated that a unipolar world is not sustainable, “a unilateral diktat [of the U.S. and its allies] and imposing one’s own models produces the opposite results. Instead of settling conflicts, it leads to their escalation; instead of sovereign and stable states, we see the growing spread of chaos; and instead of democracy, there is support for a very dubious public ranging from open neo-fascists to Islamic radicals.” 38 Two years earlier, Xi Jinping selected Russia as the first destination of his first foreign trip after officially taking office and delivered a speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations about the importance of China-Russia relations. He stated: “Strong China-Russia relations not only answer to our interests but also serves as an important, reliable guarantee of an international strategic balance and peace.”39

36 See joint C-R declaration dated Nov.23, 1998.; 2005 年 7 月 1 日《中华人民共和国和俄罗斯联邦关于 21 世纪国际秩序的联合声明》与 2008 年 5 月 23 日《中华人民共和国和俄罗斯联邦关于重大国际问题的联合声明》，
37 “Sovmestnaya Deklaraciya RF i KNR”
39 In Moscow, new Chinese leader Xi warns against meddling http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/24/us-china-russia-moscow-idUSBRE92M02F20130324
The concurrence of China’s and Russia’s positions on major issues of global politics and the desire to transform the world system from unipolarity to multipolarity or something else can partly be explained by a number of factors. Some Russian scholars note, however, that China-Russia rapprochement and the growing shared view of threats and interest have more fundamental causes related to “cultivating a community of like-minded, non-Western countries” that could have a greater leverage over shaping the future of the international order.\(^{40}\) Even though there is no Cold War style ideological confrontation with the United States, as it was the case during the years of Sino-Soviet alliance, the current ideological, or ideational, fault lines might be even deeper, because in today’s world both China and Russia fundamentally reject the idea of American global leadership and “universal values” of the West, which are increasingly associated with a new wave of colonialism under the slogan of “democracy.”\(^{41}\) Today’s Russia witnesses the rise of the most radical version of Eurasianism that rejects Atlanticism and liberal values.\(^{42}\) China, in turn, increasingly identifies itself as a leader of the developing “South” and attempts to cultivate its traditional morality, rooted in Confucianism.\(^{43}\) Such non-acceptance of the global leader and the joint rejection of the Western ideology result in the tighter consolidation of the “non-West,” where China and Russia are the core players.

When projected on the current China-Russia relations, the factors of alliance formation, such as power configuration of the international system, the perception of threats and interests are, with certain caveats, in favor of continuous rapprochement of China and Russia.

2.2. Moderate Institutionalization: Criteria 4 through 9

While being contributing factors, the above-explored common threats and interests might be neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for China-Russia alliance to materialize. It is necessary, therefore, to analyze the actual military interactions between the two countries and


see how far they went, if at all, in terms of institutionalization of alliance relations. The six
criteria in this category grasp what is called a moderate degree of military institutionalization.

**Formal alliance treaty or agreement.** Post-Cold War China-Russia relations generated a
voluminous stock of treaties. Since 23 December 1992, when the first post-Soviet Russian
President, Boris Yeltsin, made his first official visit to China and formally established the
new diplomatic relationship, China and Russia have signed or announced about 200 inter-
governmental treaties, agreements, declarations, statements, protocols, communiques, and
other documents regulating various aspects of the new post-Cold War bilateral relationship.
The most important one, however, is “Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly
Cooperation between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation,” signed by
Vladimir Putin and Jiang Zeming on 16 July 2001 in Moscow.  

The lack of straightforward defense provisions in the 2001 China-Russia treaty does
not make it justifiable to dismiss this document as not qualifying as an alliance treaty. At
closer examination, it is clearly a non-aggression and consultation pact. Article 2 states that:
“The two parties will not use force or the threat of force in their mutual relations, nor will
they adopt economic or other means of putting pressure on each other,” and further that “the
two parties reiterate that they undertake not to be the first to use nuclear weapons, nor will
they aim strategic nuclear missiles at each other.”

The treaty includes additional provisions
for assistance in the event of war, such as promise, according to Article 8, that “neither party
will participate in any alliance or block which damages the sovereignty, security and
territorial integrity of the other party, and will not adopt any similar action, including not
concluding a similar treaty with any third country.” Moreover, it states that “neither party to
the treaty will permit a third country to use its territory to damage the national sovereignty,
security, and territorial integrity of the other party,” and further that “neither party will permit
the establishment on its territory of an organization or group that harms the sovereignty,
security and territorial integrity of the other party, and will prohibit such activities.”

These are very strong non-aggression commitments. In case of hypothetical war between China and
Japan, or Russia and Ukraine or any other country, both China and Russia can, according to
the treaty, be expected to remain neutral. The actual reaction of China to Russia’s politics in

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46 Ibid.
the post-Soviet space and in Syria, and Russia’s reaction to China’s moves into South and East China seas suggests that both countries fulfill their treaty commitments.\(^{47}\)

More controversial is Article 9 of the treaty, which states that “when a situation arises in which one of the contracting parties deems that peace is being threatened and undermined or its security interests are involved or when it is confronted with the threat of aggression, the contracting parties shall immediately hold contacts and consultations in order to eliminate such threats.”\(^{48}\) Given that “the threat of aggression” and the ways of “eliminating such threats” are open to different interpretations depending on the situation, Article 9 turns the treaty into an implicit defense pact. At the same time, the absent military assistance clause is compensated by Article 7, that implies coordination of military efforts and policies, namely that China and Russia “shall expand and deepen confidence building measures in the military field so as to consolidate each other’s security and strengthen regional and international stability,” and Article 16, which points at increasing military cooperation, including the sharing of “military know-how.” In reality this means increased access of China to Russian weapons and military technologies.

As such the China-Russia Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation is a typical alliance treaty which, while falling short of a straightforward defense pact, qualifies squarely as a non-aggression pact and a consultation pact. However, an alliance treaty, while being a useful indicator of a military alliance, can hardly fully reflect the actual characteristics of an alliance. One has to look deeper at the workings of military interactions.

**Mechanism of regular consultations.** The most comprehensive and developed aspect of the contemporary China-Russia military relations is the mechanism of regular consultations. The two countries have developed a comprehensive multi-level mechanism of official regular consultations that finds expression in frequent summit meetings and conversations, cemented by a multitude of institutionalized bureaucratic exchanges.

At the level of top decision makers, the number of meeting has been growing steadily, especially after Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia. Since 2006 and before Xi Jinping came to power in china, the leaders of the two countries met at least 4-5 times every year.\(^{49}\)

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\(^{47}\) China, in fact, offered Russia a range of business agreements and loans immediately after Russia was hit by Western sanctions in the wake of the Ukraine Crisis in 2014. Additionally, by sitting beside Putin in Red Square during the Victory Parade, Xi Jinping clearly demonstrated to the whole world that China is emphatically not following Western pressure on Russia and, in the complex geopolitical milieu, in fact sides with Russia.

\(^{48}\) Treaty.

After Xi took office, the number of meetings between Chinese and Russian leaders broke all records. During the two years of 2014 and 2015 Putin and Xi met 15(!) times, either during multiple bilateral meetings or at separate “Putin-Xi forums” as parts of BRICS, SCO, or other meetings.

Another high-level consultation mechanism is the regular meetings of Prime Ministers. In April 1996, the then Presidents of Russia and China, Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin, agreed that the two countries must have an institutionalized high-level channel of regular contacts to promote bilateral cooperation and coordinate each other’s positions on world affairs. Following this agreement, on 28 December of 1996, the then Chinese Prime Minister, Li Peng, went to Russia with the first working visit, and the two sides decided to establish a mechanism of regular yearly meetings of Prime Ministers. The decision formally materialized during the second Prime Ministers meeting on 27 June 1997 in Beijing, when Li Peng and his Russian counterpart, Viktor Chernomyrdin, signed an “Agreement on the Establishment and Organizational Foundations of the Mechanism of Regular Meetings of Russian and Chinese Prime Ministers,” which established that the Prime Ministers would meet at least once every year, in Moscow and Beijing on rotating basis. The newly established consultation mechanism also included the Russian-Chinese Commission (responsible for the preparation of the meetings) and five Sub-Commissions (on trade and economic, technological, energy, transport, and nuclear energy cooperation) – all of them must also hold regular meetings no less than once a year. Thus, this whole mechanism alone generates at least 7 meetings between Chinese and Russian high-level officials that creates multiple channels of information exchange. Indeed, since 1996 Li Peng’s visit to Moscow, the yearly meetings have been taking place regularly, with the 20th meeting between Dmitry Medvedev and Li Keqiang happening in Beijing on 17 December 2015. The two sides signed 24 agreements

in various spheres, including energy, infrastructure, culture, trade, medicine, joint cadre education programs, technological cooperation, particularly civic aviation, etc.\textsuperscript{52}

\[\text{The rest of the paper is still work in progress}\]

\textsuperscript{52} For full list of agreements signed at this meeting, see: “Zhong E Zongli di Ershi Ci Dingqi Huiwu Lianhe Gongbao [Summary report of the twentieth of regular meetings between Chines and Russian Prime Ministers],”\nXinhua\textsuperscript{\textregistered} Wang [Xinhua News Agency], 18 December 2015, \texttt{http://gb.cri.cn/42071/2015/12/18/7211s5201656.htm}.