

Russia-China Relations in the 21st Century: A Strategic Partnership to Counter United States Hegemony

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The Russia–China relationship has evolved from a historically complex and often distrustful bilateral relationship into a comprehensive strategic partnership with significant implications for the contemporary international order. This article examines the transformation of Russia–China relations in the twenty-first century and analyses whether their expanding cooperation represents a durable strategic alignment aimed at challenging United States primacy or remains a pragmatic partnership constrained by divergent interests and growing asymmetry. Drawing on structural realism, power transition theory, constructivism, and neoclassical realism, the study conceptualises the partnership as a multidimensional form of strategic alignment shaped by systemic power competition, shared normative orientations, and domestic political considerations. The article argues that Russia–China relations are best understood as a flexible, asymmetric and counter-hegemonic strategic alignment rather than a conventional military alliance. Its durability will depend on the ability of both powers to manage asymmetry and divergent interests while sustaining their shared commitment to greater strategic autonomy and a more multipolar international order. The analysis focuses on economic interdependence, energy cooperation, infrastructure connectivity, financial de-dollarisation, defence-technical cooperation, arms transfers, joint military exercises, security dialogues, and coordination through institutions such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The findings suggest that Russia and China have developed substantial mechanisms of hard and soft balancing, contributing to the diffusion of power and the strengthening of multipolar tendencies in global politics. However, the partnership is not equivalent to a formal alliance. Increasing Chinese economic and technological predominance, Russia's growing dependence on Chinese markets and dual-use technologies, and differences in regional interests constrain deeper institutional integration.

Keywords: Russia-China relations, strategic partnership, U.S. hegemony, multipolarity, economic-military cooperation

Introduction

The post-Cold War international system has undergone profound transformations in the distribution of global power, most notably through the emergence of China as a major economic and strategic power and Russia's continuing efforts to preserve its great-power status. The predominance of the United States following the dissolution of the Soviet Union produced a largely unipolar international environment; however, the subsequent diffusion of economic, military and political capabilities has increasingly challenged the durability of this configuration. Within this changing geopolitical landscape, Russia and China have evolved from historically ambivalent and strategically cautious neighbours into an increasingly institutionalised comprehensive strategic partnership. Their relationship has acquired renewed significance amid intensifying U.S.–China strategic competition, heightened Russia–West tensions, NATO–Russia rivalry and the expansion of Western sanctions against Moscow (Mearsheimer, 2013; Goddard, 2018). The trajectory of this relationship is particularly significant because it represents not merely a bilateral realignment but a potential factor in the broader restructuring of the contemporary international order.

The transformation of Russia–China relations extends well beyond conventional diplomatic engagement and encompasses an increasingly interconnected range of economic, energy, financial, infrastructural, military, technological, regional and institutional dimensions. Bilateral economic relations have deepened through trade, energy partnerships, infrastructure connectivity and the increasing use of national currencies, while defence cooperation has expanded through arms transfers, defence-technical collaboration, joint military exercises and security dialogues. At the institutional level, coordination through BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has provided additional platforms for advancing shared interests and strengthening non-Western mechanisms of international cooperation. These developments reflect the two powers' pursuit of greater strategic autonomy and their efforts to diversify the institutional and economic foundations of global governance. Nevertheless, the relationship should not be reduced to the emergence of a cohesive anti-American bloc. Rather, it represents a complex configuration of strategic convergence, mutual interdependence and structural asymmetry, shaped by differences in national capabilities, geopolitical priorities and long-term strategic objectives (*The Russia–China Entente and Its Future*, 2020; *Russia, China and the Revisionist Assault on the Western Liberal International Order*, 2023).

The historical evolution of the partnership further underscores this complexity. Russia and China have moved from the ideological affinity of the early Cold War through the Sino-Soviet split and subsequent strategic rivalry towards post-Cold War rapprochement and institutionalised cooperation. The

2001 Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation provided an important foundation for consolidating bilateral relations, while subsequent agreements and high-level strategic consultations progressively expanded the scope of cooperation (Sun, 2015). The relationship acquired a particularly significant symbolic and strategic dimension with the articulation of a “no-limits” partnership, reflecting the two governments’ commitment to expanding cooperation across multiple domains (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2022). At the same time, the deepening of the partnership following the deterioration of Russia’s relations with the West has altered the balance within the relationship. Russia’s increasing reliance on China as an economic market, source of manufactured goods and technological and financial support has coincided with China’s expanding economic and technological capabilities, generating an increasingly asymmetric form of interdependence.

Existing scholarship has examined Russia–China relations from multiple perspectives, including strategic partnership, great-power competition, economic interdependence, military cooperation and the challenge posed by their alignment to the U.S.-led international order. However, comparatively less analytical attention has been devoted to the relationship between their counter-hegemonic convergence and the structural asymmetries developing within the partnership. The central puzzle is therefore not simply why Moscow and Beijing cooperate, but why extensive and increasingly institutionalised cooperation has not culminated in a formal alliance, and whether the growing asymmetry in their economic, technological and strategic capabilities may simultaneously strengthen and constrain their partnership. This study addresses this gap by conceptualising Russia–China relations as a multidimensional strategic alignment in which systemic balancing incentives, shared normative orientations and domestic political considerations intersect with material interdependence, unequal capabilities and divergent regional interests.

Against this background, the article advances the central argument that Russia–China relations constitute a durable, flexible and asymmetric form of counter-hegemonic strategic alignment rather than a conventional military alliance. Structural realism explains the systemic incentives that encourage both powers to balance U.S. predominance; power transition theory situates their cooperation within the broader redistribution of global capabilities and the movement from unipolarity towards multipolarity; constructivism illuminates the shared normative emphasis on sovereignty, non-interference and resistance to Western interventionism; and neoclassical realism highlights the role of leadership perceptions, domestic political priorities and regime-security considerations in shaping the scope of bilateral cooperation (Mearsheimer, 2013; Goddard, 2018; Pellegrini Jeri, 2021). These theoretical perspectives provide an integrated framework for examining how economic and energy interdependence, infrastructure and financial cooperation, defence collaboration, military exercises

and institutional coordination contribute to the consolidation of the Russia–China partnership.

The study further identifies a convergence–asymmetry paradox at the heart of this relationship. Shared concerns over U.S. strategic predominance, Western sanctions and the existing configuration of global governance provide strong incentives for closer Russian–Chinese cooperation. Yet the same process has generated an increasingly unequal distribution of capabilities within the partnership. China’s growing economic, technological and financial weight, coupled with Russia’s increasing dependence on Chinese markets, investment, financial mechanisms and dual-use technologies, has altered the traditional balance between the two powers. At the same time, their shared commitment to multipolarity does not eliminate differences in their long-term strategic interests, particularly in regions such as Central Asia and the Arctic. The partnership consequently represents neither a transient tactical arrangement nor an integrated alliance. Instead, it constitutes a strategically consequential but deliberately flexible alignment, whose durability will depend upon the ability of Moscow and Beijing to manage growing asymmetry, preserve strategic autonomy and accommodate divergent regional interests while sustaining their broader convergence on the need for a more multipolar international order.

The study adopts a qualitative research design based on the systematic analysis of secondary sources. The study employs structural realism, power transition theory, constructivism and neoclassical realism as complementary analytical perspectives to interpret patterns of strategic convergence, interdependence, power asymmetry and the limitations of alliance formation. The paper is organised into eight sections. The second section presents the theoretical framework, while the third traces the historical evolution of Russia–China relations. The fourth and fifth sections examine economic and military cooperation, respectively. The sixth analyses counter-hegemonic strategies and the pursuit of multipolarity, while the seventh discusses structural constraints and emerging asymmetries. The eighth evaluates whether the relationship represents a strategic partnership or an emerging alliance, followed by the conclusion on its implications for the evolving international order.

Theoretical Perspectives on Russia–China Strategic Partnership and Global Power Transition

The theoretical framework for analysing Russia–China relations in the 21st century draws on structural realism, power transition theory, constructivism, and neoclassical realism, with each perspective explaining a distinct dimension of their evolving strategic partnership. Structural realism focuses on the distribution of power and the security pressures generated by U.S. predominance. In an anarchic international system, states seek survival and relative power, creating incentives for major powers to balance against a dominant state (Mearsheimer, 2013). From this perspective, the growing convergence between Russia and China can be understood as a response to perceived U.S. primacy and

containment. Their balancing operates through both hard and soft mechanisms: military cooperation, joint exercises, and strategic signalling represent hard balancing, while coordination through BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and alternative economic and diplomatic institutions reflects soft balancing (Powers, 2011; *The Russia–China Entente and Its Future*, 2020). Thus, structural realism explains the systemic foundations of their alignment while also accounting for why extensive cooperation can develop without resulting in a formal military alliance.

Power transition theory provides a complementary explanation by situating the Russia–China partnership within the changing hierarchy of international power. The theory suggests that instability increases when rising powers become dissatisfied with the prevailing international order and acquire sufficient capabilities to challenge the dominant power (Goddard, 2018). China's rapid economic and technological rise and Russia's continued military and energy capabilities give both countries distinct yet complementary capacities to challenge aspects of the existing order. Their cooperation can therefore be interpreted as part of a broader transition from unipolarity towards multipolarity, including efforts to reduce dependence on Western-dominated financial and institutional structures (*Russia, China and the Revisionist Assault on the Western Liberal International Order*, 2023). However, Russia and China should not be treated as identical revisionist powers. China possesses greater economic and technological capabilities and has often pursued institutional and economic transformation, whereas Russia has relied more heavily on military capabilities, energy resources, and geopolitical influence. This distinction suggests that their convergence is based on overlapping strategic interests rather than identical visions of the future international order (Goddard, 2018; *Russia, China and the Revisionist Assault on the Western Liberal International Order*, 2023).

Constructivism adds an ideational dimension by explaining how shared identities, norms, and political narratives sustain the relationship. Constructivist approaches emphasise that state interests are shaped not only by material capabilities but also by intersubjective understandings and collectively constructed identities (Pellegrini Jeri, 2021). Russia and China increasingly emphasise sovereignty, non-interference, territorial integrity, and respect for distinct political systems, providing an important normative foundation for their cooperation. Their diplomatic discourse also reflects shared perceptions of Western interventionism, external encirclement, and attempts to constrain their status as major powers. Through leadership summits, joint declarations, and coordinated positions in multilateral institutions, these narratives have helped transform historical mistrust into a discourse of strategic complementarity (*The Russia–China Entente and Its Future*, 2020). Constructivism, therefore, demonstrates that the partnership is not merely an instrumental arrangement based on immediate material interests but is also reinforced by a gradually

consolidating shared identity as non-Western great powers seeking recognition and strategic autonomy.

Neoclassical realism provides a further layer of analysis by connecting systemic pressures with domestic political processes. While the international distribution of power establishes the broad parameters of foreign policy, state responses are mediated by leadership perceptions, domestic political priorities, and regime-security considerations. In the Russian and Chinese cases, the consolidation of political authority under Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping has influenced the direction and intensity of bilateral cooperation (*Getting China Right*, n.d.). The partnership provides Moscow with economic and diplomatic support that can mitigate Western pressure, while Beijing benefits from a stable strategic relationship with Russia as it manages competition with the United States and pursues its broader regional objectives (*The Russia–China Entente and Its Future*, 2020). At the same time, domestic and economic constraints place limits on the extent of cooperation. Russia’s increasing dependence on China and China’s continuing interdependence with Western markets create incentives for both governments to preserve flexibility rather than enter into binding alliance commitments (*“Limitless” Sino-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic?*, 2025). Neoclassical realism thus helps explain the apparent paradox of a relationship that has become increasingly institutionalised and strategically significant while remaining deliberately “short of alliance.” Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a multi-layered explanation of the Russia–China strategic partnership.

The Russia-China Partnership: Strategies to Challenge U.S. Hegemony

The Russia-China partnership represents a strategic alignment aimed at challenging U.S. hegemony on multiple fronts. Militarily, both nations conduct joint exercises and share defence technologies, enhancing their capabilities while signalling a unified stance against American military influence. Economically, they foster trade agreements and investment projects that reduce reliance on Western markets and financial systems, aiming for greater autonomy and resilience. Diplomatically, Russia and China coordinate positions in international forums to counter U.S. policies and influence, presenting alternative visions for global governance. Their technological collaboration spans areas like cybersecurity and space exploration, positioning them as formidable competitors to U.S. technological dominance. This partnership also extends into cultural exchanges and educational initiatives, bolstering mutual understanding and solidarity. Overall, by leveraging their combined resources and strategic alignment, Russia and China seek to reshape global power dynamics, challenging the traditional Western-centric order and asserting themselves as influential players on the world stage. Here are some major areas where the Russia–China Partnership directly counters United States Hegemony (Lin & Hart, 2022).

Economic Cooperation and Strategic Interdependence

Economic cooperation between China and Russia has become a cornerstone of their strategic partnership, marked by extensive collaboration across various sectors. This bilateral relationship has grown significantly in recent years, driven by mutual interests and geopolitical considerations. Both nations view their economic ties as essential for enhancing their global influence and securing their national interests. China, as the world's second-largest economy, and Russia, a major energy supplier, have forged a robust economic relationship centered on trade, investment, and energy. China is Russia's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching approximately \$190 billion in 2023 (General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China (2024)). This trade dynamic is heavily influenced by energy, with Russia supplying China with substantial amounts of oil, natural gas, and coal, while China exports machinery, electronics, and consumer goods to Russia. The energy sector is a pivotal area of cooperation, featuring major projects like the Power of Siberia pipeline, which transports natural gas from Siberia to China, and the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean pipeline, which delivers oil. These projects are integral to China's energy security and Russia's economic strategy. Investment flows between the two countries also highlight their economic partnership. Chinese investments in Russian infrastructure, mining, and technology are expanding, while Russian investments in China's financial and technology sectors are growing. Joint ventures and collaborative projects in agriculture and industrial sectors further underscore their economic interdependence (Downs, 2025).

Bilateral Trade and Economic Interdependence

In 2020, the bilateral trade volume reached \$107.76 billion, with a target of \$200 billion by 2024 (General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China 2021). This marked a significant increase from previous decades, indicating deepening economic ties. This growth is driven primarily by the exchange of energy resources and a diversification of traded goods. Russia plays a crucial role as a major supplier of crude oil and natural gas to China. The Power of Siberia pipeline, operational since 2019, has been pivotal in boosting the flow of natural gas from Russia to China, meeting China's growing energy needs and diversifying Russia's export markets amid Western sanctions. In addition to energy exports, trade between the two countries includes a broad range of goods. China exports machinery, electronics, vehicles, and consumer products to Russia, contributing to a balanced trade relationship. This diversification helps stabilize trade dynamics and reduces reliance on any single commodity. The bilateral trade relationship has also benefited from collaborative infrastructure projects that improve connectivity between the two nations. These projects, including enhancements to rail and road networks facilitate smoother and more efficient trade flows (Downs, 2025). Geopolitical factors, such as

Western sanctions on Russia and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have influenced the trade dynamics between the two countries. The BRI, aimed at improving economic connectivity across Eurasia, has been a significant driver in fostering deeper economic integration. Furthermore, Russia and China have established various bilateral agreements to enhance economic cooperation, covering trade, investment, and joint ventures. These agreements support the ongoing growth of their trade relationship. Looking ahead, the trade volume between Russia and China is expected to continue its upward trajectory, driven by further economic collaboration and geopolitical developments (Lukin, 2024).

Energy Cooperation and Strategic Resource Partnership

Russia is a key energy supplier to China, accounting for approximately 15% of China's oil imports. The Power of Siberia gas pipeline, operational since 2019, is a landmark project that underscores the growing energy partnership. This pipeline is expected to deliver 38 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually from Russia to China. Energy cooperation between Russia and China has become a cornerstone of their bilateral relationship, characterized by increasing trade volumes and strategic investments. As of 2024, this partnership has evolved into a critical component of both countries' energy strategies, with significant implications for global energy markets. Russia, endowed with vast oil and natural gas reserves, has positioned itself as a key energy supplier to China. The Power of Siberia pipeline is a flagship project in this cooperation. This pipeline, stretching over 2,000 kilometers, facilitates the export of natural gas from Siberia to northeastern China, and is expected to deliver up to 38 billion cubic meters of gas annually by 2025 (Downs, 2024). The development of this infrastructure underscores Russia's strategic pivot towards Asian markets in response to Western sanctions and fluctuating European demand. China, with its growing energy needs driven by rapid industrialization and urbanization, has found a reliable supplier in Russia. The bilateral energy trade also includes crude oil, with China becoming one of Russia's largest oil export markets. This partnership is mutually beneficial; Russia gains a stable, lucrative market for its energy exports, while China secures a steady, diversified energy supply to support its economic growth. The energy cooperation extends beyond oil and gas. Both countries are exploring nuclear energy opportunities, with joint ventures and collaborations to develop nuclear power plants. Additionally, there is growing interest in renewable energy projects, reflecting a broader commitment to energy security and sustainability (Lukin, 2024).

Infrastructure Connectivity and Eurasian Integration

Infrastructure projects between Russia and China have significantly expanded in recent years, reflecting deepening economic and strategic ties. Collaborative initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) exemplify the economic synergy between the two

nations. Russia's transport network, particularly the Trans-Siberian Railway and its connections to the New Eurasian Land Bridge corridors, are being increasingly synchronized with China's push for seamless rail links between Asia and Europe (Lukin, 2024). This land-based connectivity aims to create rapid, high-volume alternative trade routes that bypass traditional, US-controlled maritime routes and minimize exposure to potential naval blockades or disruptions. The ongoing development of joint railway bridges, such as the Tongjiang-Nizhnelenskoye railway bridge across the Amur River, further integrates the two economies. This logistical infrastructure, combined with the increasing adoption of local currencies, particularly the Chinese Yuan, for bilateral trade, replacing the US dollar is part of a de-dollarization push. This financial infrastructure strategy, supported by Russia's use of China's financial messaging systems, aims to build an economic sphere more insulated from US extraterritorial sanctions and financial leverage, thereby fundamentally chipping away at the foundation of the US-led global economic order. These projects, while often facing their own commercial and technical hurdles, are unified by the shared political objective of creating parallel, non-Western-dependent global systems (Shagina, 2024).

Table 1: Russia –China Economic Co-operation (2015-2025)

Period	Total Annual Trade	Energy Cooperation	Infrastructure & Investment
2015–2017	\$64B – \$84B	Recovery phase after 2015 ruble crash, Rosneft receives \$15B+ prepayments from China for oil.	Construction of the \$55B Power of Siberia 1 (PoS-1) begins; Yamal LNG attracts \$12B in Chinese funding.
2018–2021	\$107B – \$146B	PoS-1 pipeline opens (2019); energy becomes 30-35% of bilateral trade value.	Launch of the Heihe-Blagoveshchensk bridge, BRI integration with Eurasian Economic Union.
2022–2024	\$190B – \$245B	Record high trade; China imports \$60B+ in crude oil alone (2024). Russia redirects gas from EU to China.	Surge in logistics hubs at the border, Russia-China Investment Commission manages \$160B+ portfolio.
2025 (Est.)	\$218B – \$220B	8-month energy trade hits \$47.6B; PoS-1 reaches full 38 bcm capacity.	Power of Siberia 2 MoU signed; focus on \$200B portfolio of 60+ joint transport/logistics projects.

Source: *China-Russia dashboard: A special relationship in facts and figures.* Swedish National China Centre 2025

Military and Security Cooperation: Strategic Convergence and Defence Interdependence

Military cooperation is a critical component of the Russia-China strategic partnership, driven by mutual interests in countering US military dominance. Military cooperation between Russia and China has intensified in recent years, marked by increased joint exercises, technology sharing, and strategic collaboration. Both countries conduct regular joint military drills, including naval and land-based exercises, to enhance operational coordination and interoperability. They have also engaged in the transfer of military technology, weaponry, and missile systems. Additionally, Russia and China collaborate on defence-related research and development, and they hold joint security dialogues to address regional and global security issues. This cooperation reflects their mutual interest in counterbalancing U.S. influence and strengthening their strategic partnership (Rácz & Hrytsenko, 2025).

Arms Trade

The arms trade between Russia and China represents one of the most dynamic and strategically significant dimensions of their bilateral relationship, evolving over three decades from a traditional supplier-buyer arrangement into a complex framework of defence-technical cooperation and industrial interdependence. The trajectory of this trade mirrors larger geopolitical and economic transformations, reflecting how shifting power balances and technological capacities have reshaped the nature of great-power partnerships in the 21st century. In the immediate post-Cold War era, Russia emerged as China's principal source of advanced weaponry. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Moscow supplied Beijing with a wide range of major combat systems, including Su-27 and Su-30 fighter aircraft, Kilo-class submarines, Sovremenny class destroyers, Mi-17 transport helicopters, and S-300 surface-to-air missile systems (SIPRI, 2024). These transfers were crucial in modernising China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), which lagged technologically behind Western powers and regional competitors. According to SIPRI data, China accounted for nearly 40 per cent of Russia's total arms exports during this period, with annual transactions averaging US\$ 2–3 billion. This phase also laid the foundation for long-term defence cooperation, including technology transfers and training arrangements (SIPRI, 2024). By the mid-2000s, however, the relationship began to shift. Russia grew increasingly cautious about transferring its most advanced systems, partly due to China's growing capability to reverse-engineer Russian technology a practice highlighted by China's development of the J-11B fighter, derived from the Su-27. Simultaneously, China's domestic defence industry expanded rapidly, reducing its dependence on imported arms. By 2012, Russian arms deliveries to China had declined to less than US \$700 million.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent Western sanctions on Russia revived Moscow's strategic and economic dependence on Beijing. This led to renewed defence sales, including the Su-35 fighter jets and S-400 air defence systems, two of Russia's most advanced exports. Between 2015 and 2020, China imported roughly US \$4.5 billion worth of Russian weaponry, demonstrating a temporary resurgence in the traditional arms trade. However, by the early 2020s, the pattern shifted once more. SIPRI data indicate that between 2019 and 2023, Chinese arms imports fell by about 44 per cent compared to the previous five-year period (SIPRI, 2024). Despite this decline, Russia still accounted for roughly three-quarters of China's foreign arms acquisitions, underscoring persistent but changing interdependence. The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 introduced a new dimension to the arms-trade relationship. With Russia under heavy sanctions and struggling to access Western technology, China became an indispensable supplier of dual-use goods, including machine tools, microelectronics, optical components, and drone parts. These items, though not classified as direct weapons systems, are vital to sustaining Russia's defence production. In this sense, the direction of dependency has begun to invert, Moscow increasingly relies on Beijing for critical inputs rather than the reverse (Gabuev & Prokopenko, 2024). Analytically, the evolution of the Russia-China arms relationship reveals a paradox. On one hand, their cooperation is emblematic of a growing strategic convergence aimed at countering U.S. and Western dominance in global security affairs. On the other hand, the relationship is characterised by structural asymmetry; Russia remains technologically constrained and economically vulnerable, while China continues to ascend as a self-sufficient and innovative military power. The arms trade, therefore, has transformed from a transaction-driven exchange into an instrument of strategic coordination, where technology flows, and industrial linkages symbolise a broader geopolitical realignment. This interdependence, while deepening their partnership, also embeds long-term imbalances that could shape the trajectory of their alliance and the emerging multipolar global order (Gabuev, 2024).

Joint Military Exercises

Joint military exercises between Russia and China have intensified in recent years, reflecting a growing strategic partnership between the two countries. These exercises aim to enhance military cooperation, improve interoperability, and demonstrate the strength of their bilateral relations. Notable exercises include the Vostok series, the Naval Cooperation exercises, and the Aviadarts competition. The Vostok exercises, held primarily in Russia's Far East, are large-scale drills that involve land, air, and sea components, emphasizing joint operational capabilities and strategic coordination (Hart, 2023). The 2018 Vostok exercise was one of the largest, involving around 300,000 troops, including a contingent from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). Naval

Cooperation exercises, such as the Joint Sea series, showcase the two navies' capabilities and focus on joint maritime operations, including anti-submarine warfare, air defence, and amphibious landings. The 2019 Joint Sea exercise in the Baltic Sea was particularly significant, demonstrating their ability to project power far from their home waters. Aviadarts, an annual competition within the International Army Games, highlights the prowess of Russian and Chinese pilots in various aerial disciplines. This event fosters mutual understanding and the exchange of best practices between their air forces. The exercises often involve thousands of personnel, hundreds of aircraft, and numerous warships, underscoring the comprehensive nature of their military collaboration (Korolev, 2019). Geopolitical analysts note that these joint exercises serve multiple purposes. They are a response to perceived threats from NATO and other Western alliances, a way to counterbalance U.S. influence in Asia and the Pacific, and a means to ensure regional stability. Additionally, the exercises help Russia and China to modernize their armed forces through shared experiences and technologies. Regular joint military exercises, such as the Vostok 2018 and Naval Interaction 2021, demonstrate enhanced interoperability and strategic trust. These exercises are designed to improve coordination and operational capabilities, signalling a united front against potential adversaries.

Security Dialogues and Exchanges

Security dialogues and exchanges between Russia and China have become increasingly robust, reflecting the deepening strategic partnership between the two nations. These interactions encompass high-level meetings, joint statements, military exchanges, and cooperative frameworks aimed at addressing common security challenges and enhancing mutual trust. High-level meetings between Russian and Chinese defence officials are a cornerstone of their security dialogues. Regular summits and bilateral talks provide a platform for discussing regional and global security issues, defense policies, and military cooperation. Notable meetings include the annual Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summits, where both countries, as key members, coordinate on counterterrorism, anti-drug trafficking, and regional stability. Joint statements and agreements further solidify their security cooperation. In 2019, Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement, emphasizing coordination in defence and security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2019). This agreement underscores their commitment to supporting each other's core interests and enhancing strategic collaboration. Military exchanges play a significant role in fostering closer ties. Both nations participate in joint military exercises, such as the Vostok and Naval Cooperation drills, which enhance interoperability and joint operational capabilities. Additionally, there are regular visits and exchanges of military personnel, allowing for the sharing of best practices and the development of a common understanding of military strategies and tactics. Cooperative frameworks like the SCO and the Conference on

Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) provide multilateral platforms for security cooperation. Within these organizations, Russia and China work together on initiatives aimed at promoting peace and stability in the region. These platforms also facilitate dialogue on non-traditional security threats, such as cybersecurity and information warfare.

Table 2: Russia –China Military Co-operation (2015-2025)

Period	Arms Trade & Technology	Joint Military Exercises	Security Dialogue & Exchange
2015–2017	Russia delivers crown jewel systems: Su-35 jets and S-400 missiles.	First joint naval drills in the Mediterranean (2015) and Baltic Sea (2017).	Signing of the first 5-year Military Roadmap (2017–2020).
2018–2020	Joint work on Ballistic Missile Early Warning Systems and aero-engines.	China joins Russia's Vostok-2018, start of annual Strategic Air Patrols.	Upgrade to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for a New Era (2019).
2021–2023	Russia seeks Chinese dual-use tech (chips, drones) amid Ukraine war sanctions.	First joint Naval Patrol near Alaska (2023), Joint Sea drills expand.	Signing of the 2021–2025 Roadmap, Feb 2022 “No-Limits” statement.
2024–2025	Integration of AI, nuclear submarine tech, and satellite intelligence sharing	Large-scale Ocean-2024 and Joint Sea-2025 focus on Arctic/Pacific	Xi-Putin Brotherhood of Arms summits (2025), direct secure hotlines active.

Source: SIPRI Yearbook 2025: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security.

Geopolitical Strategies to Counter U.S. Hegemony

The geopolitical strategies of China and Russia to counter U.S. hegemony are rooted in a shared desire to transition the international system from a unipolar, U.S.-led order to a multipolar framework. This deep alignment is driven by mutual concerns over perceived Western containment, with both nations viewing the United States as their principal strategic adversary. Their efforts span economic, military, and diplomatic domains, systematically aiming to weaken the core elements of American global leadership and its alliance networks. The core strategy is to undermine the U.S. dollar's global dominance and create financial resilience against Western sanctions—a process known as de-dollarization (Korolev, 2023). This is concretely demonstrated by the fact that

over 99% of Russia-China bilateral trade is now settled in their national currencies (Yuan and Ruble), bypassing the dollar and insulating their transactions from U.S. financial leverage (Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation, 2025). Furthermore, they champion institutions like the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which offer non-Western-conditioned financing to the Global South, directly challenging the governance of the IMF and World Bank. Militarily and diplomatically, the cooperation is a display of solidarity designed to complicate the strategic calculations of the U.S. and its allies. They conduct increasingly frequent and sophisticated joint military exercises and naval patrols in strategic regions, such as the Indo-Pacific, to signal their joint capability and to strain U.S. resource allocation. Diplomatically, they coordinate within the UN Security Council and leverage non-Western forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the expanded BRICS group to promote a narrative of absolute state sovereignty, non-interference, and a post-Western world order, thereby eroding the political and normative credibility of U.S. foreign policy. This partnership, while pragmatic and constrained by asymmetrical economic dependency, represents the most significant current challenge to the global U.S. security and economic architecture. In spite of having challenges in their partnership, both nations are effectively advancing their shared objectives within these specified fields such as Economic and Financial Diversification, Regional Strategic Cooperation, Military and Security Alignment and diplomatic and institutional etc.

The economic and financial diversification strategy of China and Russia is fundamentally aimed at minimizing their vulnerabilities to U.S. sanctions and financial leverage, thereby undermining the U.S. dollar's role as the global reserve and trade currency, which underpins American hegemony. This strategy is multi-pronged, encompassing a systematic shift away from the dollar (de-dollarization), the establishment of non-Western financial institutions and the forging of deep, non-Western-dependent trade links, particularly in the energy sector. Following the full-scale Western sanctions imposed on Russia after 2022, this effort has accelerated significantly. The most visible and concerted action is the de-dollarization of their bilateral trade. Both countries have dramatically increased the use of their national currencies, the Chinese Yuan (RMB) and the Russian Ruble, for trade settlements, effectively bypassing the U.S. financial system and limiting Washington's ability to monitor and restrict transactions. By 2023, approximately 90% of bilateral trade between China and Russia was settled in their respective national currencies, a stark increase from previous years. The Yuan has, in fact, surpassed the U.S. dollar to become the most traded foreign currency on the Moscow Exchange, demonstrating Russia's forced but strategic pivot towards the Chinese financial ecosystem. This shift is not just about currency, it is also about creating alternative payment channels. Russia's System for Transfer of Financial Messages (SPFS) and China's Cross-Border Interbank

Payment System (CIPS) are being promoted as alternatives to the Western-dominated SWIFT interbank messaging system, offering a sanctions-proof mechanism for cross-border payments, particularly within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS frameworks (Gabuev, 2024). Complementing this monetary effort is the creation of alternative multilateral financial institutions that challenge the governance and lending conditions of the U.S.-dominated World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The New Development Bank (NDB), established by the BRICS nations, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), proposed by China, is key components. These institutions are designed to finance infrastructure and development projects, offering funding in local currencies or outside the strict political conditionality often imposed by Western-led banks. For developing countries, this provides a compelling alternative to dollar-denominated loans and the structural reforms often mandated by the Bretton Woods institutions, giving the Global South a choice that strengthens Beijing and Moscow's influence. Furthermore, economic interdependence, particularly in the energy sector, underpins their trade diversification. Russia, as a major energy producer, has redirected vast quantities of oil and gas from European markets to China, its most important customer. This is achieved through long-term contracts and major infrastructure projects, such as the Power of Siberia pipeline, which secure China's energy supply and provide Russia with a stable, non-Western market immune to Western sanctions. China's growing reliance on Russian energy imports helps Beijing diversify its supply away from vulnerable sea lanes and supports Moscow's financial resilience against Western pressure. Conversely, Russia has become highly dependent on China for manufactured goods, machinery, and electronic equipment, with Chinese exports filling the vacuum left by exiting Western firms, even including dual-use goods that support Russia's defence industrial base. This asymmetric but strategically vital trade relationship insulates them both, to varying degrees, from the global economic consequences of U.S. foreign policy, accelerating the trend toward a fractured, non-Western-centric global economy.

The regional strategic cooperation between China and Russia is a concerted effort to dismantle the perceived unipolar dominance of the United States and to establish a "multipolar world" order in which their national interests and governance models are secure from Western interference. This strategy is executed across multiple geopolitical theatres, including Central Asia, the Indo-Pacific, and the Arctic, leveraging their respective strengths to create regional blocs that exclude the U.S. and its allies.

- The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is the flagship institution for Sino-Russian regional coordination in Central Asia and Eurasia. Evolving from the "Shanghai Five" in 1996, the SCO's primary function is to foster cooperation on security and counter the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, issues both nations view as

potential threats to their internal stability. Russia historically holds the security mantle in the region, partly through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), while China dominates the economic landscape via its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The strategic cooperation here is one of de-confliction, where China and Russia coordinate to ensure their influence spheres are complementary rather than competitive. Russia provides the security umbrella, and China provides the infrastructure and investment, which many SCO members, with the notable exception of India, see as vital for their economic development (Kendall-Taylor 2024). The SCO thus acts as a non-Western-led regional security forum, which by its very nature counters U.S./NATO influence and supports the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states, a core tenet of both Chinese and Russian foreign policy. The inclusion of new members like Iran and Belarus further strengthens the SCO's geopolitical weight, encompassing around 36% of the world's GDP based on PPP as of 2024 and challenging the normative framework of the Western-led order.

- In the Indo-Pacific, the focus shifts to direct military signaling aimed at countering the U.S.-led network of alliances, particularly the Quad (U.S., Japan, Australia, and India) and AUKUS. China and Russia have significantly deepened their military and security cooperation, although they stop short of a formal alliance. This cooperation is demonstrated through increased frequency and complexity of joint military exercises, such as the “Maritime Interaction” naval drills and combined long-range bomber patrols. These joint activities are highly visible demonstrations of operational compatibility and mutual resolve to resist what they perceive as U.S. containment strategies. Joint air patrols have been conducted in sensitive areas like the Sea of Japan, the East China Sea, and even near the Aleutian Islands in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone. Such actions serve two strategic purposes: firstly, they force the U.S. and its allies to respond to potential threats in two separate theaters simultaneously (Europe/Middle East and the Indo-Pacific), stretching U.S. resources. Secondly, they boost the operational proficiency and technical integration of the Russian Armed Forces and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), including in areas like anti-submarine warfare and air defence, further challenging U.S. military primacy in the Western Pacific.
- The Arctic has emerged as a new strategic frontier for cooperation. Russia, possessing the vast Arctic coastline and the crucial Northern Sea Route (NSR), views the region as its vital economic and military backyard. China, despite being a “near-Arctic state,” seeks to integrate the NSR into its “Polar Silk Road” component of the BRI. The melting ice due to climate change is making the NSR an increasingly viable alternative shipping shortcut between Asia and Europe, potentially

reducing transit time by up to 40% compared to the Suez Canal route. This new maritime corridor bypasses traditional U.S.-controlled choke points, lessening China's dependence on vulnerable sea lanes (Buchanan, 2023). The cooperation involves Russia providing security, management, and its unique nuclear-powered icebreaker fleet (managed by Rosatom) to keep the route open year-round, while China provides the necessary investment, cargo volume, and technology for port development and infrastructure. This partnership, solidified by agreements like the one for the year-round Arctic shipping route, directly challenges the U.S. focus on the region as a purely international concern, reinforcing Russia's control over the NSR and expanding China's global reach into a strategic new domain.

The military and security alignment between China and Russia is a critical pillar of their strategy to counter U.S. hegemony, serving both to enhance their individual military capabilities and to demonstrate a powerful, cohesive challenge to the Western-led alliance structure, particularly NATO. This alignment, while explicitly labelled as not targeting any third party, is systematically focused on developing mechanisms to counter U.S. military and technological dominance in key global regions. A primary component is the escalation and complexity of joint military exercises, such as the annual "Joint Sea" naval drills and large-scale anti-missile command and staff exercises like "Aerospace Security (USNI News, 2025)." These manoeuvres, which often take place in strategically sensitive areas like the Sea of Japan, the East China Sea, and the Pacific, are not mere symbolic acts but are structured for practical training in coordinated operations, including joint anti-submarine warfare, air defence, and missile defence. Their purpose is to improve interoperability between the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Russian Armed Forces, forcing the U.S. and its regional allies (like Japan and South Korea) to contend with a unified, dual-front strategic challenge, thus diluting U.S. resources and attention. Beyond visible exercises, the cooperation includes a deepening collaboration in advanced military technology and resource sharing. Historically, China was a major recipient of Russian advanced weaponry, including Sukhoi fighter jets and S-400 surface-to-air missile systems, which was essential for the rapid modernization of the PLA. While China has since developed its own indigenous capabilities, Russia continues to share technology in areas of mutual strategic interest.

More recently, since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, China has become an essential lifeline for Russia's defence industrial base, providing massive imports of high-priority dual-use items, including microelectronics, machine tools, fiber optic cables, and drone components. This crucial industrial support allows Russia to circumvent Western sanctions and maintain its production of missiles, tanks, and, notably, cheap, mass-produced attack drones, providing Moscow with battlefield experience that is reportedly being shared with Beijing, particularly regarding lessons learned that could be applied to a potential conflict scenario

like Taiwan. Furthermore, the two nations are making efforts to build a shared early missile defence framework, including strengthening early warning cooperation and integrating anti-missile resources, an active effort designed as a direct countermeasure to U.S. plans for an expanded global missile-defence shield (Department of Defence of China, 2025). This strategic convergence extends to the diplomatic and geopolitical sphere, where they act as an informal, yet highly effective, security bloc. They utilize the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a platform for regional security coordination in Central Asia, explicitly excluding U.S. influence and prioritizing stability and non-interference. Globally, their shared opposition to NATO expansion and Western-led interventions forms a core strategic alignment. By supporting each other diplomatically and economically, they create an “authoritarian axis” that complicates the strategic calculations of Western powers, ensuring that any conflict involving one of them is viewed by the West as having potential strategic and resource implications for the other. This calculated, non-alliance partnership is sustained by their shared perception of Western “encirclement” and is strategically designed to erode U.S. deterrence capability across multiple theaters.

The profound evolution of diplomatic and institutional cooperation between China and Russia stands as a central geopolitical strategy aimed at collectively countering the perceived hegemony and unilateralism of the United States. This partnership, which both nations are careful to describe as a comprehensive strategic coordination rather than a formal military alliance, is fundamentally driven by a shared worldview that rejects the existing US-centric international order and seeks to establish a more equitable, multi-polar global system. Their alignment has deepened significantly since the initial post-Cold War rapprochement, accelerating particularly after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and exponentially following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The bedrock of this relationship is a mutual desire for immunity from Western interference, criticism, and sanctions, and a strategic conviction that weakening Washington's global influence is paramount to securing their respective national interests. Diplomatically, the most powerful display of this coordination is the “no limits” joint statement issued in February 2022, a declaration that asserted their friendship had “no forbidden areas” of cooperation and explicitly criticized the expansion of the NATO alliance, a key security pillar of the US-led system. This statement effectively signalled to the world that Beijing would not join the Western punitive measures against Moscow, thus providing Russia with essential diplomatic and economic breathing room. Within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), China and Russia operate as a consistent voting bloc, frequently exercising their veto power to block resolutions that scrutinize or sanction their interests and allies (such as North Korea or Syria), thereby frustrating US attempts to use the international body to enforce its foreign policy agenda. This coordination undermines the efficacy of the US-led system of

collective security, demonstrating a unified front against what they term “bloc politics.” Institutionally, the partnership is cemented through their joint leadership and promotion of non-Western multilateral organizations. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which now spans much of Eurasia, serves as the primary regional security platform. Through the SCO, China and Russia increase military interoperability via regular joint exercises (like the “Peace Mission” series) and promote the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, a stance directly opposed to US and Western efforts to promote democratic norms and human rights. This institutional framework effectively limits Western security influence in Central Asia, a region deemed strategically critical by both powers.

Economically and financially, the BRICS+ group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, plus new members) is the core mechanism for challenging the US-dominated financial architecture. China and Russia actively spearhead initiatives to increase the use of national currencies (the Yuan and Ruble) in bilateral and intra-BRICS trade, a process known as de-dollarization. This strategic shift is critical for mitigating the impact of US sanctions by bypassing the dollar-based global payment system. The creation of the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) within BRICS offers nascent non-Western alternatives to the World Bank and the IMF, providing financing options that are decoupled from Western political conditionality’s. Furthermore, the strategic alignment of Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) with China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is designed to create an integrated, US-exclusive Eurasian economic and infrastructure space, binding the continent's economies closer together and reducing reliance on traditional, Western-dominated trade routes.

Conclusion

In the 21st century, the strategic partnership between Russia and China has become a defining feature of global geopolitics, with both nations aligning their efforts to counteract U.S. hegemony and reshape the international system. This partnership, marked by deepening cooperation and mutual support, underscores their shared objective of challenging the existing unipolar world order dominated by the United States and advancing a more multipolar global structure. The collaboration between Russia and China is driven by a convergence of strategic interests. Both countries perceive the U.S. as a primary obstacle to their regional and global ambitions, leading them to coordinate their policies and actions to undermine Western dominance. In diplomatic arenas, Russia and China have consistently supported each other, advocating for reforms in international institutions that reflect their growing influence and resist Western-led initiatives. Their alignment on issues such as international security, trade policies, and global governance reform demonstrates their commitment to creating a more balanced global order. Economically, the partnership is

characterized by robust bilateral trade and investment, which serves as a cornerstone of their strategic alignment. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has facilitated significant economic engagement between the two nations, with Russia playing a critical role in advancing infrastructure projects and enhancing connectivity across Eurasia. This economic collaboration not only strengthens their mutual interests but also provides them with substantial leverage against Western economic influence. The integration of Russian energy resources into China's expanding economy further cements their economic ties, ensuring a stable and strategically beneficial relationship.

The military dimension of their partnership adds another layer of complexity and significance. Increased defence cooperation and joint military exercises exemplify their ability to project power and challenge Western military preeminence. While their security interests are distinct and occasionally divergent, their combined military efforts serve as a counterbalance to the U.S. and NATO, reinforcing their strategic alignment. This military collaboration demonstrates their capability to coordinate and assert influence on a global scale, further advancing their shared goal of diminishing U.S. dominance. Despite the strength of their partnership, Russia and China navigate a range of challenges and potential friction points. Regional aspirations and strategic priorities sometimes intersect or conflict, such as competing interests in Central Asia and overlapping security concerns. However, their pragmatic approach and focus on shared objectives enable them to manage these differences and maintain a unified stance against Western influence. This ability to navigate internal complexities while pursuing common goals highlights the adaptability and resilience of their strategic partnership. The Russia-China partnership in the 21st century represents a significant and strategic alignment aimed at challenging U.S. hegemony and reconfiguring the global order. Through diplomatic coordination, economic cooperation, and military collaboration, both nations work to advance their interests and reshape the international system to reflect their strategic priorities. As they continue to strengthen their relationship, Russia and China are poised to play a pivotal role in the evolution of global geopolitics, driving efforts to establish a multipolar world that diminishes Western dominance and better aligns with their shared vision for international relations.

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