

DUAL COUNTER-DETERRENCE: EVALUATING THE IMPLICATIONS OF A FORMALIZED NUCLEAR ALLIANCE BETWEEN CHINA AND RUSSIA

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The balance of power among the three main nuclear powers is shifting as a result of tactical and strategic military decisions made by the U.S., China and Russia. The U.S. economic and political expansion in Europe and the Indo-Pacific presents simultaneous threats to both China and Russia. In response to these perceived threats, China and Russia are increasingly strengthening their bilateral strategic relations. This study seeks to examine the potential prospects of establishing a formal military alliance between China and Russia, with a particular focus on the nuclear domain. It answers the questions about how the nuclear alliance between Moscow and Beijing could change the balance of power, what it would mean for both states, their rivals and the international system as a whole. The methodology used in the research is based on an empirical collection of evidence from previous works on the theme, which were structured using SWOT analysis categories. After interpreting the result of the study, it was found out that neither Moscow, nor Beijing needs to form a nuclear alliance with one another, but if prerequisites for this occur, they would most likely be linked to the possibility of direct nuclear threat from the U.S. as a result of a strategic miscalculation. Thus, the alliance would be based on those conditions that would arise once Russia starts strategically supporting China or vice versa, in response to nuclear threat from Washington and its allies. However, both countries must maintain and strengthen their strategic nuclear cooperation in order to effectively demonstrate their ability to deter the U.S. and maintain their positions in the international arena.

Keywords: Russia, China, the U.S., alliances, nuclear capabilities, balance of power, SWOT analysis.

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**ДВОЙНОЕ КОНТРСДЕРЖИВАНИЕ:
АНАЛИЗ ПЕРСПЕКТИВ СОЗДАНИЯ ФОРМАЛИЗОВАННОГО
ЯДЕРНОГО АЛЬЯНСА МЕЖДУ КИТАЕМ И РОССИЕЙ**

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Баланс сил между тремя основными ядерными державами меняется в результате тактических и стратегических военных решений, принятых США, Китаем и Россией. Экономическая и политическая экспансия США в Европе и Индо-Тихоокеанском регионе представляет одновременные угрозы как Китаю, так и России. В ответ на эти воспринимаемые угрозы Китай и Россия все больше укрепляют свои двусторонние стратегические отношения. Это исследование стремится изучить потенциальные перспективы создания формального военного союза между Китаем и Россией, уделяя особое внимание ядерной сфере. Оно отвечает на вопросы о том, как ядерное сближение между Москвой и Пекином может изменить баланс сил. То есть, что это будет означать для обоих государств, их соперников и международной системы в целом. Методология, используемая в исследовании, основана на эмпирическом сборе доказательств из предыдущих работ по теме, которые были структурированы с использованием категорий SWOT-анализа. После интерпретации результатов исследования выяснилось, что ни Москве, ни Пекину не необходимо формировать стратегический ядерный альянс друг с другом, но если предпосылки для этого возникнут, то они, скорее всего, будут связаны с возможностью прямой ядерной угрозы со стороны США в результате стратегического просчета. Таким образом, альянс будет формироваться на основе обстоятельств, которые возникнут, когда Россия начнет оказывать стратегическую поддержку Китаю, или наоборот. При этом в обоих случаях – как ответ на ядерную угрозу со стороны Вашингтона и его союзников. В то же время обе страны должны укреплять свое ядерное стратегическое сотрудничество, чтобы продемонстрировать свою способность сдерживать США и сохранять свои позиции на международной арене.

Ключевые слова: Россия, Китай, США, альянсы, ядерные возможности, баланс сил, SWOT-анализ.

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INTRODUCTION

The most recent American nuclear strategy focuses on addressing what are identified as dual sources of threats in two distinct theaters of conflict. According to the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review¹, these threats emanate simultaneously from Russia and China, posing challenges to the American leadership on the global arena. As a result, in 2024, we saw the deployment of U.S. medium- and short-range missiles in Denmark² and the Philippines³ which served as a message to China and Russia that political conditions on the international arena have already changed, and, accordingly, the leverages of maintaining Washington's position in the international system are adapting to the new circumstances. Background for the previously mentioned situation could be considered the collapse of the arms control system in recent decades, especially after the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM), Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) and Open Skies (OST) treaties. The culmination of this process was Russia's suspension of its participation in the New START, a move justified by 'the U.S. alleged major violation of the treaty'⁴. While Moscow stated it would continue to honor the agreement until its expiration in 2026, there are no prospects for a new treaty to replace it, creating uncertainty in the strategic realm. In this context, Russia took an additional step by establishing a de facto and de jure nuclear alliance with another nuclear power, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The two nations signed a treaty that includes mutual provision of military assistance in the event of an armed conflict⁵. As stated in Article 4 of the agreement: 'If one of the parties finds itself in a state of war due to an armed attack by one or more states, the other party will immediately provide it with military assistance by all means at its disposal...'

Turning to the relationship between China and Russia, both nations continued conducting joint strategic bomber patrols in recent years. In 2024 the scope of these joint strategic flights became more proximal to the Alaskan region, signaling both countries' disapproval of perceived challenges to strategic stability and their readiness to address potential threats accordingly⁶. Simultaneously, senior officials from both sides have already expressed their intent to further deepen ties between both countries' armed forces⁷.

This raises the question of whether a formal nuclear alliance between China and Russia is possible. Accordingly, this study seeks to evaluate the potential benefits associated with the formation of such an alliance. Many researchers address the possibility of a military and political alliance between Beijing and Moscow, with some offering positive views and others expressing skepticism. However, only a limited number of studies explore in detail the specific conditions under which such an alliance might form, along with the potential prospects and risks for both nations and their international competitors. Even fewer examine these aspects from a perspective of nuclear strategy. This study aims to address the latter issue in detail.

Since the mid-Cold War, China and Russia's diplomatic and military relations have undergone changes. After a period of hostility since late 1950s and early 1960s, their ties began to improve during the M. Gorbachev years, and tensions continued to ease following the Ukraine crisis. In recent times, the two countries have enhanced their cooperation in nuclear deterrence, raising speculation about the possibility of a closer alliance, though no formal military partnership has

¹ 2022 Nuclear Posture Review. Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation. 07.10.2022. Available at: <https://armscontrolcenter.org/2022-nuclear-posture-review/> (accessed 07.09.2024).

² Совещание с постоянными членами Совета Безопасности. Президент России. 28.06.2024. Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/security-council/74437> (accessed 07.09.2024).

³ Judson J. US Army Deploys Midrange Missile for First Time in Philippines. *Defense News*, 16.04.2024. Available at: <https://www.defense-news.com/land/2024/04/16/us-army-deploys-midrange-missile-for-first-time-in-philippines/> (accessed 26.04.2025).

⁴ О российско-американском Договоре о СНВ и ситуации, приведшей к решению о приостановлении его действия. МИД РФ. 20.04.2023. Available at: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/1413415/ (accessed 23.01.2025).

⁵ Договор о всеобъемлющем стратегическом партнерстве между РФ и КНДР. Гарант. 19.06.2024. Available at: <https://base.garant.ru/409304598/> (accessed 23.01.2025).

⁶ Sonne P. Russia and China Carry out First Joint Bomber Patrol Near Alaska. *The New York Times*, 25.07.2024. Available at: <https://www.ny-times.com/2024/07/25/world/asia/russia-and-china-carry-out-first-joint-bomber-patrol-near-alaska.html> (accessed 25.04.2025).

⁷ Министр обороны РФ Андрей Белоусов провел встречу с заместителем председателя Центрального военного совета КНР. Минобороны России. 10.10.2024. Available at: https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12533073@egNews (accessed 23.01.2025).

materialized [1]. The potential for a Sino-Russian military alliance has been a topic of intense scholarly interest in the recent decade. Perspectives on this issue generally fall into three main categories: some argue that a full-fledged alliance is unlikely to materialize, others contend that an informal alliance is already taking shape but will not progress into a formal one, and a third group believes a formal alliance is probable in the future.

A segment of the scholarly literature disputes the likelihood of a full-scale Sino-Russian alliance. P. Bolt was an early advocate for this position, which was later supported by V. Pecherica [2; 3]. More recent publications by D. Stefanovich⁸ and A. Kireeva have further bolstered this argument, adding that there is a lack of conditions on the international arena for such an alliance to be formed [4]. J. Nye also shares this view, mentioning that the mistrust between Beijing and Moscow is the main obstacle for both in establishing a close military relationship [5]. Additionally, K. Kuzmina, A. Larionova and V. Morozov lend their support to this perspective, arguing that it is not in Russia's interest to limit its autonomy by entering into a formal strategic alliance with China [6]. More recent publications by S. Loftus continue to challenge the possibility of a comprehensive alliance, claiming that both states would not be able to negotiate on every aspect of a potential alliance [7]. Broadly speaking, this school of thought highlights negative factors such as historical distrust, conflicting regional ambitions, along with potential economic and political costs of a formal alliance as key reasons why a proper Sino-Russian alliance is unlikely.

A second group of scholars posits that while a formal alliance may not exist, there is evidence of an informal alliance between China and Russia. This perspective was initially proposed by Director of the Berlin branch of the Carnegie center (hereinafter the activity of the Carnegie Center is recognized as undesirable by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation) A. Gabuev (recognized in the Russian Federation as a foreign agent) as he suggested the concept of a 'soft' alliance, which has gained traction in various forms in recent years [8]. N. Chang-Liao has contributed to this view additionally expressing his opinion on the high probability of status quo in the close Sino-Russian relations in the future [9]. Scholars such as D. Trenin, K. Asmolov and B. Babaev offer the term 'coalition' and 'entente' as the most prominent definition of the current relations between Beijing and Moscow [10; 11]. A. Naumenko and S. Saltanov provide additional backing for the concept of a 'quasi-alliance' [12]. Overall, supporters of this perspective frequently highlight enhanced military collaboration, shared diplomatic positions on numerous global matters and strengthening economic connections as indicators of this informal alliance.

The third perspective in the literature suggests that a complete Sino-Russian alliance is not only possible but likely. This view has gained prominence in recent years, with Karaganov being its early advocate [13]. A. Korolev has been a consistent proponent of this perspective, with multiple publications supporting the stance that China and Russia are increasingly moving towards becoming formal allies [14; 15; 16]. A.L. Lukin has provided additional support for this view, stating that international crises, such as the spread of the coronavirus, are likely to have a positive impact on the relations between the two countries in the coming years [17]. S. Trush reinforces this position, mentioning that China and Russia may be forced to form an alliance in response to a possible strategic miscalculation by the United States – for example, if Washington takes aggressive action or makes a mistake in a strategic confrontation, similar to the one that almost led to a catastrophe during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 [18]. More recent contributions by A. Kuzycina argue that while earlier the majority of political scientists were skeptical about the likelihood of a China-Russia alliance, the rapidly changing situation has led to increasingly substantive discussions on the matter [19]. B. Carlson and R. Meyer zum Felde have further addressed the potential danger of such an emerging alliance to the Western World [1; 20], highlighting the growing prominence of this academic discourse in Western countries. Summing up, researchers in this category often emphasize the growing strategic rapprochement between China and Russia, their shared opposition to U.S. hegemony, and the increasing frequency and sophistication of joint military exercises as indicators of a trajectory toward a formal alliance.

While there is no consensus, the ongoing debate reflects the complexity and significance of this geopolitical relationship. Further research is needed to continue monitoring and analyzing

⁸ Stefanovich D. *Can Russia Help China Counter Missile Threats?* Russian International Affairs Council. 08.10.2019. Available at: <https://russian-council.ru/en/analitics-and-comments/interview/can-russia-help-china-counter-missile-threats/> (accessed 11.09.2024).

the evolving dynamics between these two major powers, especially in terms of nuclear strategy. Considering the three distinct schools of thought, this research aims to assess the likelihood of a military alliance by factoring the different aspects of nuclear cooperation between China and Russia. Article's central argument posits that the alliance between Russia and China would demonstrate increased nuclear collaboration and military effectiveness in direct confrontation with the U.S., thereby showcasing its full potential. Conversely, in non-confrontational scenarios, the lack of a formal nuclear alliance between Russia and China will lead to restricted cooperative efforts, primarily due to the risks of destabilizing global geopolitical dynamics, significant reputational costs and potential impacts on strategic stability within the Moscow-Beijing-Washington triangle.

This study employs a composite methodology, primarily utilizing qualitative analytical methods mixed with SWOT analysis classification approach. It bases on the empirical collection and categorization of data derived from various scientific, publicistic and institutional resources. In this context, implementing SWOT analysis as a framework for organizing the gathered data enables the exploration of both the limitations and strengths associated with a potential nuclear alliance between China and Russia, as well as highlighting the prospects of its realization. This perspective contrasts with the skeptical view held by some scholars, who argue that risks and perspectives are distinct categories that should be analyzed independently of one another. A key point of SWOT analysis is its requirement to systematically identify and evaluate both the challenges and risks alongside the benefits and opportunities related to the subject matter. This approach provides a broad understanding of the study's topic and enables the formation of more objective conclusions. Each category implies certain meaning. **Strengths** denote the conditions favoring the establishment of a formal nuclear coalition. **Weaknesses** represent the barriers that hinder the formation of such a coalition. **Threats** outline the costs that emerge from the establishment of a formal nuclear coalition. **Opportunities** describe the benefits that both countries gain from the formation of a formal nuclear coalition. In this sense, Strengths and Weaknesses relate to internal factors within the nuclear alliance, whereas Opportunities and Threats are presented as external ones.

CONDITIONS AND BARRIERS SHAPING SINO-RUSSIAN STRATEGIC COOPERATION

Beginning with this section of the analysis it should be noted that both countries could be considered natural allies⁹. By natural allies we mean countries with common political styles of ruling and similar views on foreign policy issues. Similarly, neither country is trying to impose its ideological principles on the other one [12]. This can partially explain the difference in the situation with each country's individual relations with the U.S.

According to S. Loftus the Sino-Russian natural alliance is defined by a shared understanding of state sovereignty under international law, mutual concerns about the destabilizing influence of liberal ideologies and a commitment to promoting the idea of diverse civilizations and regional governance models in global affairs [7]. Traditionally, Western discourse regards the political structures of Russia and China as near-identical. It presumes that this alignment extends to both domestic policies, characterized by relatively centralized political ruling, and foreign policies that are conservative and driven by *realpolitik*¹⁰. A key focus of their cooperation lies in opposing perceived threats from U.S. military and economic expansion in the Indo-Pacific region, including the deployment of strategic military systems and the strengthening of alliances. Central to this partnership and relevant to this study, is their shared common interest in condemning the deployment of theater missile defense systems, which they argue undermine the security of other states [1].

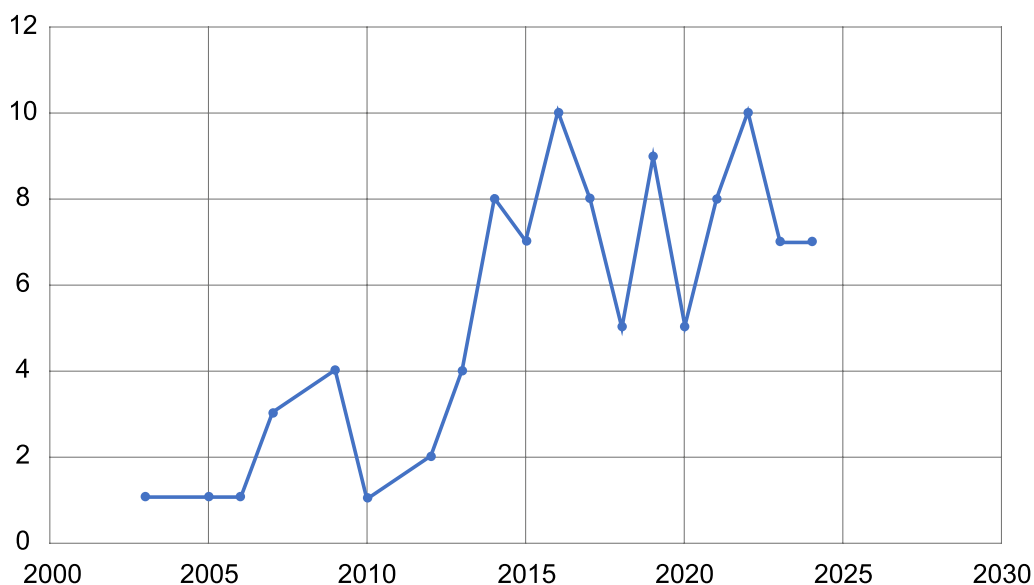
⁹ Bruce W. North Korea, Russia and China: The Developing Trilateral Imperialist Partnership. RAND Corporation. 13.09.2023. Available at: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/09/north-korea-russia-and-china-the-developing-trilateral.html> (accessed 13.09.2024). The activity of the non-profit research organization RAND Corporation is considered undesirable by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The high degree of political, military and technical cooperation between China and Russia is another factor to consider. This collaboration is evident in the regular joint military exercises that have taken place since 2003, peaking notably in 2007, 2014, 2016 and 2022 (Figure 1). The increasing frequency of such exercises between China and Russia reflects changing geopolitical dynamics. This shift can be traced back to 2007, when President V. Putin's Munich Security Conference speech called for the transition to multipolar world order. Around the same time, China and Russia began strengthening their ties in the arms trade sphere¹¹. The 2014 Ukrainian crisis prompted Russia to further enhance its partnership with China, leading to more frequent military exercises. Between 2016 and 2022, tensions over Taiwan, particularly after President Tsai Ing-wen's rejection of the 'one country, two systems' model, contributed to closer military cooperation, alongside the U.S.–China trade conflict [21]. By 2022, the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict and the broader geopolitical standoff with the West resulted in a notable increase in military coordination between Russia and China.

Russia also remains China's primary partner in maintaining close diplomatic contacts, particularly through frequent bilateral meetings between leaders (Figure 2). In October 2024, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov emphasized that military and military-technical cooperation between Moscow and Beijing is progressing rapidly¹². Both countries continue to engage in joint military exercises, conduct air and sea patrols, and cooperate along their shared border. Russian Foreign Minister also stated in September 2024 that Russia and China do not require a NATO-style military alliance, as their bilateral military cooperation is already effective. According to this position, the Sino-Russian partnership operates on a foundation of trust, effectively constituting a de facto alliance without the need for formalization¹³.

Figure 1. Number of Joint Military Exercises Between China and Russia (Bilateral and Multilateral)



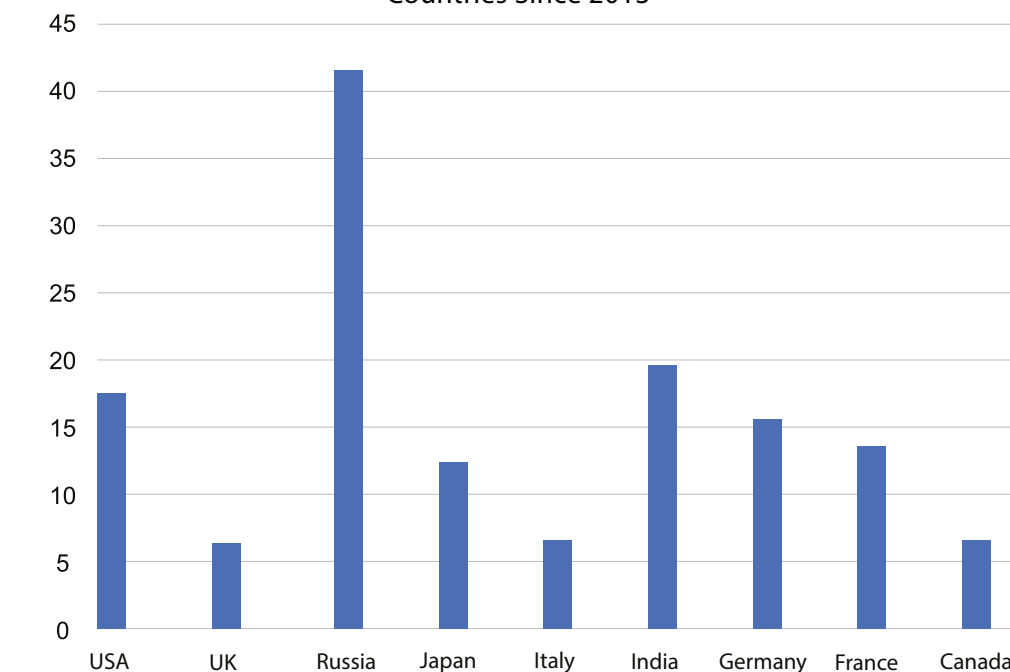
Data source: compiled by the author based on CSIS data¹⁴.

¹¹ How Deep Are China-Russia Military Ties? CSIS. 07.08.2024. Available at: <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-russia-military-cooperation-arms-sales-exercises/> (accessed 23.01.2025). Hereinafter the activity of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is recognized by the Ministry of Justice as undesirable in Russia.

¹² Россия и Китай: партнерство и дружба, закаленные временем. *Российская газета*, 03.10.2024. Available at: <https://rg.ru/2024/10/03/rossiya-i-kitaj-partnerstvo-i-druzha-zakalennye-vremenem.html> (accessed 17.09.2024).

¹³ Москва и Пекин не нуждаются в военном альянсе, заявил Лавров. *РИА Новости*, 20.09.2024. Available at: <https://ria.ru/20240920/lavrov-1973917761.html> (accessed 18.09.2024).

¹⁴ China–Russia Joint Military Exercises. CSIS. 07.08.2024. Available at: <https://chinapower.csis.org/data/china-russia-joint-military-exercises/> (accessed 23.09.2024).

Figure 2. Number of One-On-One Meetings Between Xi Jinping and Leaders of Selected Countries Since 2013

Data source: compiled by the author based on CSIS data¹⁵.

The author, along with other scholars, attributes the intensification of China-Russia cooperation in recent years to mutual agreements that ease decision-making processes for both nations' leadership—including on whether to maintain or limit strategic cooperation [14]. Notable examples include the non-aggression agreement, together with the commitment not to initiate the use of nuclear weapons against one another, formulated in the 1st and 2nd articles of the 2001 Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship¹⁶. Similarly, the joint declaration on 'No Limits Cooperation'¹⁷ highlights the absence of 'forbidden areas of cooperation' between China and Russia.

The establishment of strategic partnerships serves as a critical foundation for forming alliances among nations, should they choose to pursue this path in the future [15]. While this consistency may apply to some extent in the case of Chinese-Russian relations, it is not applicable to Russia's other strategic partnerships. China and Russia are facing opposition from the U.S., leading to a closer alignment between the two, while the situations with, for example, India and Vietnam are more complex. This complexity arises from both countries having simultaneous strategic ties not only with Russia but also with the U.S. Additionally, the foreign policies of India and Vietnam are influenced by factors like India's new non-alignment policy¹⁸ and Vietnam's shared position with Washington on the need to counter China's ambitions in the South China Sea¹⁹. Therefore, the China-Russia relationship stands out as a more distinct case.

¹⁵ *Series: China-Russia Relations*. CSIS. 09.11.2023. Available at: <https://chinapower.csis.org/series-china-russia-relations/> (accessed 23.09.2024).

¹⁶ *Договор о добрососедстве, дружбе и сотрудничестве между Российской Федерацией и Китайской Народной Республикой*. Президент России. 16.07.2001. Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/3418> (accessed 23.01.2025).

¹⁷ *Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development*. President of Russia. 04.02.2022. Available at: <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770> (accessed 25.09.2024).

¹⁸ *Non-Alignment Is Still India's Foreign Policy Alignment*. *Deccan Herald*, 29.09.2023. Available at: <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/non-alignment-is-still-indias-foreign-policy-alignment-2706058> (accessed 23.01.2025).

¹⁹ *An Indispensable Upgrade: The U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*. CSIS. 19.08.2024. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/indispensable-upgrade-us-vietnam-comprehensive-strategic-partnership> (accessed 23.01.2025).

From a historical perspective, several strategic partnerships have evolved into formal alliances, with the example of the relationships among the United States, France and Germany before and after the formation of NATO. While some critics argue that the circumstances surrounding NATO's expansion post-World War II were unique, it is important to highlight that the current block dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region closely resemble those of the Cold War era, during which two military-political blocs vied for dominance in the ideological conflict between communism and capitalism. The key distinction today lies in the shift of ideological frameworks from communism to 'authoritarianism' and from capitalism to 'democracy', as articulated in U.S. National Security Strategy²⁰. As A. L. Lukin emphasizes in his study China, Russia and North Korea are currently informally working to balance the alliance-building efforts among Japan, South Korea and the United States [22].

Another prerequisite for the formation of a nuclear coalition between China and Russia is the concept of 'double counteraction to double deterrence'²¹. This notion was introduced by the foreign ministers of both nations in April 2024, possibly signaling the intent for an active bilateral nuclear defense coalition aimed solely at countering potential offensive nuclear actions from the countries that threaten the establishment of a multipolar world order. In this context, the U.S. emerges as the primary actor attempting to counter this shift in favor of maintaining its unipolar hegemony. Therefore, a possible nuclear defense alliance is predicated on the understanding that it would only be operational in response to a possible nuclear threat from the U.S. Notably, this framework does not account for regional conflicts of either Russia or China, thereby allowing each nation to remain independent from obligations to address the other's regional disputes. This arrangement effectively counters some of the arguments against the formation of an alliance, as neither Russia nor China is inclined to engage in the regional conflicts of one another.

In recent decades, the expanding military capabilities of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly the strengthening alliances and military deployments, have contributed to a strategic alignment between China and Russia. Washington has already positioned intermediate-range missiles in locations such as the Philippines and Denmark, while enhancing and expanding its global anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system²². Concurrently, previous American administrations have focused on maintaining and strengthening the network of regional alliances. Considering this, a recent study by A. Kydd posits that as one of the countries in the U.S-China-Russia triangle becomes more powerful, the motivation for the other two to resolve their differences increases [23]. Therefore, despite the existing contradictions in Sino-Russian relations, which will be addressed further in the study, the possibility of reaching a compromise between them appears to be growing.

A significant indication of the growing foundation for a potential nuclear coalition between Russia and China is their joint statement issued on May 8, 2025, commemorating the 80th anniversary of Victory in World War II. In this statement, both parties reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening global strategic stability, jointly addressing emerging challenges and threats in relevant domains, and emphasized the importance of comprehensively considering all key factors affecting international strategic stability²³. Of particular note is the fact that Moscow and Beijing once again expressed their shared concerns regarding the deployment of medium- and shorter-range missiles, as well as components of missile defense systems, in close proximity to their respective borders.

²⁰ National Security Strategy. The White House. 2022. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf> (accessed 26.09.2024).

²¹ Совместная пресс-конференция Сергея Лаврова с Министром иностранных дел КНР Ван И по итогам переговоров. Посольство России в Китае. 09.04.2024. Available at: https://beijing.mid.ru/ru/news/sovместnaya_press_konferentsiya_sergeya_lavrova_s_ministrom_inostrannykh_del_knr_van_i_po_itogam_per/ (accessed 28.09.2024).

²² Губин А. Современные планы США в сфере создания национальной противоракетной обороны: преломление для Восточной Азии. Российский совет по международным делам. 26.04.2024. Available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/sovremennye-plany-ssha-v-sfere-sozdaniya-natsionalnoy-protivoraketnoy-oborony-prelomlenie-dlya-vosto/> (accessed 29.09.2024).

²³ Совместное заявление РФ и КНР о дальнейшем углублении отношений всеобъемлющего партнерства и стратегического взаимодействия. Президент России. 08.05.2025. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/6309> (accessed 08.05.2025).

It is important to recognize that the nuclear alignment between China and Russia may be also influenced by the shift in Washington's perception regarding China. No longer viewed solely as an economic competitor, the U.S. now believes that Beijing²⁴ is actively enhancing its nuclear capabilities with the goal of reaching 1000 operational nuclear warheads by 2030²⁵. This evolving perspective is contributing to the perception of China as a strategic threat.

The most important factor to consider when analyzing Russian-Chinese cooperation is the geographic location of both countries. The length of their common border is 4,209 km. Such a huge distance dictates the need for a reliable zone of mutual guarantees, ensuring internal security in the event of a potential military conflict [11]. In addition, D. Madiyarova and Wu Shuai point to the well-developed and constantly improving transport infrastructure connecting the two countries [24]. This fact gives reason to believe that in the event of a strategic military conflict, it could become a key element of the logistics system.

The cordial personal ties between the heads of state of Russia and China could facilitate the ongoing strategic alignment between the two nations [20]. The leaders exhibit similar governing styles, further united by shared long-term vision, mutual personal affinity and even comparable age [17]. This emphasis on personal diplomacy as an approach to interstate interaction, especially on themes such as nuclear strategic cooperation, could prove its effectiveness in two different ways. First, it facilitates direct communication between leaders, enabling them to discuss issues and make mutual decisions without the involvement of lower-level officials or intermediaries. Second, it underscores the personal relationships and trust which sometimes can break negotiation deadlocks or enhance cooperation between states as a whole.

Despite the growing political, military and economic cooperation between Russia and China, several barriers remain that complicate the potential for a formalized nuclear alliance between the two nations. One key issue is the divergence in their regional priorities and the differing nature of their relationships with the U.S.

Russia is reluctant to engage in disputes in the East and South China Seas, while China prefers to avoid involvement in the complexities of Eastern Europe [1; 4]. Likewise, each state has a slightly different relationship with the U.S. On the one side, China wants to avoid any sanctions, whether they are primary or secondary, because of the economic and reputational risks they bear²⁶. Such could be imposed by Western countries in case China decides to step into a formal nuclear coalition with Russia. In contrast, Russia is already under sanctions, so forming an alliance with China wouldn't have a significant effect on its economic situation.

However, a problem for Russia is the fact that it is not interested in the unilateral strengthening of China and its growing nuclear potential, as this could pose a threat in the future [1; 2]. Additionally, Russia is afraid of becoming too reliant on China, due to differences in their economic potentials [4]. A formal alignment between the two of them would raise the question of leadership that arises with the formation of a formal alliance and its internal hierarchy.

When analyzing the prospects for the formation of a nuclear alliance between China and Russia, experts express concerns about the possible limitation of the sovereignty of both countries within the framework of such a union

²⁴ Biden Approved Secret Nuclear Strategy Refocusing on Chinese Threat. *The New York Times*, 20.08.2024. Available at: <https://www.ny-times.com/2024/08/20/us/politics/biden-nuclear-china-russia.html> (accessed 30.09.2024).

²⁵ Pentagon Says Chinese Nuclear Arsenal Still Growing. Arms Control Association. January–February 2025. Available at: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-01/news/pentagon-says-chinese-nuclear-arsenal-still-growing> (accessed 24.01.2025).

²⁶ Sher N. Why Isn't China Going All out to Help Russia in Ukraine? *Responsible Statecraft*, 04.04.2022. Available at: <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/04/04/why-isnt-china-going-all-out-to-help-russia-in-ukraine/> (accessed 30.09.2024).

In exploring the prospect of a nuclear coalition between China and Russia, experts express concerns regarding a possible constraint on each party's sovereignty within the alliance [3; 4; 10]. As both nations aim to establish a strategic partnership, they must carefully navigate their respective autonomy. Maintaining a delicate equilibrium in responsibilities and rights is essential for ensuring a functional and cohesive coalition, especially when facing external threats, posed by other international actors. NATO's decision-making structure, particularly regarding nuclear deterrence, reflects a real hierarchical balance of power among members, with the United States retaining its status as *primus inter pares*. Without a clear hierarchy within joint strategic armed forces, the decision-making process becomes protracted, leading to uncoordinated actions by one or more parties involved. Recently, the increased frequency of joint military exercises between China and Russia, involving coordinated command structures, might be understood as a mean of assessing and calibrating the compatibility between their armed forces.

Presumably, if all conditions for the creation of such an alliance become favorable, a lengthy negotiation process will be needed to finalize the coalition agreement. This agreement must outline all the terms and obligations for each party, which will require finding a compromise. Some researchers, as J. Nye, note the possible difficulty of coordinating the competing national ideologies of China and Russia as an obstacle to further military cooperation in the strategic sphere [5, p. 126]. Other authors even argue that it is naive to believe that Beijing and Russia will be close to agreeing on every military-strategic aspect [7].

An alliance would directly contradict China's non-bloc and non-alignment pledges which are still part of Beijing's official doctrine [17]. As reaffirmed by President Xi Jinping in June 2024, China upholds the principle of 'opposing bloc confrontation' as outlined in the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' and enshrined in the Chinese constitution²⁷. Consequently, establishing an alliance with Russia would be interpreted as an effort to form a defense triangle between Beijing, Moscow and Pyongyang, positioned against the competing bloc of South Korea, Japan and the United States. Since 1964 China has also been one of the few countries to accept the doctrine of No First Use²⁸. Russia on the other hand renounced the concept after the fall of the USSR. Thus, a potential alliance in the nuclear sphere would mean that Beijing would have to change the doctrinal limitations for using its nuclear weapons.

Last but not least by declaring the existence of a dual 'danger' coming from China and Russia, the U.S. presents the concept of a common for the international community global threat which strengthens its network of allies and also unites the international society against Moscow and Beijing²⁹ [25; 26]. In this way, Washington conveys its own vision on the current international reality, offering the world an agenda that benefits itself and its national security interests. Understanding this strategy of the U.S. global discourse, Russia and China would not publicly state an official united front against the U.S. in the strategic sphere, in order for such a strategy to prove and remain ineffective.

²⁷ В Пекине прошло торжественное собрание по случаю 70-летия провозглашения "Пяти принципов мирного сосуществования". Си Цзиньпин выступил с важной речью. Посольство КНР в РФ. 28.06.2024. Available at: http://ru.china-embassy.gov.cn/rus/zqgw/202406/t20240630_11444664.htm (accessed 24.01.2025).

²⁸ Why a Substantive and Verifiable No-First-Use Treaty for Nuclear Weapons Is Possible. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 04.06.2024. Available at: <https://thebulletin.org/2024/06/why-a-substantive-and-verifiable-no-first-use-treaty-of-nuclear-weapons-is-possible/> (accessed 02.10.2024).

²⁹ Weaver G., Woolf A. *Requirements for Nuclear Deterrence and Arms Control in a Two-Nuclear-Peer Environment*. Atlantic Council. 02.02.2024. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/requirements-for-nuclear-deterrence-and-arms-control-in-a-two-peer-nuclear-peer-environment/#about> (accessed 04.10.2024). Hereinafter the activity of the Atlantic Council is recognized as undesirable by the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation.

STRATEGIC GAINS, POTENTIAL COSTS AND GLOBAL CONSEQUENCES

Key opportunity for both nations lies in establishing a two-front defensive nuclear alliance. Such an alliance could balance the U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy in two key theaters of military operations, which has been repeatedly noted by experts in recent years³⁰ [20]. As D. Trenin notes, such coalition has the potential to diminish U.S. influence across the eastern, western and southern regions of Eurasia, either by restraining American forces in those areas or by compelling them to disperse their resources along the entire front [10].

Concurrently, the combined nuclear stockpiles of China and Russia represent the largest arsenal of nuclear weapons globally, surpassing³¹ that of NATO. Together, these two powers possess enough number of nuclear warheads to alter the balance of power inside the Russia-China-U.S. strategic tirangle³² [27]. The analysis suggests that such a coalition would present a challenge to the military superiority of the U.S. and would hinder American expansion efforts by necessitating the development of new deterrence strategies and increasing military spending.

By analogy, since both Russia and China are developing their capabilities for midcourse interception of ICBMs³³, a joint air defense, anti-ballistic and early-warning system appears promising as an area of cooperation.³⁴ Nuclear cooperation could be furthered in the sphere of strategic missile defense, hypersonic technology and the construction of nuclear submarines.³⁵ Lastly, China would benefit from gaining access to Russia's military technologies and energy resources for civil and military purposes [15]. All this could lead to a reduction in the economic costs associated with the expenditures on deterrence. Similar initiatives have already taken place among AUKUS members and the U.S. in 2024, involving trilateral flight tests of hypersonic technologies with a pooled funding approach³⁶. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, these campaigns aim to accelerate testing and leverage the combined resources of the member states.

While such cooperation in the nuclear domain is viewed as a potential threat to the Beijing-Moscow-Washington formation, it could ensure peaceful coexistence between China and Russia, ultimately reinforcing their economic relations and maintaining a stable balance of power between the two as a separate part of the triangle [2]. As we can observe, economic ties are steadily growing, with Russia-China trade volumes showing consistent increases in the last few years³⁷. This trend is closely linked to rising international tensions, which have contributed to the deepening political alignment between Moscow and Beijing.

Based on this, the nuclear alliance between China and Russia offers bilateral benefits, such as the expansion of strategic cooperation and a stronger stance against U.S. expansion. However, it also comes with costs. This partnership could trigger an arms

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *Status Of World Nuclear Forces*. Federation of American Scientists. 29.03.2024. Available at: <https://fas.org/initiative/status-world-nuclear-forces/> (accessed 05.10.2024).

³² Weaver G., Woolf A. Op. cit.

³³ Mezey J. *Russian and Chinese Strategic Missile Defense: Doctrine, Capabilities, and Development*. Atlantic Council. 10.09.2024. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/russian-and-chinese-strategic-missile-defense-doctrine-capabilities-and-development/> (accessed 05.10.2024).

³⁴ Kashin V. *Tacit Alliance: Russia and China Take Military Partnership to New Level*. Carnegie Endowment. 22.10.2019. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2019/10/tacit-alliance-russia-and-china-take-military-partnership-to-new-level?lang=en> (accessed 05.10.2024).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *AUKUS Partners Sign Landmark Hypersonics Agreement*. U.S. Department of Defense. 18.10.2024. Available at: <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3966986/aukus-partners-sign-landmark-hypersonics-agreement/> (accessed 24.01.2025).

³⁷ Цыплаков С. *Об основных трендах развития торговли России и Китая*. Российский совет по международным делам. 13.09.2024. Available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/ob-osnovnykh-trendakh-razvitiya-torgovli-rossii-i-kitaya/> (accessed 24.01.2025).

race with the United States, leading to increased global tensions and complicating arms control efforts. At the same time, the risks of nuclear crisis increase as the international strategic order transforms.

The risk of an accelerated arms race as a result of the security dilemma arises as the balance of military power between NATO, Russia and China changes. Should this trend emerge, the USA will most likely take on a strategy of outnumbering the Sino-Russian combined nuclear capabilities or/and of qualitatively improving its nuclear arsenal [1; 28]. Such a combination of circumstances would involve the three countries in an economically costly competition for building strategic military capabilities, similar to that during the Cold War. Moreover, a formal nuclear coalition would strengthen mutual trust between China and Russia at the expense of strategic stability in relations with the U.S. This shift will eventually lead to a more adversarial environment, where arms control negotiations become more difficult to carry out due to heightened suspicions and a lack of confidence in each party's intentions.

Accordingly, it is worth noting that such coalition creates strategic risks for all competitors within the Russia-China-U.S. triangle [11]. Another danger arises from the possibility of destabilization and potential conflict as a result of the rapprochement between China and Russia in the nuclear sphere. As China and Russia continue to strengthen strategic ties, including the possibility of forming a nuclear entente, the balance of power will alter in a way which directly jeopardizes U.S. interests. The U.S. would have a fair reason to continue deploying its nuclear capabilities close to the borders of Russia and China. Consequently, such a shift could provoke tensions reminding of the Caribbean missile crisis, when the world once stood on the brink of nuclear conflict.

DISCUSSION

The findings enhance our understanding of the relationships among the three nuclear-armed countries who are currently possessing the largest strategic capabilities. According to the analysis, current conditions allow us to consider the possibility of a strengthening military-nuclear cooperation between the two countries. Spheres of cooperation that could be broadened include new technologies and joint strategic security systems. However, it is important to address such problems as the ambiguity surrounding the internal hierarchy of the perspective alliance and the potential threat of economic sanctions for China, as well as the risks associated with limiting Russia's sovereignty. An additional complication is the need to reconcile differing nuclear doctrines, which requires the development of mechanisms for their potential synchronization within the framework of a formalized union. Lastly, both sides must consider the risks of an increasing international uncertainty caused by the formation of a new nuclear alliance and likelihood of a direct confrontation.

The research does not claim to be exhaustive but it partially engages in discussions about the evolving bloc dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region, involving China, Russia and the United States. Of particular note is the resumption of dialogue between Russia and the United States, which began in 2025. Under certain conditions it could also affect the strategic balance, especially if the previous level of bilateral relations is restored. However, this development is unlikely to have a negative impact on the sustainable dynamics of the Russian-Chinese partnership, which is expected to maintain its previous trajectory. Further upgrade of the research could be based on the already conducted analysis, which emphasizes the strategic triangle of Russia, China and the U.S., but does not account for other significant actors that could broaden the scope. Notably, the nuclear capabilities of India and Pakistan, along with North Korea's close partnership with Russia, which require deeper exploration within the broader nuclear framework.

While the newly formed military alliance between Russia and North Korea may offer a relevant basis for comparison with the Russia-China case, several key differences should still be taken into account. The terms of the agreement between Russia and North Korea allow both parties to share any available resources, including nuclear weapons, which

could serve as a model for how Russia might establish similar nuclear alliances with other nations. However, it's important to recognize that North Korea's economic, military and political influence differs significantly in scale from that of larger global powers like China. Currently, the Russia-North Korea alignment has not led to significant shifts in the balance of power between the East and the West. In contrast, a Russia-China alliance would have a much more pronounced effect on the global power balance, owing to China's substantial economic strength and military capabilities.

At the same time, an essential area for examination could be the prospects of strengthening and sustaining the nuclear strategic cooperation between China and Russia in the long term. This involves developing strategies that implement cautious and less risky deterrence measures between the two nations, without committing to formal military obligations. In other words, how to create a nuclear partnership that has the characteristics of a formal alliance without actually formalizing it.

CONCLUSION

Neither of the two countries is inclined to pursue a formal military alliance within the strategic domain. Both nations harbor concerns about the potential constraints on their autonomy that such an alliance may impose. While an official nuclear partnership could enhance the national security position of each state from a strategic standpoint, it may also result in adverse consequences in the future, particularly concerning the risk of miscalculations and changes in the balance of power.

Nonetheless, the possibility of such an alliance must not be fully neglected. The formal nuclear alliance between Russia and China would most likely unleash its full potential in a direct and inevitable confrontation with the U.S., as the only state with an approximately equal nuclear arsenal. Based on this, Washington at this stage is the main adversary against which the joint deterrence of Beijing and Moscow is directed. Thus, close military-political relations are a good prerequisite for forming an alliance.

A de jure alliance between Russia and China can only be discussed once definitive actions are taken, such as Russia providing clear strategic support to China or vice versa, possibly in response to an offensive threat from Washington and its allies. However, nuclear cooperation and interaction must be maintained and further developed in order to demonstrate defensive readiness and thus deter Washington's offensive foreign policy. This is the key approach of maintaining stability within the framework of the nuclear triangle, the Indo-Pacific and in the world in general.

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