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China-Russia Security Cooperation in the 2020s:

BALANCING, WEDGING, BLOODLETTING, AND THE U.S. ROLE

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How do you conceptualize China-Russia military alignment?

East Asia is increasingly a center of security, military, and political competition. China is engaged in a major conventional and nuclear buildup, and the United States has responded by building forces to preserve its ability to defend partners and allies in the region. Both countries have expanded and deepened their partnerships, perhaps most interestingly China's partnership with Russia.

From an international relations theory perspective, however, China's deepening partnership with Russia is not surprising. The basic outline of this partnership is easy to explain, although its precise form is less predictable. Theories of balancing—internal and external—do much of the work as do wedging (an approach for separating opposing allies) and "bloodletting" (an approach for weakening an opposing state or alliance). The security dilemma, meanwhile, helps explain the intensity of the U.S.-China competition as well as some of the potential limits that China has imposed on its support of Russia.

What can IR theory explain, or fail to explain, about the nature of China-Russia alignment?

To understand China-Russia alignment, we must first address China's intense competition with the United States. Since the mid-1990s, China has dramatically improved its military forces. This modernization was made possible by China's impressive economic growth and technological advances. And from China's perspective, this buildup was required to increase its security, especially its ability to prevent Taiwan from becoming independent.

The United States, however, views China's improved capabilities as a threat to its regional allies and partners. In response, the United States has both internally balanced (i.e., built forces better suited to defeating China's) and externally balanced (i.e., deepened and expanded its alliances and partnerships with Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and others). China views these responses as threatening, which has added fuel to its own balancing behavior.

The deep source of U.S.-China competition is disagreement over Taiwan; they disagree about the political status quo. Because this is not a security dilemma, complete information about their goals would not end the competition. However, the action-reaction cycle of arming and allying does in

some ways resemble security dilemma dynamics, including signaling by both states that indicates they have more malign motives.

China's partnership with Russia, however, has not taken the form of standard balancing against power or threat. Russia and China are not planning to join each other in fighting a large conventional war against the United States. Russia's participation in a war would not add much to China's ability to fight in East Asia. In addition, Russia might well be unwilling to run the risks of joining a large conventional war against the United States, which could go nuclear along a variety of paths. Russia's interests in the region aren't large enough to warrant the risks; neither are China's in Russia's west.

Likely much more important, China and Russia are enhancing each other's military capabilities via:

- the sale of components that can be used in weapons (e.g., China's provision of microelectronics and commercial drones to Russia)
- the provision of expertise in designing and building weapons (e.g., Russia's reported transfer of information about submarine quieting)
- the sale of weapons (e.g., Russia's sale of jet engines and air defense to China; note, however that these sales long preceded the Ukraine war and have decreased as China's ability to produce advanced weapons systems has increased)
- trade that supports their economies (e.g., Russian sales of gas and oil to China, China's sale of cars to Russia)

These are not standard forms of balancing, but instead a complex type of diffuse reciprocity that is enabling increases in both countries' economics and individual military capabilities. The result is an increase in both countries' abilities to internally balance. In broad terms, this type of interaction is not unique to the China-Russia relationship. For example, throughout the Cold War the United States viewed Western Europe's economic prosperity as important to NATO's ability to maintain effective conventional forces and to the alliance's political cohesion; U.S. economic policies reflected this understanding. In the China-Russia case, the countries are more concerned with their own military potential than with their joint military capability.

Although Russia and China have declared that their partnership has "no limits," it clearly does. Although China has supported Russia's military capabilities, it appears not to have provided military weapons. This likely reflects China's desire to avoid more severe economic sanctions (although their potential impact is likely reduced by the Trump administration's tariffs) and its desire to avoid further damaging its relationship with the United States, which could lead to intensified American responses to China's improving military capabilities. In a broad sense, China faces a mild security dilemma: too much support for Russia could generate U.S. reactions that leave China less secure.

We can also envision China's support of Russia as a type of bloodletting, which involves taking measures that "ensure that any war in which an adversary is involved is prolonged and deadly." In this case, China's alignment with Russia is one step removed—draining the West via Ukraine. The United States and its NATO allies have provided substantial military and economic support to Ukraine, which is a drain on their economies and, maybe more importantly, on their military stockpiles and readiness. While China is not directly interested in weakening Ukraine, by supporting Russia and thereby prolonging the war, China can increase the economic and military strain the Russia-Ukraine war imposes on the West.

The impact may not be large, however. The United States is sensitive to the drawdown of its military stockpiles and is expanding weapons production in response. As a result, the U.S. industrial base may be strengthened by its support for Ukraine. One result could be that the United States is better prepared to fight a long war over Taiwan.

A different but arguably related effect of U.S. support for Ukraine (and President Trump's interest in ending the war) has been a diversion of U.S. foreign policy attention from China to Russia. Even major powers face limits on their ability to focus on international threats. The United States is likely less preoccupied with China than it would be were it not for the Russia-Ukraine war. This in turn could reduce either the extent to which it sees China as threatening and/or the resources it devotes to countering China's military capabilities. Even if neither of these is correct, if China believes they might be true, it has an incentive to provide support that enables Russia to drag out the war.

China's support of Russia may also serve as a wedging strategy: an attempt to divide an opposing alliance, thereby increasing a state's own security and/or its ability to attack members of the opposing alliance. Wedging can be an alternative to, or a complement to, balancing—it weakens opposing capabilities, which reduces the state's need to balance internally and/or externally. By supporting Russia, China is contributing to strains in the U.S-Western Europe relationship, which in turn supports China's geopolitical interests.

One might argue that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has worked against China's interests: the invasion has revitalized the NATO alliance, with members increasing their defense spending substantially. But the war has also often created divisions between Europe and the United States. Even before the second Trump administration, U.S. support for Ukraine was periodically unreliable. Many, albeit not all, European members of NATO have more consistently supported Ukraine and have allowed the transfer of some types of weapons that the United States was unwilling to provide. Such political divides between the United States and its Western European allies could serve China's interests. Western Europe could contribute some, but not much, to a war in East Asia, so keeping Europe out of a war may not be very important to China. But China does trade substantially with Europe. Divisions between Western European countries and the United States could reduce their willingness to adopt

policies that hurt China's trade/economy. Divisions could also reduce Europe's willingness to participate in a U.S.-led trade embargo that was designed to coerce or punish China. Consequently, if China sees the continuation of the Russia-Ukraine war as sustaining and even deepening these tensions within the West, then China has yet another reason for its partnership with Russia.

On the flip side, China has an interest in the United States remaining an active member in NATO. U.S. withdrawal from Europe would free up U.S. forces, defense dollars, and attention, which could then be reallocated to East Asia. Whether the United States remains in NATO is, however, largely beyond China's influence—the alliance's future will be determined by internal American debates over its grand strategy. China may, therefore, be able to contribute to divisions within NATO without increasing the probability that the alliance will dissolve.

To round out this sketch of alignment decisions, it is useful to consider an important factor that does not directly concern security or economics: the worldviews of the partners. China and Russia view the United States as a hegemonic power that exerts too much influence on global norms and institutions. They view their alignment as providing a counterweight. They oppose liberal values—including individual rights and democratic governance—and both have authoritarian regimes that they believe will outperform the West. While geopolitical and economic interests are likely the key drivers of their alignment, their shared worldview also plays a role.

What are the implications for scholars as well as U.S./allied policymakers?

The policy implications that flow from preceding explanations of China-Russia alignment are limited because some of the actions are deeply structural; given U.S. and Chinese interests, competition is likely and cannot be greatly defused without significant changes. That said, a few points stand out:

- If the United States wants to make the deepening of its alliances less threatening to China, it should consider reducing, not increasing, the roles it asks them to play in Taiwan scenarios. By linking the alliances specifically to Taiwan, the United States makes them appear more threatening to China, shifting them from potentially defensive alliances to offensive alliances.
- If China's support for Russia is designed partly to drain Western resources, then to defeat this strategy the United States and its allies will have to give still greater priority to economic growth and increased defense spending.
- If China's support for Russia is partly a wedging strategy, the U.S. effort to defeat this strategy will require it to be an increasingly committed and consistent ally. The doubts created by the Trump administration greatly exceed any damage that China can inflict on the NATO alliance via its support for Russia's war in Ukraine.