



China-Russia Security Cooperation in the 2020s:

THE IRRELEVANCE OF TIED HANDS

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How do you conceptualize China-Russia military alignment?

China and Russia do not currently share a defense pact, which would commit them to go to war if one of them is attacked, though their [2001 treaty](#) contains non-aggression, neutrality, and consultation commitments. For that reason, I use the term “security cooperation” here rather than “alliance” to describe their relationship.

Traditional IR theories of alliance do not shed much light on thinking about contemporary China-Russia security cooperation. One established IR perspective, for instance, is that a primary function of alliances is to tie hands. States sign formal alliance treaties [committing](#) themselves to go to war and failure to abide by these agreements imposes reputation or audience costs on the treaty violator. Fear of those costs thus compels intervention in the event of war, thereby tying the hands of alliance signatories. Because tied hands in turn make the alliance commitment credible, the alliance commitment strengthens deterrence.

But this tying-hands perspective sheds little light on contemporary China-Russia security cooperation. As noted, China and Russia have not signed a defense pact committing them to go to war on behalf of each other and are unlikely to do so. Neither is threatened by a direct U.S. invasion, which would require a tight alliance bond with another power to maintain the balance of power and deterrence. That is, China and Russia in 2025 do not face the same strategic environment as did Russia and France in 1914, Britain and France in 1939, or the United States and Western Europe in 1949. Both also retain adequate second-strike nuclear forces to maintain assured destruction deterrence.

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

Even if China and Russia did sign a defense pact, such an agreement would likely include flexible language that would give each side leeway to stay out of war involving the other party without violating the treaty, skirting potential audience costs. This was a common pattern during the Cold War, when the treaties between China and the Soviet Union included language that limited the alliance commitment in a number of ways, including limiting to defensive wars only, limiting wars involving Japan, limiting to geographical parameters, and not specifying what exactly the ally was

supposed to do in the event of war. The Soviet Union used this flexibility to justify its non-involvement in China's wars with India and Vietnam, and to declare that it would stand aside in the event of nuclear war between the United States and China. The recent [Russian-North Korean alliance agreement](#) also includes such [flexibility](#).

America since 1945 has also included flexibility in all its alliances. For example, with the Philippines, the United States has used their alliance treaty's [flexible language](#) to justify staying out of minor clashes between Chinese and Philippine naval vessels.

A substantial amount of scholarship on great power military cooperation focuses on preparing for major war between great powers. Scholars draw on the experiences of World War I and World War II in particular to develop ideas of why great powers cooperate, in preparation to deter or win the next world war. Essentially, great powers [balance](#) together to fend off a potential great power aggressor, or bandwagon together to attack other great powers.

But this perspective is not helpful in thinking about China-Russia cooperation in the 2020s. A scenario in which China, Russia, or the United States individually or collectively launch a conventional major war against each other is essentially unthinkable because of geography, nuclear weapons, and other reasons. 2025 is not 1914 or 1939, when France, Russia, and Britain discussed whether and how to balance together to fend off Germany's bid for hegemony. Toting the aggregate military-industrial capabilities of China, Russia, and the United States in anticipation of who might win a (conventional) World War III—and how alliance cooperation might or might not achieve the balancing necessary to prevent World War III—does not speak to realistic 2020s conflict scenarios. Scholars and policymakers are better off devoting their energies to examining more realistic threats and possibilities.

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

Instead of focusing on tying hands functions or preparation for World War III, a different IR perspective would be more helpful in thinking about China-Russia cooperation, most notably how such cooperation might directly increase the military effectiveness and power of those two states, either fighting separately or together, for realistic conflict scenarios. To military planners, thinking about how cooperation increases military power may seem like an obvious point. But this function of alliances has been surprisingly neglected by international relations scholars, who for decades have tended to focus more on tying hands or balancing dynamics, or have focused on just aggregating the military-industrial capabilities of the cooperating states.

There has been some IR [scholarship](#) on how different forms of security cooperation can increase the military effectiveness and power of the involved states, either fighting alone or fighting together as

part of a coalition. Some of the specific means by which security cooperation can do this are as follows.

1. Trade in materials that contribute directly or indirectly to military power. Examinations of China-Russia cooperation in the 2020s, for instance, should focus on how trade could improve specific fighting capabilities for limited, realistic conflicts. There are many areas of trade that China and Russia have engaged in, and could engage in going forward, to increase their military power in fighting realistic conflict scenarios. In the face of economic sanctions from the Ukraine War, [Russia has increased its export of oil and oil products to China](#), enabling it to continue fighting Ukraine. China, in turn, has [exported drone technology to Russia](#), which is widely used in the Ukraine conflict. China has also sent [rare earth minerals to Russia](#), which are crucial for a variety of technologies. And the two states are expanding their [cooperation in artificial intelligence research](#) and in [submarine technology](#).
2. Peacetime military planning. Contemporary coalition warfare is quite complex, with belligerents needing to coordinate military strategy, coalition command, weapons interoperability, and logistical interface between forces (including language and communications). Peacetime planning, including joint military training and wargames, can substantially improve coalition fighting power in wartime, making the whole greater than the sum of the parts, which is why NATO and the U.S.-South Korea alliance have placed a premium on these priorities. The possibility of Chinese and Russian forces actually fighting alongside each other during wartime, however, is probably on the lower side, especially as combat involving Russian forces is most likely in the European theater, and combat involving Chinese forces is most likely in the South or East China Seas. Yet, in recent years, China and Russia have engaged in [dozens of joint military exercises](#), involving tens of thousands of troops, in regions ranging from the Arctic to the Mediterranean to the South Atlantic. They also have conducted [joint submarine patrols](#). These activities help each nation improve its military effectiveness for military conflicts they might engage in unilaterally, such as China preparing for naval clashes with the U.S. in the South China Sea.
3. Intelligence sharing. Intelligence about potential rivals generally pertains to capabilities and intentions. Military cooperation can provide institutional channels for states to share information about common rivals securely with each other. Intelligence-sharing with security partners such as Israel, Egypt, the Gulf States, Pakistan, and others has been an essential element in U.S. operations against terrorist groups and the Iranian nuclear program, for example. Public reports are that China and Russia currently [have more limited intelligence sharing](#). But there are opportunities for future sharing, including Russia providing to China information on the performance of Western weapons in the Ukraine conflict and China



providing information on American naval and air capabilities it learns from its South China Sea operations.

IR scholars need more theoretical and empirical work as to exactly when and how much these different degrees of joint military cooperation serve to increase military effectiveness and power. There is a surprisingly limited amount of political science research on this question, perhaps because the benefits of cooperation are so dependent on military and political context. Future scholarly work should nonetheless explore these areas, addressing theoretical and empirical questions such as:

1. When does joint peacetime military planning pay off during wartime?
2. What kinds of wartime military command are most effective?
3. When can exchanged technologies or weapons provide the greatest impact?
4. Is there concrete evidence of cooperation contributing or not contributing to military effectiveness or power for coalitions such as the U.S.-led coalition during the Vietnam War, the UN coalition during the Korean War, Arab states during its several wars with Israel, the Western coalition during and after the 2001 Afghanistan War, and others?

For policymakers, meanwhile, assessments of China-Russia military cooperation should focus narrowly and realistically on the degree to which each different form of cooperation directly affects American national security interests. Not all such manifestations of cooperation pose comparable threats.

Relatedly, the United States should recognize its limited ability to shape China-Russia cooperation. The United States is unlikely to have a grand opportunity to peel China away from Russia (or the reverse) as it did in the early 1970s, at acceptable diplomatic cost. In certain circumstances it may have the opportunity to use levers to curb specific aspects of cooperation, such as imposing secondary sanctions on China for purchasing oil from Russia in violation of international sanctions. But use of these tools can itself be complex; the imposition of sanctions, for example, interacts with American trade policy toward China.

As a result, American policymakers should judge China-Russia military cooperation with a realistic sense of both its danger and American ability to shape it.