

China-Russia Security Cooperation in the 2020s: *Liberal Realism and Authoritarian Self-Encirclement*

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How do you conceptualize China-Russia military alignment?

Given the recent increase in China-Russia alignment, many observers wonder if there is now a truly effective illiberal transnational movement that has a solid normative foundation as well as transactional great-power backing. This view combines the current backlash against supposedly overweening, tone-deaf, “decadent” transnational liberal elites with a counter-project that glorifies so-called traditional values and strongman politics. These normative claims appear to play some role in justifying the alliance of convenience between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping as well as efforts to project illiberal soft power to shore up the mutual interests of autocrats and their rent-seeking cartels.

Skeptics take the view that these authoritarian social systems and their reactionary ideologies are a reshuffling of the features of past forms of authoritarian transnationalism, such as fascism and the Holy Alliance. They are gaining some purchase now because institutionalized liberalism has turned out to be far beyond the sustainable capacity of semi-modern societies, especially at a time when libertarian variants of economic and cultural liberalism are stimulating populist reactions in the established liberal democracies. When the geopolitical and normative pressure from established liberal societies has been intense, it has made sense for authoritarian powers like Russia and China to work together as an axis of sovereigntist resistance.

But while scholars and policy analysts often think of liberal and realist theories as competing narratives of how the international system works, I’m suggesting that it is actually the liberal powers that have been the best realists. They never [fight wars](#) against each other, they make more prudent and [reliable allies](#), they are less prone to self-defeating overextension, their war economies have been superior, they have foiled every

challenge to liberal command of the high seas, and they have been on the winning side of six out of the past six struggles for hegemonic control of the international system since the Seven Years War.¹ In contrast, authoritarian regimes that glorify ruthless coercion fail to understand how the balance of power works, believing instead in the [myths of empire](#): the offense has the advantage, aggressive victories are cumulative, on-lookers bandwagon with the most belligerent power, the enemy is a paper tiger, and there is a pot of gold just over the horizon in El Dorado. So far, behavior and alignments in the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia mostly fit the accustomed pattern, though the flailing United States and backsliding India remain in an uncertain strategic limbo.

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

Military alignments in the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia more generally conform to a pattern that has been familiar for at least two centuries. The more liberal, hegemonic great powers and their allies have formed an encircling, balancing alliance to contain the unruly behavior of late-developing, authoritarian great powers who often thrive in the liberal order but nevertheless chafe under the demands of a system of rules that is poorly matched to their social and political systems. The authoritarian late-developers, by contrast, tend toward the offensive exploitation of fleeting windows of opportunity, *fais accomplis*, opportunism in alliance relations, and the diplomacy of bluster and compellence rather than deterrence. An old idea that explains the current behavior of China and Russia, for instance, is “lateral pressure.” Lateral pressure is a [feature](#) mainly of authoritarian states and the transactional systems they create based on the state-centered, bilateral, rent-seeking systems that fit their type of social order.

Self-encirclement is a recurrent pattern of international relations that results from this syndrome. Late-developing authoritarians with illiberal political economies and constrained access to the global commons form loose military alliances whose goal is to gain state-dominated control over resources and markets that are substantial enough for economic and military self-sufficiency against globally dominant alliances that have liberal states at their core. These liberal opponents pose an inherent threat to the late-developers for material and ideological reasons. Lateral pressure from the authoritarians has routinely triggered encircling resistance from liberal-led alliances in

¹ Jack Snyder, “The Liberal Balance of Power and the Four Horsemen of Its Apocalypse,” presented at the Berkeley political science department, March 2025; under review.

For critiques, see Michael Desch, “Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters,” *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Fall 2002), pp. 5-47; Alexander Downes, “How Smart and Tough Are Democracies?” *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Spring 2009), pp. 9-51. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

the Crimean War, the two World Wars, the Cold War, and incipiently the liberal-led containment of authoritarian threats to Ukraine and Taiwan. These rivalries have routinely become locked in as a result of the structure of material power, the way it is institutionalized in the different social orders, and legitimating ideas such as the myths of empire.

The difference between the liberal and illiberal approaches to power rivalry shapes this general pattern of self-encirclement by the belligerent authoritarian powers. Some of the more specific tactics of this rivalry also reflect the situational difference between liberal and illiberal states, while other tactics are more generic. The most obvious difference is that global liberal powers use their command of the sea to blockade and embargo their illiberal rivals (both World Wars, CoCom, Cuban Missile Crisis, chips, Straits of Malacca), project power along the littoral (Crimea, both World Wars, the Cold War ring of bases), and remotely supply their forces.

Another difference is that alliance relations between fully consolidated liberal regimes have generally been more [reliable](#) than those between autocracies or between fully liberal and less consolidated liberal regimes. Democratic alliances, reflecting their rule-based principles, have been more reliable as a result of the more deeply rooted common political identities that legitimate them and substantially reduce mutual threat perceptions among their members.

Autocratic alliances, by contrast, reflecting their roots in repressive and discriminatory social systems, have been opportunistic and unreliable for centuries despite attempts to use expedients like dynastic marriage, common religion, or common authoritarian ideology to add a normative veneer to their realpolitik. States with mixed or weakly institutionalized regimes in transition toward democratic mass politics are [more likely](#) to have volatile politics, civil conflict, and rising mass nationalism which makes them less reliable security partners. Dilemmas of abandonment and entrapment are not absent in democratic [alliances](#), but they are more acute in authoritarian and mixed-regime alliances.

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

The opportunistic, bet-hedging BRICS remain a diverse group in almost every way. It is hard to imagine them durably cooperating as a principled illiberal bloc mirroring what liberal NATO and the EU have done in the past. This brings us to the other huge unknown about the future of alliance systems—namely, will liberal and formerly liberal backsliding states behave like a coherent security community as they generally have

since 1950? U.S. President Donald Trump's hostility to liberalism at home and abroad, the repeated crises of the democratic regime in South Korea, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's distinctive brand of illiberal backsliding make it far from certain that liberal democracy will continue to provide firm ground for security alliances. Just as liberal threats tightened the opportunistic alliance between China and Russia, so too the militarized threats now coming from those two authoritarian powers provide an incentive to tighten the encircling alliance of liberal, semi-liberal, or simply endangered states around them. But at the same time, those authoritarian threats create incentives for various kinds of hedging. This could take the form of some small states bandwagoning with the authoritarians, others enhancing neutral regional alliances such as ASEAN, or more capable states resorting to self-help in the form of national nuclear deterrents. Theory-based prediction is always hard, but it is especially so when illiberal backsliding in the hegemonic leader of the liberal order places us in uncharted territory.

Liberals in established democracies should thus strengthen the political cohesion, military power, and economic stability of their states by effectively updating what John Ruggie called "the embedded liberal compromise." To that end, voters need to support candidates that will provide a social safety net of the welfare state, opportunities for class mobility, better funded public education, an effective regulatory environment that will improve our marketplace of ideas, smart industrial policy that will sustain growth and prevent climate change, free trade with allies, and rule-following among non-aligned states. In this way, they can recreate the liberal social consensus that is needed to underpin a stabilizing policy that reliably deters and reassures authoritarian rivals. The so-called West has done this before, but it went off track when Reagan/Thatcher era libertarianism undermined the embedded liberalism. It now needs to be reconstructed and updated for the new circumstances.