



China-Russia Security Cooperation in the 2020s:

THE ABSENCE OF ALIGNMENT

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How do you conceptualize China-Russia military alignment?

China and Russia are not aligned in any meaningful way and structural realism explains why. There is little evidence that the two powers are working together to enhance their security against the United States, which is what great-power alignment is all about. The reason is simple: international conditions—specifically, the balance of power and geography—encourage go-it-alone policies and make alignment largely unnecessary.

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

Any analysis of military alignment must begin with an understanding of the key actors and the various forms their interactions can take. Regarding the actors, China, Russia, and the United States have all been great powers since 2017. The international system is therefore multipolar. The United States is the most powerful of the poles. China is a close second and is a potential regional hegemon in East Asia, which is to say it has the wherewithal to dominate that region. On most metrics, it is more powerful than any of the previous potential hegemonies in modern history (Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union). Russia is the weakest of the three poles by a considerable margin and is not a potential hegemon in Europe in the way its predecessor the Soviet Union was, though it does have significant military capabilities. Thus, in order to analyze the China-Russia-U.S. relationship we should employ theories of great-power politics and empirical cases from multipolar worlds, especially Europe from 1789 to 1945 and Asia from 1895 (when Japan became a great power) to 1945.

As for great-power interactions, it is important to distinguish between alliances and alignments, both of which are designed to enhance the security of the interacting parties, albeit in different ways, and other forms of coordination that do not contribute to the security of the interacting parties in a meaningful way. Great powers enter into alliances when they make treaties whose terms commit them to common defense against peer competitors or threatening great-power coalitions. Such arrangements are vanishingly rare. Of the 300-plus agreements involving great powers recorded in the

Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions (ATOP) dataset, only one—the Franco-Russian Alliance (1891-1917)—is a clearcut example of an alliance made in peacetime.

Alignments, by contrast, are informal arrangements for security cooperation between two or more great powers. Like alliances, they are deterrent or defensive agreements designed to preserve the territorial integrity and domestic political order of the aligned states, but unlike alliances, they do not involve formal treaties. Although they are more plentiful than alliances, great-power alignments in peacetime are also rare; there are arguably only four in the ATOP dataset, the most famous of which are the British-French and French-Russian alignments in the decade before World War I (1914-18).

Finally, most instances of military coordination between great powers, some of which are written down—ATOP records somewhere between 60 and 70 of these agreements—are not made for joint deterrence or defense.

Structural realist theory rests on four assumptions about great powers and their environments: they inhabit an anarchic system, they prioritize their security, they possess some offensive capability, and they are uncertain about each other's intentions. As such, great powers closely monitor their military capabilities relative to those of their peers. Without a central authority to protect them—and knowing that others have the ability to hurt them but being unsure about those states' intentions—they conclude that they must procure the means to defend themselves. They are in a self-help world. Yet whenever one state tries to make itself more secure, others are rendered less secure, a situation known as the security dilemma. As a result, all great powers increase their military capabilities, leading to competitive spirals.¹

In order to generate military capability, great powers engage in balancing behavior—they work to amass military strength so as to deter aggression or to prevail in a conflict in the event that deterrence fails. Great powers can adopt two kinds of balancing policies: internal and external. Internal balancing occurs when states increase their military might by arming—increasing the quantity and quality of weapons at their disposal—innovating superior military practices, or imitating the demonstrated successful practices of others. Great powers balance externally when they ally or align with other great powers to deter or defend against common threats, where threat is a function of power and geography.

Great powers much prefer to balance internally because it allows them to rely on themselves. It is true self-help. Indeed, a review of European great power behavior from 1871 to 1945 reveals that the strongest great powers (Britain, France, Germany, and Russia/the Soviet Union) armed reciprocally against their peers and imitated each other's innovations more than 90 percent of the time. Whenever

¹ Sebastian Rosato, "Competition under the Security Dilemma," *International Security*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (Spring 2026).

one of them found a way to greatly increase the size or effectiveness of its forces, their arms competitions, involving modest increases in military capabilities, devolved into arms races, involving major increases in military capabilities. An analysis of one well-known description reveals that great powers arms raced each other a little over 50 percent of the time between the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1) and World War II (1939-45).²

In stark contrast, great powers regard external balancing, to include alliances and alignments, as undesirable, because it involves relying on others, who may not be willing or able to honor their commitments. Hence, great powers will only engage in it when they confront a serious threat to their security that they cannot handle by internal balancing alone.

Consider that Germany was threatened by France and Russia while Austria was threatened by Italy and Russia—both faced a two-front war problem against peer competitors—when they aligned in 1879. After the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1), France and Russia each opted for self-help, engaging in a 20-year arms race against the newly powerful German Empire. It was only when Germany enacted yet another massive Army Bill in 1893 and decisively won those arms races that France and Russia decided to form an alliance in order to counter the German threat. And it was only in 1907, after Russia had been defeated in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5) and descended into revolution, that Britain, now facing the real prospect of German hegemony on the European continent, aligned with France and Russia.

It is telling that the Nazi threat, although formidable, was not enough to cause a British-French-Russian alignment 30 years later. France, which was the least secure of the three threatened powers, did not attempt to create a balancing coalition with Britain and the Soviet Union until the spring of 1939 when Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, and neither London nor Moscow accepted its advances. In fact, there was no great-power balancing coalition against Germany when war broke out in 1939.

None of this is to say that great powers will not cooperate in the military realm. Any help from any quarter may increase a state's security, so great powers are constantly looking for ways to improve their situation. Even as they arms raced separately against Germany in the 1870s and 1880s, French and Russian civilian and military officials were in near-constant contact about the prospect of German domination on the continent. The same is true of British and French leaders both at the turn of the twentieth century and after Hitler came to power in Germany. Indeed, great powers will often cooperate with would-be adversaries in the belief that any measures to defuse threats are as important as measures to counter them. Britain and Germany discussed their differences constantly during the Anglo-German naval race (1898-1912) as did the United States and the Soviet Union in the

² Samuel P. Huntington, "Arms Races: Prerequisites and Results," *Public Policy*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1958), pp. 42-86.

late 1960s and early 1970s. In other words, cooperation, with potential friends and enemies, is ubiquitous.

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

China and Russia are behaving much as realism predicts and as great powers have behaved in the past. Beijing is engaged in intense internal balancing, modernizing its nuclear forces, building a blue water navy, and developing anti-access and area denial capabilities. As a result, China and the United States are in an arms competition even if the intensity of that competition does not rise to the level of an arms race. As for Moscow, it too has resorted to self-help, building up its military capabilities, and going to war with Ukraine in 2014 in order to forestall what it regards as a serious security threat: potential Ukrainian membership in a U.S.-dominated NATO alliance.

At the same time, however, China and Russia have not engaged in external balancing against the United States. They have certainly not made an alliance, nor is there any indication that they are considering one. But they have also not aligned with each other. This is hardly surprising since both powers believe they can handle the security threat posed by the United States on their own. As the ongoing war in Ukraine makes clear, Moscow has effectively deterred the United States from lending serious aid to Ukraine let alone posing a threat to Russia itself.

Moreover, Russia is likely to prevail in that conflict, thereby further increasing its security. For its part, China is well-positioned to deter or defeat U.S. aggression in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, most of the debate about U.S.-China relations revolves around the question of whether the United States can still deter or defeat China. In short, neither Russia nor China sees a reason for alignment with the other.

This is not to say that Beijing and Moscow have not cooperated with each other, though that cooperation does not even begin to approach the kind of cooperation between Britain, France, and Russia in the late 1930s, let alone when they were aligned in the 1900s. Consider that China and Russia conducted joint military exercises in the South China Sea and near Japan in 2024. At the same time, China has sold militarily relevant materials and weapons components—though, importantly, not weapons—to Russia in exchange for military expertise. Finally, the two powers have engaged in trade that supports both of their economies.

Yet none of these activities can be construed as military alignment. Joint military exercises may allow for some knowledge transfer between the two navies, but were China to become involved in a naval war with the United States in the Indo-Pacific, it is not clear that Russia would be able to contribute naval assets to that conflict—and even if it could those assets would be of hardly any value.

As for the exchange of military materials for know-how, this is best understood as a Chinese attempt to exploit Russia's war in Ukraine for its own selfish gain. For one thing, aiding Russia ensures that the



United States is focused on the European rather than Asian theater. For another, Chinese materials come at the price of Russian expertise that China can then use in its ongoing competition with the United States. Meanwhile, economic cooperation between the two sides surely does something to support their economies, but it is hardly an indicator of military alignment. After all, China and the United States are far more reliant on trade with each other than China and Russia are.

In sum, China's relationship with Russia is characterized by the absence of alignment, a situation that is well-explained by structural realism.