

SECURITY INSIGHTS



The Impact of Partnership with China on Russia's Strategic Culture *By Pavel K. Baev*

Executive Summary

Russia's politically prioritized strategic partnership with China has a larger effect on the transformation of Russian strategic culture than its official discourse and mainstream justification of policy-making reveal. Challenges and risks related to China's spectacular but slowing growth are effectively forbidden from being examined, so Russian strategic culture is presently in denial of vulnerabilities in the Far East. Russian leadership is increasingly uncomfortable with the picture of U.S.- China competition shaping the pattern of global relations and seeks to compensate for Russia's economic weakness by increasing the role of its military force:

- Modernization of the nuclear arsenal is intended to increase the political usefulness of this element of military might, in which Russia has significant advantage over China.
- Reckless experiments with rather limited cyber capabilities show an attempt to prove that Russia dares to achieve more than China with fewer resources.
- Interference into local conflicts by dispatching mercenaries and other "hybrid" means demonstrates Russia's readiness to operate in regions where China has significant economic interests.

China is wary about Russia's heavy reliance on projecting military power and seeks to restrain this aggressive behavior, even if China benefits from presenting its actions as moderate and responsible in comparison. Russian strategic culture struggles to overcome this influence and evolves under the pressure of conflicting needs to prove its potency as China's main strategic partner and to assert its ability to act independently and forcefully on the international arena.

Introduction

The deepening and widening of Russia's strategic partnership with China since mid-2014 has become a major direction of Russia's security policy and is driven by the need to compensate for the significant disadvantage in power balance in Russia's evolving confrontation with the West. Both President Vladimir Putin and President Xi Jinping praise the mature cooperation as

historically unique and emphasize the particular friendliness of their personal ties. Russian experts argue that the upgraded military interactions amount to a de facto security alliance, even if the intention to establish a formal treaty-based alliance is carefully downplayed in the official discourses.¹

It is difficult, nevertheless, to find evidence of the effect of this high intensity of interactions on the transformation of Russian strategic culture, which continues to focus on conflict with the United States and Europe, despite the recommendations of mainstream political pundits regarding the need to overcome “residual West-centrism.”² Chinese strategic culture is certainly distinct in its political complexity and historical roots.³ It has, however, a strong imprint of ideological and organizational reconstitution in the second half of the 20th century, which is not that different from the Soviet experience. Yet such features as firm control of the Communist Party over the military system or severe purges of the high command over the course of a politically guided struggle against corruption are entirely foreign to present-day Russian policy patterns.

This analysis aims at identifying and evaluating several implicit effects of Russia’s sustained efforts at cultivating its partnership with China on shifts in Russian strategic culture, which evolves in the political environment of prevalent conservatism but still incorporates multiple new experiences, becoming therefore less coherent.

Rejection of Bipolarity

The big geopolitical vision that was prevalent in Moscow for many years presumed a transition from a U.S.-dominated world order to a multipolar world order, in which Russia would claim a position as one of the key players with the rank of a “great power.” The sustained rise of China used to fit into this perception, but at the start of the new decade, Russian experts have started to ring alarm bells about the emerging bipolarity, in which the competition between the United States and China becomes the dominant feature in global relations.⁴ Russia’s ability to influence world order is much reduced in this interpretation, and instead of benefiting from a position of neutrality in the main competition, it is locked in the unenviable position of China’s vulnerable camp-follower. This concern reinforces the worries about China’s success in turning Russia into its raw materials “appendage.”⁵ Russian leadership is increasingly uncomfortable with this picture and finds it necessary not only to show its readiness to confront the United States but also to demonstrate its ability to engage with East Asian dynamics. In a recent visit to New Delhi,

¹ Vassily Kashin, “Russia and China: Union or Strategic Uncertainty?” Russian International Affairs Council, August 29, 2019, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytiks-and-comments/analytiks/russia-and-china-union-or-strategic-uncertainty/>.

² Sergei Karaganov, “Where to go and with whom,” *Rossiiskaya gazeta* (in Russian), December 26, 2019, <https://rg.ru/2019/12/26/sergej-karaganov-neobhodim-kurs-na-preodolenie-ostatochnogo-zapadnocentrizma.html>.

³ Andrea Ghiselli, “Revising China’s Strategic Culture: Contemporary Cherry-Picking of Ancient Strategic Thought,” *China Quarterly* 233, March 2018: 166–185.

⁴ Valery Garbuzov, “Two bipolarities of the polycentric world,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (in Russian), December 22, 2019, http://www.ng.ru/dipkurer/2019-12-22/9_7758_compromise.html.

⁵ Denis Suchilin, “Without illusions: China turns Russia into its raw material appendage,” *Novye Izvestiya* (in Russian), June 20, 2019, <https://newizv.ru/article/general/20-06-2019/bez-illyuziy-kitay-prevraschaet-rossiyu-v-svoy-syrievoy-pridatok>.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov decided it was an opportune moment to slam the U.S. concept of the Indo-Pacific region as disruptive, much to the surprise of his Indian hosts.⁶

It is in the economic domain that U.S.-China competition unfolds first and foremost, and the Kremlin is perfectly aware that Russia has no leverage in trade or investment and therefore needs to increase the usefulness of its military force—its most reliable instrument. China is not in favor of this old-fashioned, Clausewitz-inspired instrumentalization of military power and seeks to contain Russia's propensity to make war. For that matter, Beijing opposes Moscow's intentions regarding militarization of the Arctic and puts priority on the commercial use of the Northern Sea Route.⁷ Russian leadership shows deference to this guidance but persists with advancing its preferences for relying on military force. Therefore, Russian strategic culture aspires to overcome Chinese influence and generates a more pronounced emphasis on military power-building.

Nuclear Renaissance

Russia justifies its massive effort at modernizing its nuclear arsenal by the need to deter security threats from the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but there is an important undeclared rationale related to China behind this sustained investment. Russian conventional capabilities in the vast Far Eastern theater are hopelessly inferior to the grouping of Chinese armed forces, so it is only by deploying nuclear weapon systems that Moscow can maintain its ability to defend this exposed periphery.⁸ It would have made perfect sense to concentrate all ten strategic submarines in one squadron using the Kola Peninsula infrastructure, but Putin insisted on upgrading the Vilyuchinsk base on Kamchatka so that the Pacific fleet would keep half of this force. Putin, while formally supporting the proposition for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, has made clear his conviction that North Korea would never give up its nuclear program and therefore the prominence of nuclear weapons in East Asia is expected to increase, and the offer of aid to China in building an early warning system looks attractive.⁹

Arms control has constituted a key pillar of Russian strategic culture, and its breakdown is not only a consequence of escalating tensions with the United States but also a feature of Moscow's repositioning vis-à-vis China. It was entirely possible, for example, to resolve the technical issues that damaged the integrity of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, and Beijing advocated strongly for preserving this ban on the development of two major categories of missiles; however, the Kremlin opted against making any meaningful compromises.¹⁰ Now,

⁶ Geeta Mohan, "Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov Calls Indo-Pacific Concept Divisive," *India Today*, January 15, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/sergey-lavrov-on-indo-pacific-concept-1637087-2020-01-15>.

⁷ Pavel K. Baev, "Shifts in Russian Military Build-Up in the Arctic Driven by the Interactions with China," *Security Insights*, no. 32, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany: George Marshall Center for European Security Studies, June 2019.

⁸ Aleksandr Khranchihin, "Inadequate defense of Maritime region," *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie* (in Russian), October 11, 2019, http://nvo.ng.ru/nvoexpert/2019-10-11/7_1065_defence.html.

⁹ Dmitry Stefanovich, "Russia to Help China Develop an Early Warning System," *The Diplomat*, October 25, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/russia-to-help-china-develop-an-early-warning-system/>.

¹⁰ Alexey Arbatov, "Mad Momentum Redux? The Rise and Fall of Nuclear Arms Control," *Survival* 61, no. 3, July 2019, pp. 7–38.

Moscow declares its readiness to counter any U.S. deployment of intermediate-range missiles in the Asia-Pacific, which essentially means the reintroduction of land-based missiles along the border with China. The expected expiration of the New START Treaty in spring 2021 is also explained in Moscow as a result of China's unwillingness to join the arms control regime.¹¹

Maintaining nuclear parity with the United States is actually an easy task, but gaining political advantages from nuclear superiority over China is a complicated challenge that requires a subtle and nuanced interpretation in Russian strategic culture.

Cyber Recklessness

Russia has lagged in developing and introducing information technologies, but it has managed to make itself a major cyber security threat to the United States and NATO, and its strategic culture is fast evolving by incorporating these recent experiences. In many ways, these shifts are influenced by the example of and interactions with China, which has become a "great cyberpower" (which Russia is most certainly not). What makes the Chinese success particularly attractive for Russian leadership is the effectiveness of its control over social networks and the internet in general, but this achievement has not proven to be reproducible in Russia.¹² Restrictive legislation remains ineffectual not only because of a shortage of resources but also because of a profound ignorance in the top echelon of bureaucracy, which manifests itself with, for instance, Putin's suggestion to replace Wikipedia with the Russian encyclopedia.¹³

This ignorance has created a permissive environment for experimenting with cyberattacks, and Russia's military intelligence (the GRU) has taken the lead in organizing various cyberattacks, often combined with other special operations.¹⁴ This reckless behavior stands in stark contrast with the Chinese cyber policy, which combines massive investment in the development of capabilities with prudent restraint in their use.¹⁵ There is a pronounced desire in Russian strategic culture to show China that Moscow can do more with less and is willing to accept risks that are deemed unacceptable in Beijing. It is hard to conclude whether China is impressed with this daring cyber policy, but it certainly finds this policy useful for presenting its own activities as legitimate and responsible. Despite many high-level discussions, the real scope of cooperation between Russia and China in the cyber domain remains rather limited, so the amount of information available to the "guardians" of Russian strategic culture remains limited to Russia's experiences. Despite setting an official goal of the digitalization of economy and governance, Russia's cyber backwardness is set to deepen, and its strategic culture will struggle with internalizing and compensating for this vulnerability.

¹¹ Ilya Kramnik, "USA and Russia will go alone to a new strategic arms treaty," *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (in Russian), December 22, 2019, http://www.ng.ru/dipkurer/2019-12-22/9_7758_control.html.

¹² Leonid Kovachich, "How the great Chinese firewall works," *Vedomosti* (in Russian), April 24, 2018, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2018/04/25/767754-kak-ustroen-faevrol>.

¹³ Valery Shiryaev, "President and Wikipedia," *Novaya gazeta* (in Russian), November 8, 2019, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/11/08/82652-prezident-i-vikipediya>.

¹⁴ Mark Galeotti, "Footprints of the Russian Military Intelligence Agency GRU Are Everywhere," *Raam op Rusland*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/militair-beleid/1028-footprints-of-the-russian-military-intelligence-agency-gru-are-everywhere>.

¹⁵ Marie Baezner, "Cybersecurity in Sino-American Relations," *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, no. 224, April 2018.

Low-Cost Adventurism

The Syrian intervention has enriched Russian strategic culture with a new trait related to the employment of semiprivate military contractors, which have received an odd name: the Wagner Group.¹⁶ The track record of combat operations by these mercenaries in Syria is rather mixed, and Russia's military command has grown increasingly wary about engaging them for performing important missions, particularly after the debacle of an attack on a U.S. outpost to the east of Deir al-Zour, Syria, in February 2018.¹⁷ Other agencies and actors have, nevertheless, become increasingly enthusiastic about the versatility and disposability of this low-cost instrument of policy, so the prominence of paramilitary options in the strategic culture will probably grow.

One particular advantage of employing the "Wagners" is that Russia can execute power-projecting operations in conflict areas where China has important stakes but dares not protect them with military force. The first target for such semiofficial deployment was the Central African Republic, where several hundred mercenaries were hired as advisors and instructors in support of President Faustin-Archange Touadera.¹⁸ Learning from this experience, Moscow has proceeded with other clandestine operations in Africa, avoiding any interference or competition with Chinese investors but expecting that Beijing would take notice of the availability of this new reasonably efficient instrument controlled by Russian special services and their business partners.¹⁹ The most recent case of such conflict manipulation occurred in Libya, from which China had to evacuate some 35,000 civilians in 2011 and where Russia has dispatched some 500 mercenaries in support of "field-marshal" Khalifa Haftar's offensive on Tripoli.²⁰ Moscow is entirely indifferent to heavy casualties among the Wagners and is ready for defeats in some of these overseas adventures, which yield few economic benefits but are politically profitable, not least because of their deniability, which is duly registered by publicity-wary China.

Denials and Self-Deceptions

Having the fast-growing, increasingly assertive, and far from predictable China for a neighbor constitutes a grave security challenge for Russia, but its political imperatives prevent any realistic assessment of this situation. Russian discourse on this "uniquely close" partnership might be correct in the present, but Russia cannot erase the recent historical legacy of armed confrontation or previous experiences in managing violent instability emanating from China. Russian strategic culture is in denial of vulnerabilities in the Far East (with the exception of the newly fortified Kuril Islands), and this distorted picture makes it necessary to invent security

¹⁶ Pavel K. Baev, "The Impact of the Syrian Intervention on Russian Strategic Culture," *Security Insights*, no. 33, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany: George Marshall Center for European Security Studies, June 2019.

¹⁷ Kimberly Marten, "The Puzzle of Russian Behavior in Deir al-Zour," *War on the Rocks*, July 5, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/the-puzzle-of-russian-behavior-in-deir-al-zour/>.

¹⁸ Mathieu Olivier, "Russia's Murky Business Dealings in the Central African Republic," *Africa Report*, August 23, 2019, <https://www.theafricareport.com/16511/russias-murky-business-dealings-in-the-central-african-republic/>.

¹⁹ Arnaud Kalika, "Russia's 'Great Return' to Africa?" *Russie.Nei.Visions*, no. 114, Paris: French Institute of International Relations, April 2019.

²⁰ "Libya Conflict: Russian Mercenaries from the Shadowy Wagner Group Are Spearheading the Battle for Capital Tripoli," *South China Morning Post*, December 22, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/middle-east/article/3043122/libya-conflict-russian-mercenaries-shadowy-wagner-group-are>.

threats where they do not really exist, such as in the Arctic.²¹ The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 provides an example of nontraditional security challenges affecting Russian regions that have cross-border ties with China, but the Kremlin firmly discourages security thinking about exposure to such effects in order to eliminate even a shadow of doubt about the consequences of this increasingly unequal partnership.²²

This resolute self-deception reinforces Russia's new political habit of denial even with the most apparent wrongdoings or blunders. Despite the volume of evidence gathered by international investigations, Moscow continues to deny its role in the destruction of the MH17 flight over Donbass on July 17, 2014. Ignoring international condemnation, the Russian military rejects the accusations of bombing civilian targets in Aleppo, Syria in fall 2016 and recently in the Idlib province. Refuting U.S. and NATO data on developing and deploying new cruise missiles, Moscow condemned the INF Treaty to collapse.²³ What encouraged this propensity to ignore the fact-based Western position is the confidence in Moscow that Beijing would accept and back up Russia's disinformation, much the same way, for instance, as Russia supported China's stance on Xinjian or China's rejection of the ruling of The Hague's arbitration regarding the South China Sea. The norm of denying the inconvenient facts of political life has been fast incorporated into Russian strategic culture.

Conclusion

Russian strategic culture struggles to adjust to Russia's politically prioritized strategic partnership with China, particularly because most aspects of economic dynamism, political transformation, and even military reform in Russia's neighbor-state are poorly understood. Challenges and risks related to China's spectacular but slowing growth are effectively forbidden from being examined, which compels strategic thinking to focus on and to exaggerate the threats inherent to Russia's evolving confrontation with the West and exacerbates the incoherence of strategic culture. Russian leadership refuses to acknowledge the asymmetry of Russia's partnership with China and its growing dependency on China's priorities and choices, and the Kremlin is increasingly motivated to prove to Chinese leaders Russia's value and potency as a de facto ally and to prove Russia's ability to make a difference on the global arena. This urge influences dangerous shifts in Russian strategic culture, from the greater use of nuclear weapons as an instrument of policy, to reckless cyber behavior, to a propensity for overseas paramilitary adventures.

Russia recognizes the antagonism between the United States and China as the fundamental feature of the global order and expects that deepening hostility in the relations between these two powers will compensate for the profound disbalance in its own confrontation with the West. There is also an understanding in Moscow that the main dimension of U.S.-China competition is economic, and the Kremlin cannot realistically expect Russia to overcome its stagnation and

²¹ Pavel K. Baev, "Threat Assessments and Strategic Objectives in Russia's Arctic Policy," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 32, Spring 2019: 25–40.

²² Alexander Gabuev, Alexander Zhuravlev, and Anastasiya Muravyeva, "Xi and coronavirus: What the epidemic means for the Chinese leadership," Carnegie Moscow Center (in Russian), January 28, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80890>.

²³ Alexey Arbatov, "Exit from the dead-end: How the INF Treaty can be saved," Russian International Affairs Council (in Russian), May 30, 2019, https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/columns/military-and-security/vykhod-iz-tupika-kak-mozhno-spasti-dogovor-o-likvidatsii-raket-sredney-i-menshey-dalnosti/?sphrase_id=34151414.

achieve new dynamism, which is the main criterion of success in the eyes of the Chinese leadership. Although Russian strategic culture cannot quite internalize the reality and consequences of its economic backwardness, it embraces the imperative of building and projecting military and “hybrid” power as the only way to ensure for Russia a proper status on the world stage. This imperative makes Russia interested in manipulating and interfering with various local and regional conflicts and not interested in their resolution and peace-building, which generally contradicts China’s preferences. The need to make its nuclear arsenal—the main source of Russia’s strength and the major priority in investment—into a more useful instrument of policy drives Moscow’s readiness to dismantle the traditional system of arms control and, potentially, to undermine the ban on nuclear testing and the nonproliferation regime, which is also against China’s interests. Russian strategic culture will struggle with these contradictions and, by necessity, will be more open and more fluid than Putin’s conservatively minded regime is comfortable with.

About the Author

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Russia Strategic Initiative (RSI): This program of research, led by the GCMC and funded by RSI (U.S. Department of Defense effort to enhance understanding of the Russian way of war in order to inform strategy and planning), employs in-depth case studies to better understand Russian strategic behavior in order to mitigate miscalculation in relations.

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