



Alexander Korolev

China-Russia Strategic Alignment in International Politics

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*For my mother,
Galina N. Koroleva,
for all her sacrifices and unconditional support throughout my life*



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Acknowledgments

This book draws together the strands of my research on China–Russia strategic cooperation and international relations (IR) more broadly. As such, it has been long in the making. I always wanted to write a book that would bridge area studies and IR literature and thus bring the important case of China–Russia relations back to IR-informed research.

In hindsight, the starting point of this book can be traced back to December 2015, when I was invited to deliver a public lecture on China–Russia strategic cooperation at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore. When preparing for the lecture, I discovered two things about China–Russia relations as an object of scholarly inquiry: the overall tendency to underestimate the breadth, depth, and consequentiality of China–Russia strategic cooperation and the simultaneous detachment of China–Russia studies from the mainstream IR theorizing. In my subsequent works, I tried to address these issues. This book draws upon those works but pushes the theoretical and empirical analysis further in an attempt to not only present a theory-grounded analysis of contemporary China–Russia relations but also generate frameworks and theoretical approaches that can be applied to other cases of interstate strategic cooperation to facilitate comparative analyses of different strategic alignments.

Throughout the process of the book gradually taking shape, I benefited from multiple colleagues who commented on earlier drafts and parts of the chapters. I am also grateful to those colleagues who invited me to present my research on China–Russia relations, thus inadvertently pushing the project forward. An inevitably incomplete list must include: Michael Raska, Konstantin Topilskiy, Richard Bitzinger, Oriana Mastro, Brandon Yoder, Ted Hopf, Gaye Christoffersen, Vladimir Portyakov, Liu Feng, Jeffrey Taliaferro, Camilla Sørensen, Pu Xiaoyu, Zhang Ruizhuang, Feng Shaolei, Vasily Kashin, Thomas Wilkins, Dorothy Horsfield, Richard Sakwa, Victor Larin, Deborah Larsen, Margaret Pearson, Nicholas Ross Smith, and Rajesh Basrur. I am also grateful to Amsterdam University Press editors Saskia Gieling and Maryse Elliott, whose patience and professionalism are gratefully acknowledged. My apologies and appreciation to anyone not listed above but who has also contributed by a valuable comment or feedback on the earlier drafts of different segments of the book.

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Sydney, November 2021

Alexander Korolev



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1 Introduction

The Elusive Nature of China–Russia Relations and the Need for Theory

Abstract

This chapter explores how the International Relations (IR) literature on alignments can help understand the case of China–Russia relations and how, in turn, the study of China–Russia relations can enrich the theoretical knowledge about alignments. The existing studies of China–Russia relations have failed to develop a theory-grounded system of indicators to measure China–Russia alignment. In turn, the IR literature does not have a ready-made, indicators-based taxonomy of alignments that could be applied to the China–Russia case. In this context, this chapter places a particular emphasis on the importance of theory for the comprehensive and systematic understanding of China–Russia alignment. It also presents the book structure, methodology, and research design that redefine China–Russia relations in theory-informed terms of strategic alignment and reconnect it with theoretical IR.

Keywords: China–Russia relations, international relations theory, alliance, alignment

The rationale behind this book is two-fold. On the one hand, China–Russia strategic cooperation has displayed significant development and become an increasingly important factor in contemporary international politics, with considerable implications for both US–China and US–Russia relations. On the other hand, attempts to develop a theory-grounded framework and corresponding measurements that would allow an accurate and systematic assessment of the level of China–Russia strategic cooperation as well as its progress over time have been extremely scarce in the existing literature.

China–Russia strategic cooperation has progressed considerably and consistently since the end of the Cold War. According to official documents and

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statements, the relationship has progressed from “good neighborliness” in the early 1990s to “constructive cooperation” in the late 1990s to “comprehensive strategic partnership” in 2001, then further on to “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination” in 2012 and to “comprehensive strategic partnership of equality, mutual trust, mutual support, common prosperity and long-lasting friendship” in 2016 (Korolev & Portyakov, 2019). A new upgrade took place on June 5, 2019, when Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin declared China–Russia relations to be “a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era,” which highlights consistent consolidation of China–Russia alignment, its immunity to exogenous shocks, and willingness on both sides to deal with the challenges of the future (Xinhua, 2019).

The relationship soared in the context of Russia’s high-profile “turn to the East,” the deterioration of Russia–US relations after the Ukraine Crisis, China’s “new assertiveness” in the South and East China Seas, and the recent worsening of China–US rivalry, especially in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic when the deteriorating relations between Washington and Beijing became increasingly reminiscent of Cold War-style geopolitics. In this context, calls have risen in both China and Russia to form a strategic “alliance” to protect the interests and enhance the international geopolitical standing of the two countries. Some of Russia’s foreign policy experts have called for upgrading China–Russia collaboration to the level of a full-fledged political-military alliance (Tavrovsky, 2014). In China, despite the official “non-alignment” doctrine, some experts have also called to upgrade the partnership with Russia to a full-scale alliance (Yan, 2012; Dai, 2012).¹ Some prominent Chinese IR experts have argued that China will be unable to shift the US-dominated unipolar world order “unless it forms a formal alliance with Russia” (Yan, 2012). Most remarkably, China’s first National Security Blue Book, commissioned by the government and written by experts from the Institute of Contemporary International Relations, recommends that China should consider forming an “alliance with Russia” (Global Times, 2014). In 2019, during the Valdai discussion club conference in Sochi, Russia, President Putin was unambiguous by announcing that China and Russia have developed a truly strategic “alliance relationship” (Akopov, 2019). In 2020, Putin mentioned that “our [China and Russia] relationship has reached such a level of coordination and trust that we don’t need it [the alliance], but, theoretically speaking, it is not unimaginable.... It is not our task at the moment, but, in principle, we

1 For a concise summary of Chinese experts’ arguments in favor of alliance with Russia, see Lee and Lukin (2016), pp. 117-120.



don't plan to exclude such a scenario [forming an alliance with China] either" (President of Russia, 2020).

Given China and Russia's geopolitical parameters and military capabilities, a tighter alliance between them could significantly change the entire power structure of the contemporary international system. It could also have tremendous ramifications in terms of challenging the existing liberal order in the most fundamental ways. Russia could gain more opportunities to balance the United States and promote its vision of multipolarity in Europe. China could receive more political backing from Russia and greater access to Russia's energy resources and military technologies, perhaps with the integration of strategies for defense innovation and transition toward joint development of arms, which would be an indispensable asset for China in its growing tensions with the United States. Closer China–Russia cooperation could also strategically reshape Eurasia by making it more interlinked in both economic and strategic terms. Closer China–Russia alignment could also further limit Russia–US and China–US cooperation on issues of crucial strategic importance for the United States. More fundamentally, a more closely aligned China and Russia would have a stronger license to reject Western democracy and the Western model more broadly because both view it as a threat to their geopolitical interests and their regimes' survival.

Many Western analysts increasingly recognize the serious geopolitical challenge to the United States and its strategic allies that China–Russia consolidating alignment can pose. Thus, some leading US experts on the issue worry that China, if supported by Russia's military-technical prowess and enormous resources, could challenge US national security interests as never before (Ellings & Sutter, 2018). Other leading American strategists have been blunt in a recent special report to Congress by stating that US's military superiority has "eroded to a dangerous degree," to the extent that the US "might struggle to win, or perhaps lose, a war against China or Russia," especially "if it is forced to fight on two or more fronts simultaneously" (National Defense Strategy Commission, 2018, pp. v-vi).

Despite its significance for international politics, strategic cooperation between China and Russia in the post-Cold War era turns out to be difficult to define and explain. The extant studies display disturbing ambiguity regarding where China and Russia stand in terms of alliance formation, with assessments ranging from the two being called "allies" to "rivals." The reason for such an extensive range of conflicting depictions and the resultant inconclusiveness has to do with both the methodology of the existing analyses and the detachment of China–Russia studies from IR theory. The existing studies of China–Russia relations have mostly been unable to bear



significant theoretical fruit and contribute to conceptual generalization in IR. Even applications of IR theories to explore and explain the case of China–Russia strategic cooperation or attempts at theory building within the case itself have also been scarce.² The existing theories of alignment, in turn, have been unable to measure the strength of alignment in a systematic and rigorous way. For the IR field more broadly, China–Russia relations have predominantly, but unjustifiably, remained a peripheral case, often altogether absent from the mainstream IR theorizing.

The lack of a theory-grounded approach and the ambiguity that surrounds the analyses of China–Russia relations are counterproductive. Without methodical assessments of China–Russia alignment, international relations experts might be miscalculating the overall tendency of power relations within the international structure as well as the dynamics of China–US and Russia–US relations. What is at stake is not just theoretical. Knowing how closely aligned China and Russia are has significant policy implications, particularly for the United States and its allies. While China and Russia individually may still have some distance to travel before mounting a consequential challenge to American global influence, the aggregation of their capabilities in a functioning alliance or even alignment, and the ensuing geopolitical leverage, poses a serious challenge for Washington. For example, should the US and its strategic allies focus on tackling China's growing capabilities or, instead, driving a wedge between Moscow and Beijing, whose cooperation increasingly displays the features of an anti-US strategic alliance? The two options entail differently tailored foreign policies. Telling which one should be feasibly pursued, and thus potential costs of miscalculation minimized, is difficult without a methodical assessment of the alignment between China and Russia.

Studies of China–Russia relations: in search of the “right” label

There has been a striking lack of progress in understanding China–Russia relations and the degree to which they have developed over time. This

2 This does not mean that there are no works that have employed IR theories to the case of China–Russia relations. Some rare exceptions include Korloev (2016), who uses a two-level approach (global and regional) to develop a structure of Sino–Russian relations where the two align together globally but compete and hedge regionally, and Krickovic (2017), who employs structural realism and the logic of power shifts to explain the genesis and robustness of the relationship and its symbiotic nature. Both works, however, bypass the takes of defining China–Russia relationship before trying to explain it.

is manifested in the titles of some books on the relationship. In the year 2000, the pervasive question was “Rapprochement or Rivalry?” (Garnett, 2000), twelve years later, the question had barely changed to “Rivalry or Partnership?” (Bedeski & Swanström, 2012). Numerous underspecified and contrasting terms have been used to describe this bilateral relationship. Since the mid-1990s, and following the official language of Beijing and Moscow, China–Russia relations have been referred to as various “partnerships” – simply “partnership” (Kerr, 2005), “limited partnership” (Garnett, 1998), “strategic partnership” (Wilson, 2004) or “limited defensive strategic partnership” (Li, 2007). Other popular names have to do with a variety of “axes” – “axis of convenience” (Lo, 2009), “axis of necessity” (Kuchins, 2014), “axis of insecurity” (Brenton, 2013), or “axis of authoritarians” (Ellings & Sutter, 2018). China–Russia relations have also been called “entente” (Trenin, 2015), a relationship of “parallel identities” (Rozman, 2014) and other terms. The relationship has also been reported to be undergoing a “long sunset” (Lo, 2004) or carrying the features of “strategic parallelism without partnership or passion” (Weitz, 2008). Other allegorical descriptions include “comrades in arms” (Muraviev, 2014) a “romance” (Roh, 2019) or “ambivalent embrace” (Kuchins, 2007), along with Russia being presented as a “loud dissenter” and China its “cautious partner” (Snetkov & Lanteigne, 2015).

To add to the lexical confusion, the term “alliance” has also often been a reference point in scholarly discussions of China–Russia relations. According to Voskressenski (2003, p. 208), China and Russia “have always been exploring some form of alliance with each other.” Cohen (2001) characterizes China–Russia collaboration as an “emerging alliance” requiring careful monitoring. Nemets (2006) calls it an “ominous anti-American alliance” with the potential to considerably reconfigure the international balance of power and severely harm American interests. Wishnick (2001, p. 798) argues that China–Russia relations had the strategic and political foundations for an “incipient alliance” that, however, were countervailed by a range of divergent interests limiting how close the two countries can be. Trenin (2015) argues that China and Russia are entering into relations of a new kind that “will fall short of a formal alliance but will be closer than the strategic partnership the two countries have had since the 1990s.” What has been glaringly missing in the “alliance” discussions, however, is the alliance framework itself, which makes it impossible to determine in which aspects, if at all, China–Russia relations are an alliance and whether the two countries are capable of joint action in the case of a hypothetical conflict with other major powers.

Against the backdrop of intensifying Russia–US rivalry after the Ukraine Crisis and China–US competition in East and Southeast Asia, more attention



started to be paid to military cooperation between the two countries (Meick, 2017; Watts et al., 2016; Korolev, 2019; Muraviev, 2014; Blank, 2020). In this context, some observers have raised straightforward questions, such as “Is there a China–Russia alliance?” (Goldstein, 2017) and “Are China–Russia relations an alliance or not?” (Zheng, 2016). However, as in the case of the broader literature mentioned above, there has been no comprehensive framework for assessing military cooperation that would demonstrate the level of China–Russia military cooperation and its progress over time.

With such a range of assessments from highly optimistic (or alarmist) to highly skeptical, it remains unclear how closely China and Russia are aligned because none of the applied terms have been defined in a manner that is sufficient for making them subject to systematic empirical examination. For example, Lo (2009) lists factors that can undermine the depth of China–Russia cooperation without defining and operationalizing his very dependent variable – the “axis of convenience” itself – thus creating an observationally equivalent argument so that any interstate relationship can be an axis of convenience. Rozman (2014) argues that China and Russia’s national identities are much closer to each other than usually thought, and, hence, China–Russia cooperation is based on a deeper shared vision and shared values, but without defining this cooperation itself.

There have been multiple descriptions and examinations of various empirical aspects of recent China–Russia strategic cooperation (Wilson, 2016; Cox, 2016; Ambrosio, 2017; Kaczmarek, 2017; Kaczmarek, 2019; Odgaard, 2017; Wishnick, 2017; Bolt & Cross, 2018). However, attempts to develop an analytical framework grounded in IR theories to assess and explain the degree of alignment between the two countries have been scarce and have lacked objective measurements.³ Reliance on *ad hoc* measures and explanations that are neither systematic nor theory-grounded results in a disconnected patchwork that has retarded the cumulative development of knowledge in the field. This problem equally characterizes broader studies of China–Russia relations. Thus, the explanations of the upward trend in the bilateral relationship, suggested in the existing literature, include causal factors as different as the behavior of the United States (Kerr, 2005; Lo, 2009; Menon, 2009; Lukin 2015; Charap et al., 2017), the nature of China’s and Russia’s political regimes (Menon, 2009; Rozman, 2014; Lukin, 2015; Charap et al., 2017), national identities (Kerr, 2005; Kuchins, 2007; Rozman, 2014; Trenin, 2015; Wishnick, 2017), concerns about separatism (Kerr, 2005; Lo, 2008; Odgaard, 2017), benefits of economic cooperation (Kerr, 2005;

3 A rare example of an attempt to conceptualize without objective measures is Wilkins (2008).

Wilson, 2004; Swanström, 2014; Lukin, 2015; Trenin, 2015; Gabuev, 2016; Charap et al., 2017), friendship among national leaders (Ferdinand, 2007; Lo, 2008; Gabuev, 2016) and other factors. The problem with these studies is that with some exceptions (Kerr, 2005; Ferdinand, 2007; Li, 2007; Odgaard, 2017; Wishnick, 2017) their explanations rely on an arbitrary selection of causal factors that are not grounded in explicit theories. An otherwise useful and comprehensive recent work (Bolt & Cross, 2018) has brought in-depth regional expertise and actively engaged with Chinese and Russian sources, which is valuable in its own right, but still failed to present a theory-grounded analytical framework and corresponding measurements that would allow for a systematic assessment of the level and progress of China–Russia strategic cooperation.

As demonstrated by Yoder (2020, p. 2), the lack of careful attention to theory in studies of contemporary China–Russia relations results in myriad *ad hoc* explanations and diverse predictions – a situation where scholars talk past each other, basing their arguments on unstated assumptions and unspecified causal mechanisms that inform which evidence is considered and how it is interpreted. In sum, our knowledge of the strength of contemporary China–Russia strategic cooperation has been limited and unsystematic. Rozman’s (1998, p. 396) assessment from more than 20 years ago remains accurate today: analysts “have reached little consensus on what the [China–Russia] partnership is, why it has developed, what it signifies, and how firm it is likely to be.” It is even more so in the context of the Russian and Chinese leaders’ desire to bill the China–Russia partnership as a new phenomenon in international politics (Wilkins, 2008, p. 367).

Existing definitions of alignments: conceptual ambiguity

Referring to the IR literature does not help to resolve the confusion that surrounds China–Russia relations and reveals even more problems for defining and measuring interstate strategic cooperation. Alignment is an inchoate term that has not been systematically defined in the IR literature. The literature on “alliances,” in turn, contains more than 30 different definitions of the term (China–Russia relations meet some, but not others) and only two attempts to develop an objective indicators-based taxonomy (Fedder, 1968; Russett, 1971), both of which are now quite dated.⁴ Tertrais (2004) mentions

4 To appreciate the variability of alliances from some form of loose cooperation over general goals to strict commitments solidified by a formal alliance treaty, see: Weitsman (2003), Walt



the “laxity” with which experts and officials use the term. Walt (1987, p. 1) uses “alliance” interchangeably with informal “alignment” and does not provide indicators for either. Ward (1982, p. 14) documents that “much written work uses the three different orientations – alliance, alignment, and coalition – as though they were identical.” According to Wilkins (2012, p. 54), despite multiple publications, there is little understanding of “alliances” and other “alignments” between states, and there is no credible taxonomy.

Conceptual problems surrounding alliances and alignments in the study of international politics are perennial ones. In his seminal work in 1960s, Liska (1962, p. 3) wrote about the impossibility of separating alliances from international politics in general and, hence, the difficulties of studying them as a phenomenon. Three decades later, Snyder (1991, p. 121) echoed Liska’s concerns arguing that while alliances and alignments are the most central phenomena in international politics, isolating them as objects of analysis is difficult due to their ubiquity and variety of formal and informal manifestations. This problem has retarded the generation of theories about alliances, which contrasts with the theoretical richness of IR studies of various forms of conflicts, such as war, crisis, or deterrence (Snyder 1991, p. 121).

The conceptual confusion regarding both the forms and the causes of alliances remains unresolved. Salmon (2006, p. 839) demonstrates that in the absence of a single definition of alliance, the meaning of the concept has varied “from agreements on values, goals, ideology, mutual benefits to agreements for fighting and, indeed, attacking third parties.” At the same time, some argued that a broader definition of a military alliance would include alliances that do not even imply a security guarantee (Tertrais, 2004, p. 136). Such variety has led Wilkins (2012, p. 56) to conclude that despite the wealth of scholarship, there has been no general theory of alliances, and that is why it is imperative to re-examine and revise the existing frameworks and definitions of alliances and alignments. In sum, there is no ready-made framework in this subfield of IR that could be applied to assess and explain the case of post-Cold War China–Russia relations, as well as other interstate alignments.

At the same time, the term “strategic partnership” – the official name for China–Russia relations – has been surrounded by even greater confusion. The problem with the term is that there are so many interstate relations that are called “partnerships” and so little conceptual work identifying the meaning and implications of “partnerships” that the term loses any analytical

(1987), Snyder (1997), Singer and Small (1966), Ashley Leeds and Anac (2005), Morrow (2000), Reiter (1994), Sorokin (1994), Holsti, Hopmann, and Sullivan (1973).



value. As documented by Kay (2000), partnerships appear with various adjectives, and there are numerous other terms with parallel meanings, adopted by various states. These include the most popular “strategic partnership,” but also “strategic dialogue,” “special relationship,” “enhanced relationship,” “constructive strategic partnership,” “comprehensive partnership,” “long-term comprehensive partnership,” “long-term stable constructive partnership,” and “good-neighborly mutual-trust partnership” (Kay, 2000, p. 15). These terms may signal certain diplomatic posturings of some countries in different real-world strategic contexts, but they remain imprecise and open to interpretation and speculation. Often, “partnerships” play the role of not more than “simply a rhetorical device used by diplomats to help them around the rough edges of shifting global politics” (Kay, 2000, p. 17). There have been very scarce scholarly treatments of the term in connection to alliances and alignments and, hence, limited understanding of the nature and functions of partnerships (Wilkins, 2015, p. 81). On top of it all, some scholars have also talked about alignments under the partnership framework and, simultaneously, located partnerships under the broader concept of alignment (Strüver, 2016). To add to the conceptual complexity and overlaps, strategic partnerships have also been viewed as falling under the alignment concept and, simultaneously, representing a form of “soft balancing” (Ferguson, 2012, p. 205).

In summary, the theory-grounded conceptual apparatus available to scholars working on China–Russia relations or other interstate alignments is ambiguous and lacks agreed-upon, objective measurements. Discussion of alliances, alignments, partnerships, and other forms of strategic cooperation is characterized by theoretical and empirical overlaps when both the different names and tools of analysis are used interchangeably. Since “alignment,” military or not, is a core dependent variable that pervades the IR field, the scarcity of attempts to measure it has serious implications for IR research. For example, it is possible that some of the “puzzles” of increasing or decreasing cooperation that scholars have sought to explain do not actually exist by objective measures, while others might have gone unrecognized.⁵ This poses an analytical challenge for assessing China–Russia

5 Consider, for example, the cacophony of assessments surrounding China’s reaction to the Russia–Georgia war of 2008 and the Ukraine Crisis of 2014. Regarding the former, some argued that China “sides with the West, not Russia” (The Associated Press, 2008), while others argued that China was on Russia’s side (Yu, 2008). The same occurred with the Ukraine Crisis: some argued that China “sided with Russia” (Durden, 2015) while others observed that “China splits with Russia over Ukraine” (Stearns, 2014). Academic studies on the issue are similarly divided (see: Korolev & Portyakov, 2018). These conflicting depictions vividly reveal the problem with answering a

relations. At the same time, it provides an opportunity for innovation both theoretically and empirically.

China–Russia relations and alignments studies – towards analytical synergy

This book bridges area studies and IR literature by linking China–Russia relations to the study of alignments. It maps out the evolving China–Russia strategic cooperation in terms amenable to international relations theorizing and endeavors to go beyond the China–Russia case per se to start qualifying and quantifying strategic alignment in international relations. It develops a set of objective and deductively justifiable criteria to measure and explain the development of “alignment” in post-Cold War China–Russia relations.⁶ As such, and given the limitations of both fields (the study of China–Russia relations and the study of alignments) mentioned above, the approach adopted in this study involves “zigzagging” between theory and empirical analysis in that it draws on the existing theoretical knowledge, however limited, about interstate strategic alignments to understand the case of China–Russia alignment but also uses the empirical data from this case to inform generalizations regarding interstate alignment formation and thus enrich existing theoretical knowledge.

This approach requires cross-fertilization of empirical and theoretical analyses to develop a framework that can both comprehend the empirical realities of contemporary China–Russia alignment and, at the same time, help grasp the generalizable dynamics of alignments that could facilitate the formulation of hypotheses and expectations concerning alignment formation and development. The analytical intention is that the elements of alignment that are informed by the existing theoretical knowledge and refined based on the analysis of China–Russia relations can also apply to other interstate relations.

The primary theoretical inquiries this study sets out to explore are: How to define and measure strategic alignments between states? What stages does

seemingly simple question of whether China cooperated with Russia or not. In this situation, viable explanations are impossible because the very dependent variable cannot be defined.

6 When it comes to “objectivity,” there are limitations faced by any social scientists. In this sense, the suggested framework represents an interpretation, a needed one, as the author believes, but still an interpretation. It is objective in that it is based on the topical literature and operationalizable and verifiable indicators. However, the selection of those criteria as well as their measurement may be open to interpretation.



an alignment go through before becoming a full-fledged alliance? Because there are no current frameworks for assessing alignment, the empirical goal of accurately assessing the degree and trajectory of strategic cooperation in post-Cold War China–Russia relations (the main empirical goal) entails first answering these questions and thus fulfilling a broader theoretical goal of constructing a framework to assess interstate alignments.

The framework offered in this book synthesizes the theoretical literature on alliances, alignments, strategic partnerships, and other forms of interstate cooperation to develop an empirically operationalizable set of criteria for what in this book is called “strategic alignment.”⁷ The framework moves beyond simply extracting and listing different indicators from the literature and adds an ordinal dimension to the indicators by introducing definitions of “early,” “moderate,” and “advanced” stages of alignment development. To more effectively trace the trend in China–Russia relations over time, this framework qualitatively measures the degree of indicators within each stage, rather than dichotomously coding the presence or absence of these indicators. At the same time, while the particular emphasis is placed on military cooperation as the backbone of strategic alignment in general, and between China and Russia in particular, the book explores the economic and diplomatic dimensions of the bilateral relations as a “robustness check” – to assess the overall progress over time and to identify whether the increased cooperation is limited to the military realm.⁸

Applying this framework to the case of post-Cold War China–Russia relations allows making further conceptual refinements. The China–Russia case can help understand how a great power relationship can start from a very low level and progress to a closer alignment, what stages it goes through and how. At the same time, the framework allows gauging the

7 Admittedly, there are no perfect terms in the study of international relations. Like many others, “strategic alignment” is not a perfect concept. However, unlike “alliance,” it possesses the needed breadth that can facilitate conceptual development. At the same time, it reflects the nature of interstate relations that are not *ad hoc*, which is why it is “strategic,” and are driven by military cooperation (the cornerstone of China–Russia relations), which is why it is “alignment,” and not just “cooperation.”

8 I thank Brandon Yoder for the suggestion to look at economic and diplomatic cooperation as a “robustness check” on China–Russia strategic cooperation. The robustness check approach with regards to the economic and diplomatic dimensions of cooperation is dictated by the difficulty of assigning relative weights to these dimensions that are incommensurate with the military dimension within an alignment. However, the primary focus on the military dimension is warranted, insofar as it has the highest bar for cooperation and is very likely to be accompanied by enhanced economic and diplomatic cooperation. See further discussion of this issue in Chapter 2.

relative significance and scale of the contemporary China–Russia strategic alignment by placing it in a comparative context. Doing so also tests and generalizes the suggested framework using other cases. To achieve this goal, the same framework is applied to assess the case of US–India alignment as also a case of a growing strategic alignment which, according to some observers, shares similarities with China–Russia alignment. While the suggested framework will likely (and hopefully) invite additional refinements and revisions, including tests with larger samples, it represents a necessary step to fill a crucial gap in the IR literature.

Empirically, the book assesses and explains the degree and trajectory of alignment in post-Cold War China–Russia relations. The main empirical questions include: How closely aligned are China and Russia? How technically prepared are they for united military action and a full-fledged military alliance? How does China–Russia alignment fare, based on the objective measurements, with other representative alignments? Is alignment between China and Russia an *ad hoc* reaction to the recent deterioration of their relations with the United States, or does it have deeper causes that are rooted in long-term international-systemic trends? What explains the growing closeness between the two countries and how might this trend be modified or reversed?

The empirical goal is not to rename the relationship and add a new catchword to the already long list of labels. Doing so does not seem to be a very meaningful analytical endeavor. Nor is the goal to pick a fight with either “optimists” (or “alarmists”), who believe that China–Russia alignment is solid, reliable, and has potential to grow, or at least that the existing problems in the relationship are not insurmountable (Nguyen, 1993; Nemets, 2006; Kaczmarski, 2015; Cox, 2016; Ambrosio, 2017; Wishnick, 2017), or “skeptics,” who try to pile up evidence to prove the opposite (Lo, 2009; Menon, 2009; Brenton, 2013; Wilson, 2016). This strategy, without due attention to theory, would simply continue the infinite regress that besets the discussion of China–Russia relations. In fact, this study has issues with both camps but more from a methodological point of view because the works on both sides of the argument do not sufficiently utilize IR theoretical knowledge or apply rigorous measurements. This study does not attempt to prove that China and Russia are going to inevitably fight together against another country soon, or, in contrast, that the alignment is going to fall apart. It is not a policy interpretation, and the analytical style and emphasis in this book are different from those of area specialists.

Instead, the goal is to measure and explain the change in the China–Russia alignment relationship over time while also providing a rough point estimate



of the absolute degree of cooperation. From an empirical standpoint, this study should be viewed as a long-needed reality check of the elements of “alliance” in China–Russia relations that are becoming increasingly prominent in both the literature and the policy discourse. In other words, it provides a theory-grounded demonstration that is as accurate as possible of where China–Russia military cooperation stands in terms of alliance formation. By explicitly applying an alignment framework, it enhances the clarity of the existing discussion of the “allianceness” of China–Russia relations. It helps to understand how ready the two countries are for a formal military alliance should such a decision be made.

The application of the alignment framework developed in this book establishes that on a range of criteria China–Russia military alignment is moving closer to a full-fledged alliance. It is solid and comprehensive and, having passed what is defined in the framework as the “moderate” stage of alignment, continues to show a consistent incremental upward trend. It is also highly institutionalized, with growing elements of inter-military compatibility and interoperability. China–Russia alignment also appears responsive to external circumstances and based on a shared perception of the geopolitical security environment. At the same time, there are strong structural incentives for furthering the alignment that have been consolidating since the end of the Cold War and are unlikely to disappear soon. In other words, China–Russia relations appear ready for a tighter defense pact should the two countries decide to commit to it. Not announcing a formal “alliance” does not mean that such an alliance is not possible or not ready. The authorization of a China–Russia alliance is a matter of political will, not technical readiness, and the political will may not yet exist.⁹ Nevertheless, once and if such decisions are made, there is little that might hinder the effective functioning of a China–Russia alliance.

The book: structure and the logic of analysis

The rest of the book is organized into six chapters. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework of the analysis which is called an “ordinal model of

9 See a very balanced article by Fu Ying, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China. Fu (2016) sends a clear message to the American readership that by no means is the China–Russia relationship simply a “marriage of convenience” because it is complex, sturdy, and deeply rooted. Simultaneously, however, it is not an “alliance.”



strategic alignment.” Chapter 2 is a theoretical chapter that guides the discussion in all the remaining chapters. The development of the framework and the organization of the subsequent chapters are driven by the methodological consideration that one must first define the variable of interest before one can effectively embark on explaining it; especially given the ambivalence that dominates the field of China–Russia studies as mentioned above. The issue of definitions preceding explanations has been highlighted in the social science methodology literature. It has been suggested that “sometimes the state of knowledge in a field is such that much ... description is needed before we can take on the challenge of explanation” (King et al., 1994, p. 15). In other words, systematic description and definition are prerequisites to explanations, because “it is hard to develop explanations before we know something about the world and what needs to be explained on the basis of what characteristics” (King et al., 1994, p. 34).

The suggested framework consists of two clusters. The first cluster deals with the institutionalization of inter-military relations. It identifies seven indicators of military cooperation and groups them into the three stages of early, moderate, and advanced cooperation. Each indicator is ordinal; that is, the early-stage indicators precede the moderate and advanced indicators. While the primary emphasis is on military cooperation as the backbone of strategic alignment in general, and between China and Russia in particular, the framework also measures cooperation on economic and diplomatic dimensions as a “robustness check” to explore whether the increasing closeness in the relationship goes beyond the military realm. The second cluster deals with explanation and delves into the incentives for alignment formation, which are gauged by the connected conditions related to the three balances – “balance of power” (Waltz, 1979), “balance of threat” (Walt, 1987), and “balance of interests” (Schweller, 1998). All three drive the alliance formation process and appear in alignment discussions in one form or another. In the actual application of this causal cluster (Chapter 5), these three factors are located along the stages outlined in the first cluster to link the process of alignment development with the evolution of the key causal forces.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are the empirical examination of China–Russia relations based on the framework presented in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 “Military Cooperation: Approaching Alliance” is the empirical examination of the first cluster of the framework – the stadiation and institutionalization of China–Russia alignment. The framework is applied to demonstrate the developmental trajectory since the end of the Cold War and the current state of China–Russia military alignment. The chapter delves into the



underreported routinized inner workings of China–Russia alignment, going beyond the prevalent focus on relatively easy-to-trace China–Russia arms deals or military modernization programs in the two countries. The “early” indicators include confidence building measures and mechanisms of regular consultations. The “moderate” indicators comprise military-technical cooperation and personnel exchange and regular joint military exercises. The “advanced” indicators cover different levels of integrated military command, joint troop placement, exchanges of military bases, and common defense policy. The chapter demonstrates that post-Cold War China–Russia relations have, from a low starting point, grown steadily more robust, and are close to surpassing the moderate stage of alignment. Currently, China–Russia alignment sits at the borderline between moderate and advanced alignment, as defined in this analysis, and there exists a strong basis for more advanced forms of bilateral strategic cooperation.

Chapter 4 “Alignment Incentives: The Three Balances” explains the dynamics described in the previous chapters and is the empirical examination of the second cluster of the alignment framework – the incentives for alignment formation. Both China and Russia have structural positions within the international system that make them subject to systemic pressures. This chapter demonstrates that the causes of the consolidation of China–Russia alignment are to be found at both the international-systemic and domestic-politics levels. More specifically, these causes are the changes that are happening in the three balances – the balance of power, the balance of threat, and the balance of interests. All three are the major causes of alliance formation. At the same time, a lot has been assumed with regards to how these three balances operate in the context of China–Russia relations, which make empirical checks necessary. The chapter explores the relative power dynamics within the contemporary international system and drawing on first-hand data uncovers the perceptions of external threats and interests in China and Russia to show both convergences and divergences. It is demonstrated that since the end of the Cold War the three balances have evolved in a way that incentivized a closer strategic alignment between China and Russia and that there are reasons to expect a further deepening of the bilateral alignment.

Chapter 5 “Robustness Check: Economy and Diplomacy” assesses indicators of economic and diplomatic cooperation as a robustness check on the comprehensiveness of the upward trend in China–Russia alignment. The military dimension has the highest bar for cooperation. However, alignment does not focus solely on the military dimension of international politics but spreads across security, diplomatic, and economic spheres.



Increases in military cooperation are very likely to be accompanied by enhanced economic and diplomatic cooperation. This happens both because incentives for military cooperation are also likely to apply to the economic and diplomatic realms, and because economic and diplomatic cooperation complement and augment joint military capabilities. Theoretical and empirical assessments of alignments often move beyond narrowly defined security guarantees. In the assessment of the military component of China–Russia cooperation, it is particularly important to consider the economic and diplomatic aspects of cooperation because China–Russia relations are often perceived as being military-dominated and lacking other foundations. The analysis in this chapter uses quantitative indicators, such as the volume and pattern of bilateral trade and its share in each country's total external trade, the volume and nature of direct investments between the two countries, the patterns of China–Russia voting behavior in the UN Security Council and other international institutions, with special emphasis on the extent of convergence and divergence between China and Russia, as well as the agendas of regional blocs in which China and Russia are core players. The chapter shows that bilateral cooperation in each of the non-military dimensions, while not yet as strong, has steadily increased.

Chapter 6 “Comparative Mapping: US–India and China–Russia Alignments” provides a comparative perspective on China–Russia alignment using the framework developed in Chapter 2. If the evidence of growing strategic cooperation is presented in a vacuum (i.e., without offering a point of comparison), the depth of this cooperation risks appearing greater than it is. While trends might appear apparent, the relevance of those trends is debatable without comparisons. To understand the extent to which China–Russia cooperation matters at all, it is necessary to assess this cooperation in both absolute *and* relative terms. This requires applying similar criteria to other existing alignments. Simply put, what level are China and Russia really at in their relationship? Moreover, if China–Russia strategic cooperation has progressed, the question is – relative to what? Chapter 6 compares the alignment between China and Russia with the US–India alignment. The US–India evolving alignment is a new development in post-Cold War international politics that is also often being viewed as an *ad hoc* reaction to the rise of China in the Asia-Pacific region and, hence, is a useful reference point for assessing the relative depth of China–Russia alignment.

Admittedly, from a theoretical standpoint, systematically comparing China–Russia alignment with only one other alignment may not be sufficient for the robust generalization of the framework. However, it is enough to execute a plausibility probe (George & Bennett, 2005; Levy, 2008; Eckstein,



1991) for the framework and to see whether, where, and on which parameters China–Russia alignment is ahead or behind this point of comparison. As Eckstein defines it, plausibility probes are useful at the preliminary stages of theory construction and “involve attempts to determine whether potential validity may reasonably be considered great enough to warrant the pains and costs of testing” (Eckstein, 1991, p. 147). This book offers such a plausibility probe into the alignment framework it develops: it first conceptualizes the framework of alignment, and, secondly, conducts an empirical inquiry into it. Further testing the framework with dozens of other examples, perhaps also from other historical periods, is the next analytical step that goes beyond the scope of this book.

Chapter 7 “Conclusion: Empirical Findings and Theoretical Implications” puts the strands of the analysis together and discusses the implications of the main findings for our understanding of China–Russia relations and the overall evolution of the post-Cold War international structure. It discusses the significance of the phenomenon of China–Russia relations for understanding the formation and development of alliances and the importance of theory-grounded analysis for understanding the patterns of interstate relations.

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