



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: What growing China-Russia ties mean for the world order

Description: China and Russia are now arguably closer than they've ever been, with rapidly growing military and economic cooperation. Will the strength of these ties herald the end of U.S. hegemony in the Western Pacific? And do the two authoritarian giants share a vision by which they can reshape the world? International relations experts Professor Elizabeth Wishnick and Dr Alexander Korolev take a deep dive into Sino-Russian solidarity with presenter Peter Clarke. An Asia Institute podcast.

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Voiceover:

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Peter Clarke:

Hello, I'm Peter Clarke. This is Ear To Asia.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

So I think the Chinese military faces many challenges. It lags behind Russia's military, and it certainly lags behind the US military. Now whether the US and Russia will be up to the challenge of maintaining their edge is another question.

Alexander Korolev:

My assessment is that in the years to come, the China-US relationship is going to continue to deteriorate. And so will be the case of US-Russia relations. Again which will push Beijing and Moscow towards closer and closer strategic cooperation.

Peter Clarke:

In this episode, what growing China-Russia ties mean for the world order.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne.

The ties between China and Russia are in 2021 arguably the strongest they've ever been. The two nations have worked to integrate their military planning and are engaging in a number of joint weapons development programmes.

On the trade front, China's seemingly insatiable appetite for fossil fuels has significantly added to Russia's coffers badly hit in recent years by sanctions imposed by the West. Meanwhile, China also looks to Russia as a dependable source of agricultural produce.



Yet the China-Russia relationship has not always been so promising. There was a nasty falling out back in 1960, and to lubricate the now friendly ties, the starkly differing accounts of their shared history have had to be papered over on both sides.

Peter Clarke:

So how robust is the bond between the two authoritarian giants? Will it herald the end of American hegemony in the Western Pacific? And do China and Russia share a vision by which they can reshape the world?

Peter Clarke:

Joining me via Zoom to examine the Russia-China relationship and what it means for the rest of us are international relations experts, Professor Elizabeth Wishnick from Montclair University in the United States and Dr. Alexander Korolev of the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. Liz, Alex, welcome to Ear to Asia.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Alexander Korolev:

Pleasure to be here. Thank you.

Peter Clarke:

Listen, Alex. Let's start with a snapshot. Could you both just initially anyway adumbrate the contours of the current state of the China-Russia relationship? Alex, starting with you.

Alexander Korolev:

Well, I think the best way to define contemporary China-Russia relations is using the term of alignment, not alliance, but alignment, which carries the features of strategic alliance except there is no formal alliance treaty between the two countries. And there are no obligations to defend each other in case of aggression against either China or Russia. So basically, the relationship has progressed significantly, especially over the last 10 years and particularly after the Ukraine crisis, which happened in 2014.

Alexander Korolev:

Now there are multiple formats of military cooperation, including joint military exercises. A very comprehensive regular consultation mechanism has been established between China and Russia. The number of meetings is rather high compared to other informal alignments. So there is obviously an upward trend in the bilateral relationship. And if you look at the trajectory, it looks like it's moving towards an alliance. However, there is this missing final piece, which is formal alliance treaty, but many experts would argue that it's not really necessary, that in 21st century you don't have to sign alliance treaties like the case in 19th century or early 20th century. So the alignment can function pretty well and actually operate as an alliance even without this formal treaty.



Peter Clarke:

Liz, these descriptives we're parsing today, alliance, as Alex just used it, partnership, alignment, they're the words we're throwing around. What's your lens on this?

Elizabeth Wishnick:

I see the relationship somewhat differently. To my mind, Russia and China act in parallel but not necessarily in alignment. And while I agree with Alex that the two countries have definitely upgrade their cooperation in many ways in terms of the number of meetings and their military cooperation, even their economic relationship, which has long been the weak point, I don't see this as attending towards an alliance. I think both top leaders, both Putin and Xi Jinping like to talk about an alliance because the talk itself has a deterrent value to the West, but I don't really see signs of an alliance.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

I think it is a partnership of consequence. It's not an axis of convenience in the way some have portrayed it. I think it does have real content in terms of the way the two countries want to shape the world in a way that suits their domestic needs.

Peter Clarke:

We got the observables. We can see the meetings. We can hear and read their propaganda both sides from Russia and China. How much, Liz, is opaque the details, the underlying character and the actual details of the relationship in terms of the meetings and the ongoing context between their officials? How much is opaque and how much is really up for analysis and interpretation?

Elizabeth Wishnick:

Well, we do see the two top leaders meet very frequently, and they make a great show of their personal rapport, making dumplings together, eating ice-cream and so on. So they like to demonstrate that they have a good personal relationship. Whether that's actually the case, only Kremlin insiders will know, but they certainly do try to demonstrate that. And then we look at the numbers, how much is being sold in terms of Russian weapons to China, what is the level of Chinese investment in Russian and so on. So there are certain observables that we can see.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

But when it comes to dissect whether or not we see an alliance or not, the military experts will look at details of the cooperation, so are Russian and Chinese forces displaying interoperability? Do they plan to fight side-by-side in some future conflict? And to my understanding, that is not yet the case. There are signs of growing military cooperation but not yet of some future coordinated activity on the battlefield.

Alexander Korolev:

Just a small remark. I absolutely agree with Liz that it's really crucial to look at their actual content of military cooperation rather than try to find the best label, partnership alignment or alliance. However, there was a very important recent development which happened in 2019 I think, which we have neglected, and also I should have mentioned it is the announcement by President Putin that Russia has been helping China to develop early warning missile defence system, which includes basically an integration of early warning systems Russia currently has and China currently has.



Alexander Korolev:

And if this happens, then the level of cooperation will be on par with that of the advanced alliances the United States has because strategic arms is the most sensitive area of military cooperation for any country, and the two countries are moving in that space. They're converging as well.

Peter Clarke:

Alex, as content for our listeners, could we just describe very quickly the comparative economies of these two large nations? Of course, our focus has been on China described as the rising power. We've seen its increasing military presence, particularly in the South China Sea. How has Russia evolved economically, and what's the comparison between Russia and China economically at the moment, their GDP, for example?

Alexander Korolev:

I think obviously China turned out to be much more successful than Russia economically after it started its policy of opening and reforms in 1978 compared to Russia's liberalisation after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The outcomes are quite miserable for Russia, I would say. Basically, Russia has lost most of its manufacturing industries and turn into large-scale petrol station whereas China became economic powerhouse. And this has, I would say, rather negative implications for China-Russia cooperation, especially for Russia. There's complementarity. I have resources. You want resources. I sell you resources. It looks great and quite often it's presented as a factor that pulls the two countries together, but, in fact, I think it creates quite many problems for Russia especially which only 25, 30 years ago was far ahead of China in terms of economic development. And just within two decades it turned into like a petrostate, gigantic gas station.

Alexander Korolev:

If you look at the structure of bilateral trade between China and Russia, then the share of machinery and equipment in Russia's export to China it dropped from 20% plus in 1990 to less than 1% in early 2000. Now the two governments are trying very hard to introduce non-energy related projects in the bilateral relationship, so they made some progress. In 2019, the share of non-energy products in Russia's export to China increased to 2%. This again you can say it's progress, but it's quite insignificant. Whereas China sells Russia a vast range of goods and commodities. So I would say that, yes, Russia has resources, and Russia probably has an advantage in terms of selling weapon systems to China. And for China, still, advanced weapons is a holy grail because China doesn't have capacity to modernise People's Liberation Army, PLA, on its own, especially when it comes to top-notch cutting edge technologies, and Russia obviously has an advantage here. But if you look at the pattern of economic cooperation, then I don't think it works well for Russia, and this is a structural problem because it's not something that you can change overnight.

Alexander Korolev:

If your economic model is based on export of energy resources, it's not something that you can overcome within a relatively short period of time. Moreover, you have to in a sense work against market logic because if you follow the market incentives, then you want to sell more energy resources and get fast cash, but to reverse this degenerating, I would say, pattern of economic cooperation will require a lot of effort on both sides.



Peter Clarke:

Alex, as you were saying that I was thinking, "What is the technological actor in terms of China versus Russia?" I'm particularly thinking of the cyber wars, if you like, and the ability within the computer realm. China seems to have huge advantages there in many ways. They've just put a robot on Mars, for example. They've got their eye on Taiwan which houses the world's biggest silicon chip maker in Taiwan. But, of course, China is a very mountainous country and it's got very limited agricultural land. So what about that equation, the agricultural products from Russia, et cetera? You talked about the weapons. They obviously these days have a lot of high end technology. What's that equation all about at the moment?

Alexander Korolev:

Well, speaking of weapons, what China really needs and where China really lags behind is aircraft engines for fighter jets. This technology they've made a significant progress, but if you talk to PLA officers, they say like, "We don't want to fly on airplanes with China-built engines." So there is a gap. And this is a critical element for the modernization of PLA.

Alexander Korolev:

Agricultural cooperation. Well, yes, it can be presented as a move ahead because it looks like it's not energy-related, but again, does it really work for the development of Russia's economy? There's a big question mark. Yes, it provides jobs, it provides cash, but it doesn't really contribute into technological development of Russia. Well, they plant hectares and hectares of soybeans in Russia. How great is that? I mean, yes, it's something different from selling gas and oil, but it's still this low tack, if you like, pattern of cooperation.

Peter Clarke:

Liz, what's your take on this?

Elizabeth Wishnick:

I think it's true that agriculture cooperation is not going to be the solution to a major boost in the China-Russia economic situation. There was some hope that Russia could help make up for the loss of US soybeans due to the US-China trade war, but Russian exports of soybeans really amount to only 1% of China's demand. So Russia is a new source of agricultural exports to China, but it's not going to have the stature of the US or Brazil or Argentina. But I'd like to say that there are other aspects to the economic relationship between the two. For example, Huawei signed an agreement with Russia's MTS to build a 5G network in Russia. And this past year was the year of technological cooperation between the two countries. They're cooperating in vaccine production both in Russia developing an additional Chinese vaccine and then in China producing the Sputnik V vaccine. So I think they are attempting to move beyond the commodities based cooperation.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

And there is discussion of defence co-production, although this is a sensitive issue because of concerns in Russia about intellectual property rights violation by China in the past and even in the present. And I'd like to go back to that point that Alex made about the early warning agreement that Russia and China have signed where Russia is going to help China with early warning of missiles. I think that this is a sign of tightening defence relationship, but this materialised once the nuclear



agreements between the US and Russia fell by the wayside. The question is what is China going to do? Where would China deploy its missiles if the US deployed additional missiles in Asia, for example? What if China deployed missiles closer to the Russian border? What would Russia do? So I think there is some unknowns about the whole missile aspect in how it might shape the China-Russia relationship.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

And also, Russia is not opposed in principle to including China in arms control negotiations going forward while China is opposed to it. So we see a slight difference in the two on that front. But getting back to the economic relationship, I think that often we talk too much about Russia as the junior partner because of economic weaknesses that Alex so rightly pointed out that Russia confronts. On the other hand, China does need some of those resources. 15% of China's oil comes from Russia, and China believes that pipeline energy resources are safer than resources shipped by sea, although perhaps the incident in the United States with the cyber attack on the oil pipeline will cause some rethinking of that point of view. I don't know. But nonetheless, I think China does depend on Russia for certain products but doesn't talk about them to the same degree that Russia talks about its resource supplier role with respect to China. So there's a difference in the rhetoric that highlights the different roles that the two countries play.

Peter Clarke:

Liz, could we take the opportunity now just to delve a little more deeply into what are the intrinsic and extrinsic forces that draw Russia and China together, but potentially could also push them apart as we've seen in the past? These are both very large countries, geographically. They have a deep history of authoritarianism. They've had very limited experience in traditions of democracy, for example. Culturally, as we stand outside and observe both countries, they seem quite different from each other in terms of their history and their forms of culture. So what are those intrinsic and extrinsic forces that draw them together? What's the glue, and what are the potential forces that can still push them apart in your view, Liz?

Elizabeth Wishnick:

And that's an interesting question because I think some of the forces that bring together also potentially could draw them apart, such as borders. So border security was a key impetus in the improvement of relations between the Soviet Union and China and then Russia and China because the two brought a border war in 1969 and the development of their border regions was left aside because of the security concerns both at engaging in costly military build up to protect that very long border that they have.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

On the other hand, they see borders differently. For Russia, a border is a fixed boundary while for China historically borders have been zones. And for this reason I think we see limitations to the China-Russia regional relationship where the two countries recently abandoned a 10-year regional economic agreement to develop the Russian far eastern and the Chinese northeast because three-quarters of it was not fulfilled. And some of these projects involved creating various types of border zones, which Russian remains suspicious about. And so the whole idea of the border as one bringing them together but also creating some barriers to cooperation.



Elizabeth Wishnick:

Also, I think historically the two countries have been connected. Over time, we don't usually think of Russia as a country that matters in Asia, but it's very much connected with the history of northeast Asia, but as a result, we see Russia and China looking back to different kinds of historical roles, China trying to resume its period of greatness in Asia. It's seen itself as the central power in Asia and Russia having a history of trying to balance its emphasis on Europe with an approach to Asia. Since the days of Peter the Great, Russian leaders have sought to do that.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

In the present period we have the two countries united in their search to create a world order that is beneficial for authoritarian states, but they both have a different kind of nationalism that potentially could lead to some differences between the two. So I think they share the broad brush strokes about creating a multi-polar world order and defining the rules of the authoritarian road, but their domestic trajectories I think might not always coincide and could lead to some bumps along this road.

Peter Clarke:

Alex, as I was listening to Liz, into my mind inevitably came when she mentioned territory particularly came China's claim on the South China Sea, vehement opposition from the United States and pretty much from Australia as well. We're seeing pressure on the Philippines, for example, more recently with the use of China's militarised fishing fleet. And we're seeing many other examples. Could I ask the bold question of you, Alex? What's in it for Russia to support China in the South China Sea and its claims there?

Alexander Korolev:

What's there for Russia is the same basically which drives China and Russia together. And again, on this I don't disagree with Liz. She has mentioned a few important variables. There's domestic level factors, border or culture or political regimes. They are secondary to the structural push, which comes from the international system and the confrontation. It's not just competition. It's already confrontation with the United States. Both China and Russia are in very tense relations with the US. And domestic level factors they matter, but they always gives way to structural pressure and border dispute also. Well, US-Japan alliances grew out from US occupation of Japan.

Alexander Korolev:

So basically, these factors matter, but I think they fully play out only when the international environment is rather permissive, but at the moment it's not permissive for China and Russia. This push as an outcome of deterioration of relations with the US is rather significant. It generates the common perception of external threat in both Moscow and Beijing. Going back to Peter's questions, first, we need to understand Russia's position on South China Sea. And the way Russia supports China is rather peculiar, I would say. Russia doesn't support China's territorial claims in South China Sea like, for example, where exactly a nine-dash line should be or exactly what islands should belong to China or Vietnam or the Philippines. So Russia doesn't really take a very clear stance on that, but Russia supports China when it comes to disregarding the Hague tribunal ruling on the South China issue.



Alexander Korolev:

Basically, Russia supports China when it comes to China disregarding these international institutions and the legitimacy of those international institutions. But when it comes to exact territorial claims, Russia is rather vague on these issues. So it is a broader support of China against specifically, in this case, the institution of the Hague tribunal and the Western support that it gets that the case launched by Philippines received from the United States, UK, Australia. So it's a support of China vis-à-vis the US and its Western ally rather than support of China vis-à-vis Vietnam or the Philippines or any other claimants in the South China Sea.

Alexander Korolev:

I think there is an important reason why Russia supports China in that specific way is that Russia is interested, I believe, in de-legitimising the institution of Hague tribunal because it's very possible that Ukraine is going to lodge a case against Russia about Crimea. So by rejecting the role of Hague tribunal it prepares the ground for potential case against Russia.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

I think it's true that Russia and China do see a confrontational world with respect to their relationship with United States, but for Russia mostly the threat is in Europe, not in Asia. And I think the South China Sea is a big headache for Russia because Russia would like to engage with other Asian countries and diversify its partnerships in Asia. It's been seeking arms deals with Malaysia and Indonesia, trying to engage with the Philippines, for example, and of course, Vietnam is a long-standing partner, and Russia has military and energy ties with Vietnam. And this puts Russia in uncomfortable position because Vietnam and China fought a war in 1979, which China lost. And China and Vietnam have a conflict over territory, and China does object to certain of Russia's energy projects in the South China Sea, and some of which Russia has relocated as a result.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

But I think also for China, Russia is a complicated partner in South China Sea because if we think about another part of the world where Russia and China very much cooperate – in the arctic. In that part of the world China is all for freedom of navigation. If we compare China's position in the South China Sea, we see completely a completely different story. And Chinese experts will say, "Well, these two have nothing in common because history determines the nine-dash line and so forth." But I think with respect to Russia, China treads very carefully about these issues and has not pushed back as much as you would expect on Russia for continuing its engagements with Vietnam even though in the academic literature there's certainly complaints about it, and privately experts will say that these activities by Russia are not helpful to China.

Peter Clarke:

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Elizabeth Wishnick and Dr. Alexander Korolev. And we're discussing the implications of the blossoming relationship between China and Russia for the Western Pacific.

Peter Clarke:

Liz, we've touched a little together on the weapon side of things, military weapons. Alex mentioned aircraft engines, for example. We know Russia's building a lot of weaponry and military equipment in China itself. China is the second largest military spender, a fair distance behind the USA but the second, and actually outspends Russia in this area, doesn't it? Well, China, in your view, will eventually become a strategic competitor to Russia. And following their past practises, will they gradually as all that manufacture is going on in China of military weapons and equipment co-opt some of their technology? Because Alex mentioned that they're behind some of the technology in the weapons area, the military weapons area. Will they gradually co-opt some of that technology and streak ahead of Russia in terms of strategic advantage?

Elizabeth Wishnick:

This is a complicated question. I think if you look in Southeast Asia you see Russia and China competing for market share already and in some other parts of the world as well, but an interesting statistic is that Russia accounted for one-quarter of arms sales to Southeast Asia from 2000 to 2017 and more than the US and China combined. So Russia, I think, is a bit under the radar as an arms exporter to Southeast Asia. But the competition I think we should look more broadly, not just in terms of weapons production, but in terms of the security role that they play or the economic role even that they play in particular in parts of the world. And I think areas of competition are more likely in Central Asia and in the Arctic from my point of view.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

In Central Asia we have a situation where the US preparing to withdraw from Afghanistan, and it's not clear how the security of the region is going to be maintained. China has of yet been reluctant to employ military forces beyond a role in peacekeeping, UN peacekeeping or some limited private security forces. So Russia has always posited itself as the security guarantor for Central Asia. So what would happen if China finds that its western borders are under threat from the situation in Afghanistan and wants to take some more action to protect that space? How would Russia react?

Elizabeth Wishnick:

And then in the Arctic I think the issue is more environmental and economic. For now, Russia claims the right to administer the Northern sea route, which is the waterway above the Arctic Russian coast, which is the longest Arctic coast. And China and other countries have to acquiesce to that and pay fees and have Russian escort ships and so on. But what happens when this ice melts or if the central Arctic shipping route is available and China wants to navigate without Russia accompanying them or Russia sees China as more of a competitor in this part of the world, which Russia really finds as a key component of its identity?

Elizabeth Wishnick:

I think those peripheral areas are more likely to be the locus for some competitive pressures rather than defence production being the engine of that kind of a conflictual turn.



Peter Clarke:

Alex, how do you see the extensive building by Russia in China of weaponry military equipment, et cetera, and that inevitable technology transfer? How do you see that playing out over the longer term?

Alexander Korolev:

I don't think that it's inevitable. I think Russia is still able not to share the most important technologies as any country would do. There is a big elephant in the room, which is glossed over all the time, but not really discussed in details is the pressure from US on both China and Russia. So as long as this pressure exists and increase, then all this economy-related variables are not going to pull the two countries apart. So this is dormant issues, I would say.

Alexander Korolev:

Russia is able to keep it secret, I would say, and China tends to quite often overestimate its capacity to produce cutting edge weapons. I think it was in early 2000s when China announced that it wants to reduce the import of weapon systems from Russia because it was able to develop indigenous capabilities to build weapons, but which turned out not to conform to reality, and the experts from Russia was renewed shortly. Also, in 2008 I think the two countries signed this intellectual property agreement and military cooperation which for Russia alleviated many of the concerns that China is simply going to reproduce the weapon systems purchased from Russia. It always happens in China-Russia relations, but I think now this area is better regulated, and for China also if it's interested in long-term cooperation and getting more technologies from Russia, it will be very careful not to cross the red line in this area, so to speak.

Peter Clarke:

Alex, since you raised it, I'll ask you straight up then. Since Biden took over the United States presidency from Donald Trump, what are analysts saying and how are they observing any shifts that may have already occurred in the relationship between China and Russia in response to the extrinsic additional pressures from the Biden administration?

Alexander Korolev:

I tend to think, and some experts share this assessment, some experts don't. I don't give much weight to the leadership honestly when it comes to great power relations, and all three countries we're talking about are great power, significant players, because such big countries they're subject to systemic transformations within the international system. So quite often with my students when I teach international security we do an exercise like let's make Xi Jinping president of the United States, Trump or Biden president of Russia and Putin president of China. Are things going to be different?

Alexander Korolev:

If we analyse the case comprehensively, then the conclusion is that it's not going to be significantly different because the three countries they're subject to structural forces. So it's a long-term tendency. The deterioration of US-China relations is a long-term trend, which is not going to change, whether it's Biden or Trump or whether Xi Jinping is in power or someone else. So my assessment is that in the years to come, I can't be precise how long, how many years, but based on my analysis of



the structure of the international system, whether it's Biden or Trump or someone else probably after Biden, the China-US relationship is going to continue to deteriorate and so will be the case with US-Russia relations, again, which will only increase this trend and will push Beijing and Moscow to move on maybe not towards formal alliance but towards closer and closer to strategic cooperation, something we have been witnessing since the end of the Cold War.

Peter Clarke:

Liz, the way Alex was just describing those geopolitical relationships he seemed to be conjuring up a tri-polar and a bipolar situation geopolitically. How do you see all that?

Elizabeth Wishnick:

Listening to Alex, there's a lot to agree with there, but I do think that we have to be prepared for some X factor, for some shift due to unforeseen circumstances. I don't know that we can always assume, for example, an upward Chinese trajectory given all of the domestic problems that China continues to face, especially in terms of its environment, continuing issue of poverty in its rural population and so on. And authoritarian rule is not always the most stable and can be subject to sudden shifts. But I do agree with respect to the shift from Trump to Biden, and the transition there has been reflected in the change in tone in relations between the US and Russia and China, and so far not much substantively has changed.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

Now, I do think the domestic politics matter. For Trump, any overture towards Russia was essentially radioactive because of his domestic issues and accusations of undue Russian influence on his campaign. And similarly, there were people on his China team who were dead set against any cooperation with China. So I think the parameters for him were very limited. But the Biden team so far has said that they will seek cooperation with both Russia and China where it is possible. And I think they are going to have a more fine-tuned approach to this what was called under Trump great power competition and now is being rephrased as strategic competition.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

So I see some possibilities on an issue-to-issue basis for some change, but it's not just up to the United States and what happens in the United States. It's what happens in Russia and in China. So they have agency too, and they're not just subject to the whims of the US. They take actions that lead to reaction.

Peter Clarke:

Alex, what can we learn from the pattern of behaviour of Russia and China as they act in multilateral institutions? For example what's been the pattern in your view of Chinese and Russian voting in the United Nations Security Council? How does Russia fit into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Union? What can we learn from that pattern of cooperation or not so much cooperation between China and Russia in multilateral institutions?

Alexander Korolev:

Well, what I see in that cooperation or sort of operation within the frameworks of international intuition is, again, consolidating alignment between China and Russia because if you look at, let's



say, China-Russia joint vetoes in the United Nations Security Council since the collapse of the Soviet Union, since 1991, you can see the consistently growing number of joint vetoes. So the first one was in 2007. Then after 2007 almost every year. Then two in 2012. Then one every year. Then three in 2019 and three in 2020.

Alexander Korolev:

China and Russia jointly vetoed UN resolutions mostly backed by the United States. It was on Syria. It was on Iraq, I think. It was on also with regards to allegations of genocide. Myanmar if I'm not mistaken. So there is a range of cases, but obviously there is a pattern of convergence of global strategic interest because veto is a significant mechanism which great powers this five UN Security Council members can apply. And in addition to United Nations Security Council, if you look at the voting behaviour in the UN Human Rights Council, you will see even stronger alignment pattern. I think this, again, goes back to the point about the two authoritarian systems trying to create international environment more favourable to authoritarianism, to an extent, even though I'm not particularly convinced by this authoritarians versus democracy argument when it comes to military alliance formation.

Alexander Korolev:

But nevertheless, in Human Rights Council between 2006 and 2012 when China was the chair of the council, it's on rotation basis, out of the total 120 voting occasions, China was never on the same side with the US, but there was 99% rate of agreement between China and Russia. So obviously they do use international platforms, international institutions also as a way of balancing, sort of balancing against the US and its allies.

Alexander Korolev:

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is a tricky case because after India and Pakistan joined the organisation I think they will tough time negotiating anything within Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. So this is an interesting case. The way it's assessed is that Russia brought India into the organisation, and China's condition was that, "Okay, if India joins, then Pakistan will have to join." So it's interesting that they're willing these countries like India, Pakistan, China are willing to be members of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. There is a common denominator obviously in terms of their identity, which is they're trying to present it as non-West, but what it means it remains to be seen honestly.

Peter Clarke:

Liz, your view on China and Russia behaving in multilateral institutions globally.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

I think it's contradictory in that both countries say that the US should not be so involved in world conflicts. It should be the United Nations. And when the United Nations Security Council tries to take an action and they veto it. So it creates some contradictory patterns of behaviour. But in general we do see them using the UN in support of the authoritarian norms that they've tried to promote, for example, on information sovereignty, non-interference and so on.



Elizabeth Wishnick:

I agree also on the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which has never been a very effective regional economic organisation because in Russia there was concern that this would turn the region into more of a Chinese base and even projects that might have been beneficial to Russia were opposed by Russian officials. And in terms of its effectiveness, I think there has been some intelligence sharing, so some lower level cooperation, working group cooperation. And you do see some negotiations on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation meetings. For example, China, India, Russia, or China, Mongolia, Russia can happen on the sidelines. So it's facilitated some dialogues on other topics not very effectively resolving regional ones.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

And the Eurasian Economic Union is Russia's project to reintegrate parts of the former Soviet space, and it's been very difficult to find some common ground with China's Belt and Road Initiative, which initially circumvented Russia and then Chinese leaders decided to more directly involve Russia. So there have been some agreements between these two, the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road, but not much has come from that unless you include some of the Arctic projects.

Peter Clarke:

Liz, finally, how plastic and robust or in fact brittle underlying is the increasingly tight bond between the nations of China and Russia? Some of the themes, some of the threads you've introduced into our discussion today present opportunities for both countries, but they're also lurking risks, aren't there? Yes, they seem aligned in a partnership if perhaps not an alliance. But what about the brittleness, there is some underlying brittleness in the relationship?

Elizabeth Wishnick:

This is a difficult question. Russia and China, I think, are brought together by convergence in their domestic trajectories. I think to the extent that that remains on track they will have domestic interests that keep them in the partnership despite all of the differences we discussed in terms of historical factors and border problems and differing economic systems and so on. I think as I've said before that some of the weakest points are on the peripheries of each country in terms of certain regions that Russia really considers within its own sphere and may not take kindly to China becoming more of a player.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

And I think Central Asia and the Arctic are two of such areas. One thing that's going to be very interesting to watch is that Russia just assumed the chairmanship of the Arctic Council this past May 20th. I think it's worth watching how Russia engages with China now that it's chairman of the Arctic Council. Russia was one of the countries that was most opposed to China becoming an observer state in 2013, but now China and Russia are cooperating in energy projects in the Russian Arctic. So will Russia try to accommodate China's interest, or will it try to keep China at a distance and find what opportunities are available to engage more with the other Arctic states?

Peter Clarke:

And Liz, can you imagine an unfolding scenario where China and Russia over time within that relationship you've described today are able to dislodge the United States in the Western Pacific?



Elizabeth Wishnick:

I don't see that happening anytime soon. I think we overestimate China's military power sometimes because of China's assertiveness, but this assertiveness has mostly been in so-called grey zone techniques using swarms of fishing boats and so on. And China has been acquiring technology, especially naval capabilities, to reach far beyond its shores, but it lacks a battlefield experience and it also lacks the experience in using its military forces in some kind of joint capacity, so air, sea and land forces together. They just reorganised their military to focus more on this aspect, and it's going to be a learning curve for them.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

Also, they tend still to recruit militarily from the countryside where there's a lower level of education, which may not be adequate for the high tech weapons of the future. So I think the Chinese military faces many challenges, it lags behind Russia's military, and it certainly lags behind the US military. Now, whether the US and Russia will be up to the challenge of maintaining their edge is another question, and I think that has to do with the domestic situation in both countries.

Peter Clarke:

Alex, you get the final word on this thing. How plastic, how brittle is that underlying relationship, and what is the future between China-Russia, the US and the Western Pacific?

Alexander Korolev:

Well, I think it's quite plastic actually rather than brittle because if you zoom out a little bit and look at the trajectory of China-Russia relations since the end of the Cold War, you can see the continuous enhancement of the relationship. There were ups and downs here and there, but again, if you zoom out and look at this chunk of time since 1991, the trend has been quite consistent. So all these domestic problems they've existed already. They're not new to the relationship. Nevertheless, they never created sort of perturbations that would drive China and Russia apart. There were obviously disagreements. There were delayed negotiations and so on and so forth, but nevertheless, these domestic issues or culture or border or whatever you put into this battery of domestic level variables they never created disincentives for the two countries to move away from each other.

Alexander Korolev:

So I would say it's rather stable relationship, which is well-managed, and it has been consolidating since the end of the Cold War. However, I'm not trying to make any deterministic or irreversible scenarios. I think this alignment trend, if we can put it that way, can be reversed by the change of the nature of relationship between the United States and Russia. Specifically Russia because Russia I think is the weakest end of the triangle. If the US considers cooperation with Russia, even selective cooperation with Russia, if it makes concessions when it comes Ukraine and Crimea, if it lifts sanctions, there are opportunities also to cooperate in the Asia-Pacific and in the Indo-Pacific. So I think the China-Russia alignment will be slowed down a little bit, if not reversed. So I tend to look at it, again, in structural terms. And I think a lot can depend on how US reacts and how US treats Russia, again, at the systemic level, not just some sporadic episodes of cooperation.



Alexander Korolev:

As to the future, again, the scenario which is different from that is that the confrontation between US and China and Russia and China continues, and in this case it will be increasingly difficult for the US ... Answering your question about whether China and Russia can dislodge US in the Pacific. It's not going to happen overnight. Again, it's a long-term trend, but if the relationship between US on the one hand and China and Russia on the other hand do not change significantly in the years to come, I think there are reasons to expect closer alignment between the two countries and as an outcome, increasing difficulties for the US in terms of maintaining its presence in the region.

Peter Clarke:

Alex, Liz, such a great narrative, such a big story and a fascinating discussion hearing you both today. Thank you so much for being with us on Ear to Asia.

Alexander Korolev:

Thank you. My pleasure.

Elizabeth Wishnick:

Thank you.

Peter Clarke:

Liz, before you go, how can people find you online?

Elizabeth Wishnick:

You can reach me at chinasresourcerisks.com. Once again, that's chinasresourcerisks.com in one word.

Peter Clarke:

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Peter Clarke:

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