

Strategic partnerships 2.0? Balancing through partnership:

The Sino-Russian relationship in the post-Cold War era

Introduction

The impressive economic performance of China in the last two decades along with the establishment of strategic partnership with Russia has captivated the attention of the academic and political community. This rapprochement has opened up the debate on great power competition, discussions on the changing distribution of power as well as on the re-emergence of balancing behaviour. Since 1996 China and Russia, have continuously strengthened their ties, something that has been causing uneasiness in the Western world and especially US, reinforced by the expression, on the part of both countries, of their dissatisfaction with the US-led world order and US unilateral actions.

In terms of the academic debate in IR, initially, China's economic rise and Russia's revisionism fuelled a resurgence of Realism and Balance of Power theory as explanatory tools; balancing has been one of the main points of reference in the discussion on the nature of the Sino-Russian relations, characterized as "a state behaviour causally linked to the systemic concentration of power" (He & Feng, 2008, p. 366).

According to the Balance of Power theory, second tier major powers can be expected to start to assemble forces based on arms build ups and countervailing alliances against the hegemon of the system (Bergfeldt, 2008). The classic case for balancing behaviour is interpreted by Waltz (1979, p. 127) in the following terms: "Secondary states, if they are free to choose, flock to the weaker side; for it is the stronger state that threatens them. On the weaker side, they are both more appreciated and safer, provided, of course, that the coalition they join achieves enough defensive or deterrent strength to dissuade adversaries from attacking". Referring to the specific foreign policy-balancing choices, respective contributions consider that a state could follow against another to "match, exceed, or block (its) power" (Mowle & Sacko, 2007, p. 66).

Therefore, the question on whether major powers like Russia and China could question USA hegemonic position is unavoidably raised and constitutes the starting puzzle of this paper.

In the academic literature there has been a divergence of opinions in this regard, that has resulted in three different positions, the first one emphasising an absence of “hard” balancing contrary to Realism’s prediction (alliances, military build ups); the second one identifying balancing behaviour;² and the third one referring to factors indicative of an indirect form of balancing, namely referred to it as ‘soft balancing’³.

Accordingly, some of the authors proclaim that there has been no balancing (Wohlfort, 2002; Ikenberry, 2002). Similarly, Lieber and Alexander (2005, p.119) state that “since the end of the Cold War, no major power in the international system appears to be engaged in internal balancing against the United States”; while others claim that balancing behaviour has occurred. One of the staunch defenders of Balance of Power theory, Kenneth Waltz insist that “balancing tendencies already taking place” (Waltz, 2002, p.52) a position shared by other authors such as Korolev (2018) and Layne (2006).

In the view of the absence of such critically important dynamics and phenomena such as a military alliance (external balancing) or the lacking growth in military capability (internal balancing), other realist scholars have adjusted their theoretical standpoint and set forward new types of balancing, such as negative balancing, soft balancing, indirect balancing, low-intensity balancing and institutional balancing. In this vein, some scholars such as Paul (2005) and Pape (2005) consider soft balancing as a typical state behaviour against the hegemon under unipolarity, with second-tier states trying to frustrate US actions through soft balancing. Pape (2005) also stated that soft balancing behaviour could be a precursor of more traditional balancing, depending on the future behaviour of the hegemon of the system and on the degree of the coordination of the joint abilities/capacities on the part of the challenger states. Thus, balancing considerations are still at play (Mearsheimer, 2019) even through different forms and means of application. In the post-Cold War era, great power competition has gained momentum; China and Russia have begun to reassert their influence both regionally and globally. Policymakers and academics view Russia and China as the two great powers with the

¹ William Wohlforth, ‘The Stability of a Unipolar World’, *International Security* 24/2 (Summer 1999), Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, ‘Hard Times for Soft Balancing’, *International Security* 30/1 (Summer 2005), 72–108; Gerard Alexander and Keir Lieber, ‘Waiting for Balancing: Why the World is Not Pushing Back’, *International Security* 30/1 (Summer 2005), 109–39

² Christopher Layne, ‘This Time it’s Real: The End of Unipolarity and the Pax Americana’, *International Studies Quarterly* 56/1 (March 2012), 203–13; Kenneth Waltz, ‘Structural Realism after the Cold War’, *International Security* 25/1 (Summer 2000), 5–41

³ Huiyun Feng and Kai He, ‘If Not Soft Balancing, Then What? Reconsidering Soft Balancing and US Policy Toward China’, *Security Studies* 17/2 (2008), 363–95; Robert Pape, ‘Soft Balancing Against the US’, *International Security* 30/1 (Summer 2005), 7–45; T.V. Paul, ‘Soft Balancing in the Age of US Primacy’, *International Security* 30/1 (Summer 2005), 46–71

greatest inclination and capacity to challenge the international order. Therefore, the US-Chinese-Russian triangle has monopolised the global developments since these countries shape the global competition between great powers and the polarity of the current international system, which is undergoing a complex transition. Thus, the US-led liberal world order as emerged after the end of Cold War “is now being challenged by the shifting balance of power among major international players and by the dynamic development of global agenda” (Michaiski-Pan, 2017, p. 34). Furthermore, factors such as a highly interrelated system of economy and trade, new forms of bilateral cooperation and alignment, the remaining danger of nuclear weapons, technological advancements posing new threats to security, as well as the geopolitical focus shifting away from Europe to Asia and the Pacific, compose the challenging background upon which the shifts in the international system take place. The impact on interstate relationships caused by these shifts is evident since the latter have proven more instrumental, controversial, and perplexing than the clear determination of allies and enemies, which dominated the Cold War. This requires new thinking, new institutions and the acceptance of diversity in both power and principle (Flockhart, 2016).

This paper provides an opportunity to advance the understanding on the conditions that lead to balancing and to prompt questions about the depth and the long-term vitality of Sino-Russian co-operation and alignment. The analysis also allows to bring together contributions of various dimensions on (Sino-Russian) relations, such as their military (Donaldson & Donaldson, 2003; Wilkins, 2008) and trade relations (Røseth, 2017).

Subscribing to a positivist approach this paper has two main aims. Firstly, it has as its goal to analyse quantitative and qualitative data that will be assessed chronologically in order to systematically approach the evolution of Sino-Russian partnership in depth and density in the last 27 years. The period under analysis starts from 1992 a period often omitted in literature with the Joint Statement on the Basis of Mutual Relations between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation⁴ and concludes in 2018.⁵ Such a variable-oriented perspective currently has a potential to move forward the comparative research on strategic partnership (Vieira, 2016), as well as lay foundations for (further) contributions. Furthermore, it can be applied to the cases of other strategic partnerships allowing to capture both the one-moment intensity of both cooperation and alignment and their change over time. Secondly, this

⁴ Joint Statement on the Basis of Mutual Relations between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation, Dec. 28 1992, http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2002-11/27/content_642356.htm

⁵ Certain data are available for 2019 (SC resolutions, state visits and military exercises as of October 2019)

thesis aims to examine the general patterns that hint at expressed balancing behaviour through the form of a strategic partnership and particularly the conditions that are essential in displaying a balancing behaviour. This will be achieved by identifying the prevailing conditions that lead to a balancing behaviour through a strategic partnership. The research question of this study is formulated as per follow: What conditions are deemed essential/necessary for a balancing behaviour through a strategic partnership and on a secondary basis how strengthened the relationship between the two partners is.

Thus, the dependable variables in this paper are two separate indicators addressing two different dimensions of their strategic partnership, the General Cooperation Affinity and Critical Alignment Affinity as the two representative axes to measure both the evolvement of their bilateral cooperation and the level of alignment in Sino-Russian relations. The indicators record changes and developments in the military, economic, political and trust dimension along the course of years.

The Sino-Russian Relations

Since the end of Cold War Sino-Russian relations have been renewed and strengthened, especially from 2000 onwards. Moscow and Beijing started renewing and enhancing their ties in security, trade, as well as diplomatic issues more vigorously and despite their great differences and asymmetries in various fields, the two countries share common borders longer than 4,000 km and one common past (Oznobishchev, 2017). China-Russia rapprochement is not a product of 2000's and the first approach "lies in the 1980s, as Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev and Chinese premier Deng Xiaoping sought to overcome decades of ideological, military, and political mistrust and competition" (Garnet, 2010, p. 41). Since Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to Beijing in 1989, Moscow's relations with China have grown continually stronger (Bellacqua 2010). The materialized development of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership dates back to 1996 when Yeltsin used the term in a joint Sino-Russian statement (Li, 2007, p.479). "The Russian-Chinese relationship has been strengthening since the signing of the 'Treaty of Good Neighbourliness, Friendship and Co-operation' in 2001" (Portyakov, 2010, p.2) and besides reaching an agreement on their common borders engaged in a series of common trade agreements and joints endeavours showcasing their will to create a multipolar world by limiting western interventions. For some authors one of the most dramatic diplomatic turnarounds in the past decade is the deepening of Sino-Russian strategic studies (Garnett, 2001) that turns West's focus to the developments in the East China and Russia are considered

close partners that share a common vision for the future of the international system that derives from the structural pressure of the unipolar system (Korolev, 2016). The deteriorating relations between United States and Russia as well as the latest tensions in USA-China relations have also facilitated the strategic partnership between them. The Sino-Russian rapprochement goes back to late 1980s and its continuous strengthening the last 20 or so years has caused uneasiness and discomfort in the Western world and especially in the US.⁶ China's rise as a global economic power has raised a number of concerns of the USA, exacerbated additionally by tensions related to technological and trade disputes, Belt and Road Initiative and the US presence in East Asia and in particular South China Sea. Meanwhile, Russia's improved economic position in late 2000s and military modernization also put its relations with the US in greater contention, reinforced by the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, the 2014 Ukraine crisis and the 2016 interference in US elections. However, despite the rapprochement between China and Russia, these two powers have been often considered as 'competitive', for instance at the regional level (Indeo, 1998; Eder, 2013) given the "clash of influence" in Central Asia. Undoubtedly, there is no broad consensus on what this relationship is which is reflecting its multidimensional character.

On many occasions China and Russia have expressed concerns on US hegemonic position and have sought to challenge the unipolar order by promoting multipolarity (Wilson, 2004) by showing signals of "incipient power balancing against USA even on the surface" (Carlson, 2008, p. 169). Examples of this attitude/approach date back to 1996, when they both agreed that NATO should be disbanded as a relic of Cold War (Rozman, 2000) , they have criticized NATO's 1999 bombing campaign in Serbia (Lampton, 2001) , resisted the US withdrawal from

⁶ for instance, USA the last years through Official National Security documents China and Russia are referred as "strategic competitors," "strategic adversaries" and even "enemies." According to the National Security Strategy in 2018, China and Russia are classified as revisionist powers which "challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity" marking it among the principal priorities for the Department. Moreover, there are concerns over the strengthening of China-Russia strategic partnership in many aspects such as cyberspace 'we are engaged in a long-term strategic competition with China and Russia. These States have expanded that competition to include persistent campaigns in and through cyberspace that pose long-term strategic risk to the Nation as well as to our allies and partners'. **Sources:** Executive summary of the report of the commission to assess the ballistic missile threat to the united states July 15, 1998, Cyber threats from China, Russia, and Iran: protecting American critical infrastructure, Hearing before the subcommittee on cybersecurity, infrastructure protection and security technologies of the committee on Homeland Security House of Representatives, one hundred thirteenth congress, first session, March 20, 2013, serial no. 113-9, Statement for the Record Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community Senate Armed Services Committee, 2015, Report to Congressional Committees, National Security Long-Range Emerging Threats Facing the United States as identified by Federal Agencies December 2018 7 Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge, Summary Department of Defence Cyber Strategy 2018 p.1

the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (Kuchins, 2002), opposed the war in Iraq in 2003 and the sanctions on North Korea and Iran.

In the last years, there have been numerous scholarly works addressing the Sino-Russian relations, the nature and sustainability of their strategic partnership leading to two opposing academic narratives: first, those who are doubtful of it, thus characterizing it as an axis of convenience (Lo, 2008), axis of necessity (Kuchins, 2013), axis of insecurity (Brenton, 2013), presidential pseudo alliance (Baev, 2018), opportunistic (Weitz, 2008), an illusion (Beaucamp, 2015), or a limited, defensive, strategic partnership (Li, 2007), and second, those who consider it to be a rapidly evolving relationship, with strong foundations (Wilkins, 2008, Abrossio, 2017), a true dialogue fostering bilateral trade and cooperation (Titarenko, 2014) and an 'alliance in the making' (Allison, 2018, Korolev, 2016).

Independently from their differences, most studies attempt to address the Sino-Russian relationship by focusing on its key drivers, points of frictions and a possible counterbalancing of the US hegemony (Lo, 2014; Li, 2007; Weitz, 2008). In terms of methodological choices, the most common approach to the topic has been foreign policy discourse analysis (Bellacqua, 2010; Saradzhyan & Wyne, 2017; Alexeeva & Lasserre, 2018), which is often restricted to the one-dimensional analysis of a certain aspect of their relationship, such as economic and trade ties (Anderson, 2013; Rui, 2010), energy and oil (Christoffersen, 2012; Skalamera, 2016), or the military dimension (Tsai, 2003; Muraviev, 2014).

Lately there have been attempts evaluate Sino-Russian relations strengthening by using quantitative data analysis (Korolev, 2017 ; Papageorgiou et al., 2019) and more positivist attempts have tried to empirically test an ideal model of strategic partnerships based on multivariate multiple regression models (Tyushka, Czechowska et al., 2019) or drawing on Analytic Hierarchy Process (Gupta & Azad, 2011). However, despite the dynamical evolving level of Sino-Russian relations it is still evaluated under the two main opposing narratives discussed above ranging from a low-level cooperation to a high-level cooperation with an underlying importance to the great power competition game in the post-Cold War system.

Strategic partnerships

According to Kay (2000, p. 23) ‘‘Strategic partnerships have become a major rhetorical and substantive tool of post-cold war international relations.’’ China is among the first countries to base its foreign policy diplomacy on the signing of strategic partnerships, having signed 81⁷ partnerships as of 2018. Since 2000s, the concept spread beyond China, to a global and regional level initiating a more flexible form of long-term bilateral cooperation, promising mutual gains to partner and addressing a common aim (Rivera & Cashckak, 2016). Wilkins (2014) considers strategic partnerships as the expression of collaboration between two or more partners, in a loose and non-binding way, formed to address common challenges in different areas.

In terms of the definition of strategic partnerships in this thesis they are taken as a given (i.e., considered an objective phenomenon), expressed in the signing of the 1996 treaty between Russia and China and is generally analysed as being comprised of multidimensional multilevel cooperative initiatives in various fields. Sino-Russian strategic partnership is based on comprehensive cooperation in the areas of bilateral and international politics, defence and security, as well as energy, according to De Haas (2013). These areas have been added to the historical ‘Treaty for Good Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation’, signed in 2001, under which Moscow and Beijing agreed to develop long-term relations of friendship and equal partnership while agreeing to develop mutually beneficial cooperation in trade, military, energy and other fields (Weissmann et al., 2015).

Due to the ‘flexibility’ and ‘constructive ambiguity’ of the framework of strategic partnerships (Grevi, 2008) it provides us with space to consider for the analysis adjustments, concessions and a notion of pragmatism as a philosophical choice (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). In view of all that has been mentioned so far, one may suppose that strategic partnerships have been formed under a systemic structure that could lead to a balancing behaviour and Sino-Russian partnership due to their great power status holds elements of the balance of power theory but in a distinct formation that is better suited to explain current dynamics (Kay, 2016).

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/

Methodology and research design

The method for this paper draws on previous works measuring political affinity (Moore, 2014), power transitions (Tammen et al., 2000) and alignment (Abb & Strüver, 2015). Identifying balancing behaviour, the intensity of cooperation and alignment requires a highly multidimensional metric that encompasses a different range of areas and a significant amount of data. This paper provides a comprehensive investigation of Sino-Russian strategic partnership between the years of 1992 and 2018 upon two distinct indexes in order to pinpoint the changing scale of both cooperation and alignment in a simplified and efficient manner. The period under analysis is divided in a four years period as a representation of the duration of a presidential term⁸. The evolvement and the level of the strategic partnership between China and Russia will be analysed through a coding scheme that seeks to aggregate both quantitative and qualitative data into two metrics that can evaluate the cooperation between any partnership and the alignment between great powers. A coding scheme is perceived as the process “from the data to the idea, and from the idea to all the data pertaining to that idea” (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 137) and “a transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis” (Saldana, 2009, p. 4). With the selection of a 6 set ordinal membership set we identify and assign categories, based on intensity, within the empirical data.

The empirical analysis of this paper draws on two indicators General Cooperation Affinity and Critical Alignment Affinity to describe and test Sino-Russian level of cooperation and alignment based on a wide range of data and statistical observations.

The General Alignment tool follows Moore’s (2014) ordinal coding on Political Affinity and is comprised of an overall 36-point scale as the summation of ordinal variables representing underlying and persistent components of their strategic partnership: arms transfers, joint military exercises, overall trade, energy trade, voting patterns in United Nations Security Council and official visits. Generally, these criteria seek to evaluate strategic partnership, as a product of: military, economic and political cooperation.

Following the literature on the areas that shape this bilateral relationship along with the empirical manifestation this study suggests that these areas reflect the dynamics of a strategic partnership both theoretically and practically. For the purposes of measurement all the dimensions are considered to be of equal importance. Since the paper evaluates an already

⁸ Based on Russian constitution before the change in 2012

established strategic partnership the cooperation is assessed from a positive start leading to 1 as the indication of basic cooperation all the way to 6 that presents the highest degree of cooperation in a strategic partnership.

Critical Alignment Affinity is a more substantial variable on the consolidation of an alignment. It evaluates the mutual support of the partners both in regional and international events. China has supported Russia's on Chechnya and Russia supported Beijing on Taiwan and Xinjiang, Tibet separatism moves (Lo, 2004). Moreover, we have included cases since 1996 that the event had a specific interest for each country's national interest. The respective events/crises include: Taiwan Strait Crisis 1996, Chinese Embassy Bombing in Belgrade 1999, Chechnya war 1999, the NATO enlargement 2004, Georgia crisis 2008, Syrian war 2011, South China Sea dispute 2012, One Belt Road initiative in 2013, Crimea crisis 2014, Ukraine crisis 2014, Russia's interference in US elections 2016, US-China trade war 2016 and US sanctions to Russia 2018. Thus, the second indicator Critical Alignment Affinity is structured mainly on qualitative data and is based on the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT) in an attempt to measure the mutual support between the partners and their common worldview. In the database the score starts from -10 representing hostile relations to +10 friendly relations. Our categorisation of intensity will be based accordingly to the database score and the results per period start from 1 basic alignment to 6 comprehensive alignment.

After the two indicators have provided a scoring for both the intensity of cooperation and alignment, the results will be transformed into a six-value fuzzy set calibration necessary to operate a Qualitative Comparative Analysis in order to test the causal conditions related to balancing behaviour and identify which conditions⁹ are essential for a balancing behaviour through a strategic partnership.

The research design strategy of this paper is based on "abduction", aimed at collecting pertinent observations and empirical data while applying concepts from existing fields of our knowledge for the exploration of novel and more complex sets of problems. Abduction is deemed as the most suited research design for this research as it follows a pragmatist perspective that starts with 'surprising facts' or 'puzzles' and is then devoted to their explanation (Kovács et al., 2005) while answering questions regarding the nature of a relationship based on measurable variables (Williams, 2007). The proposed research will not be based on one theory of certain school of thoughts (and its Hypothesis do not derive immediately from any specific IR theory) but rather

⁹ The 6 subcategories of the dimensions

provide a more dynamic explanation of the empirical phenomena under consideration. Choosing its variables on the existing academic literature and especially the debate on balancing as informed by sub-streams of Neorealism and rationalist approaches mainly on the dynamically evolving literature on strategic partnership this paper advances positivist research and incorporate other tools that will allow for the further exploration in the Sino-Russian relationship evolution between 1992 and 2019.

General Cooperation Affinity: *Military Dimension*

The military dimension is measured based on two subcategories: arms transfers and military exercises. Military cooperation among partners that can take various forms: equipment procurements, arms transfers, joint military exercises, nuclear disarmament cooperation, transfer of military technology, exchanges of military personnel, joint trainings and development of common doctrines (Schwartz, 2014). Their military cooperation is based on arms transfer and was further enhanced with joint military exercises (Gabuev, 2018) and despite changes over time, in the volume and depth, military cooperation remains a pillar of their ties. Since the early 1990's China has purchased a great amount of Russia's sophisticated armaments and weapons' mainly after the visit of Yeltsin to Beijing in 1992 (Boulton, 1992) thus, having helped to prop up Russia's disintegrating defence industry''(Zarzecki ,1999 p. 261) as well as assisted China's army modernisation despite the European ban on arms exports to China as imposed after the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square. Their mutually beneficial arms trade between 1991 and 2010 accounts for more than 90 percent of China's imported major conventional weapons were supplied by Russia (Jakobson et al., 2011) while in two-year period 2011 to 2012 China acquired \$2 billion worth of Russian arms.¹⁰ Arms transfer between China and Russia signal a strategic counterweight towards US hegemonism, the challenges in the Pacific mostly the Japanese power and Central Asia with the militant Islam. Therefore, there is a systemic factor and core motivations and interests in their considerations that have helped China and Russia to overcome the hostility which characterized their past relations (Donaldson & Donaldson, 2003).

The subcategory of arms transfers is calculated as the ratio per period of the annual trade of conventional weapons, from Russia to China divided by the exports of Russia to the world. For the coding membership we used the highest share per period of the top5 importers in the world and their main suppliers. Based on this average the categorisation on the intensity of

¹⁰ SIPRI <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>

cooperation was constructed from a level of 1 basic, 2 low, 3 limited, 4 moderate, 5 enhanced and 6 comprehensive, to address the increases/decreases in the world total per period.

Table 1: Arms transfers coding scheme

Arms transfers period Percentage	Set membership	Cooperation Intensity Scale
0-7%	1	Basic
8-15%	2	Low
16-23%	3	Limited
24-31%	4	Moderate
32-39-%	5	Enhanced
40% +	6	Comprehensive

The results indicate that during the 1990's there is a limited and then moderate intensity followed by the highest level of intensity in the two consequent periods 2000 to 2003 and 2005 to 2007 signalling a comprehensive cooperation. In addition, after this period the results showcase a decrease in intensity. According to the last period 2016 to 2019 with the so far available data as of 2018 it is experienced an increase in cooperation intensity. The results show a decrease in China's imports that is associated with the country's own manufacturing of advanced weapons, such as the Jian-10 (J-10) and J-11 combat aircraft and its transition into a major arms exporter (Wezeman, 2017) with its geographical focus in the Belt and Road Initiative partners and long-time partners Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Table 2: Arms transfers results

Period	Arms transfers Percentage	Set membership	Cooperation Intensity Scale
1992-1995	16%	3	Limited
1996-1999	25%	4	Moderate
2000-2003	45%	6	Comprehensive
2004-2007	45%	6	Comprehensive
2008-2011	17%	3	Limited
2012-2015	11%	2	Low
2016-2019 ¹¹	16%	3	Limited

Source: Author calculations with data collected from SIPRI

The second subcategory of military cooperation identified with as the frequency of joint military exercises it shows the two countries' increasing unity in both land and navy. The Sino-Russian military exercises have contributed to the development of their security partnership (Weitz, 2015) and "can be regarded as an extension and thermometer of the overall relationship

¹¹ Calculated based on 3 years period ending in 2018

between the two countries” (De Haas 2013, p. 44). It is observed a “shift from arms transfers to direct military cooperation” (Schwartz, 2014) during the last years that advances not only the cooperation but the alignment between them. Despite the reassurances provided by the two countries that their joint military exercises are not targeting any third country but regards international terrorist and separatist movements however, the theatre of these joint exercises in regions of great geopolitical weight for both countries such as South China Sea and the Baltic showcases an opposition to a U.S.- dominated security order (Wishnick, 2005). In early 2000s joint military exercises began to be launched between China and Russia with the first being the Apprehension of Illegal Border Crosser Exercise in 2003 followed by the first large-scale joint military exercise “Peace Mission 2005” occurred on August 19-25, 2005, in Russia’s Vladivostok and China’s Shandong Peninsula. In the following years the two militaries. In 2012 it was introduced the first naval exercise between the two countries named as “Joint Sea” taking place in on April 22-27, 2012 in the Yellow Sea. Moreover the “Joint Sea-2016,” of September 12- 19, 2016, occurred in the disputed region of South China Sea in a significant time period just after the Hague-based tribunal dismissed China’s nine-dash line claim (Panda, 2016), not only seek to strengthen bilateral military coordination but indicating a high level of mutual support and stronger alignment.

The measurement of the military exercises is based on joint exercised between China and Russia as well as military under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. For the cooperation intensity scale the measurement accounts for the amount of the two countries conducted military exercises annually, assuming than more than the half of them conducted together represents a comprehensive level of cooperation. The basic level of cooperation starts with two exercises per period and follows accordingly reaching its highest set at 15 or more per period (table 3).

Table 3: Military exercises per period coding scheme

Number of joint military exercises per period	Set membership	Cooperation Intensity scale
0-2	1	Basic
3-5	2	Low
6-8	3	Limited
9-11	4	Moderate
12-14	5	Enhanced
15+	6	Comprehensive

The results indicate that China and Russia have stepped up the level of their joint military exercises showing an intensification in the military dimension. Starting from basic cooperation in the first three periods 1992-1995, 1996-1999 and 2000-2003 it is noticed a progressive intensity on this subcategory reaching an enhanced level of cooperation in the last period 2016-2019.

Table 4: Military exercises results per period

Period	Number of joint military exercises	Set membership	Cooperation Intensity scale
1992-1995	0	0	N/A
1996-1999	1	1	Basic
2000-2003	2	1	Basic
2004-2007	3	2	Low
2008-2011	7	3	Limited
2012-2015	9	4	Moderate
2016-2019	12	5	Enhanced

Source: Calculated based on China Military webpage¹², Global fire power¹³, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation¹⁴ and the Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China annual reports to US congress¹⁵ and various authors¹⁶

General Cooperation Affinity: *Economic dimension*

The second dimension measures the economic relations between the two countries, which is considered underdeveloped compared to their military collaboration (Donaldson, 2003). After the end of Cold War, the bilateral trade between the two partners began to increase mainly the exports from Russia to China (Hsu & Soong, 2014). The bilateral trade¹⁷ from US\$5.86 billion in 1992 continuously increased reaching 6.84 in 1996 to 56.83 in 20008, \$69.6 billion in 2016 , \$84.2 billion in 2017 and \$107.1 billion in 2018. Trade relationship between China and Russia has grown over the past two decades however, the economic interdependence between the two countries is low and Russia's importance to China as a trade partner remains limited. The last 5 years the two countries have improved their trade ties, China is Russia's biggest trading partner and the largest investor, while Russia represents a powerhouse of raw material mainly on energy for China's growing market demand. However, measuring the sum of exports and imports between the countries is not an accurate indicator on their trade relationship as it

¹² <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/>

¹³ https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=china

¹⁴ <http://eng.mil.ru/>

¹⁵ https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf

¹⁶ Adapted from Weitz 2015; Yu Bin 2014; Scobell, Ratner, and Beckley 2014; Blasko 2010

¹⁷ Arms trade is not included

does not take in consideration the actual increase in total exports, particularly China's exports that are constantly increasing thus, increasing its exports to other countries. Therefore, there is an asymmetrical relationship not due to the total exports of China but on how important is each country for the others trade. On the one hand China has been one of from the top five destinations for Russian exports after 2000s while in 2010 became the top importer of Russian goods. On the other hand, Russia is not even in the top10 list of exporters in China despite the increase in trade the last years. Therefore, trade relations between China and Russia is considered rather limited and not the most dynamic aspect of their strategic partnership. The importance of trade in bilateral relations of countries and in other aspects such as the quality of relations, alignments prospects and soft balancing behaviour cannot be uncovered by examining the sum of exports and imports between two partner countries. Thus, our analysis will be based on the impact of interdependence in this relationship and how it has been evolved since the early 1990s. Interdependence signals a relationship of mutual needs and vulnerabilities (Barbieri, 2012). Based on Barbieri model of interdependence we used the equation of interdependence¹⁸ with the results ranging from 0 to 1.

$$Interdependence_{ij} = Saliency_{ij} * Symmetry_{ij}$$

The results per period were calculated with the highest indicator being set as the interdependence ratio of China and US (0.15) and divided accordingly on the 6-set membership.

Table 5: Interdependence ratio coding

Interdependence ratio/period	Set membership	Cooperation Intensity scale
0.00- 0.01,4	1	Basic
0.02-0.04,4	2	Low
0.05-0.07,4	3	Limited
0.08-0.10,4	4	Moderate
0.11-0.14,4	5	Enhanced
0.15+	6	Comprehensive

The results indicate that the first period in the early 1990s the interdependence of China and Russia was higher. The following years despite the increases in bilateral trade the interdependence of the two countries remains relatively stable with 0.03 from 1996 to 2007 and a small increase reaching 0.04 from 2008 onwards that according to the designated scale of cooperation intensity is characterised as low.

¹⁸ Barbieri, 2012

Table 6: Interdependence ratio results

Period	Interdependence ratio	Set membership	Cooperation Intensity scale
1992-1995	0.05	3	Limited
1996-1999	0.03	2	Low
2000-2003	0.03	2	Low
2004-2007	0.03	2	Low
2008-2011	0.04	2	Low
2012-2015	0.04	2	Low
2016-2019 ¹⁹	0.04	2	Low

Source: Author's calculations based on data collected from World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS)²⁰ and UN Comtrade²¹

The second subcategory of the economic dimension is the energy trade. The energy cooperation is a distinct and defining feature of Sino-Russian relations the last years. The energy trade started increasing after signing the Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation in 2001 (Nezhnikova et al., 2018). China's energy needs as the world's largest energy consumer since 2009 intensified the cooperation with Russia increased which was solidified with two major deals the signing of the \$270 billion oil megadeals in 2013 and the \$400 billion gas in 2014. Nevertheless, according to Jaffe et al. (2015, p.3) "Russia and China have until recently been slow to consummate their energy relationship". Russian trade statistics in crude oil exports to China was very low compared to the petroleum share in Russian exports to the world. From 2008 to 2013 there was a series of agreements both on natural gas and oil that lifted their bilateral cooperation to a new level (Roseth, 2017). The continuously increased share of Russian petroleum in the Chinese market since 2003 led in Russia becoming China's largest supplier of crude oil by displacing Saudi Arabia since 2016 and onwards. Nevertheless, the Western sanctions against Russia have also contributed in the strengthening of the Sino-Russian cooperation, particularly in the energy sector (Ydyrys et al., 2017).

In this subcategory fuels are used to investigate the development of bilateral energy cooperation between China and Russia and to identify the place of Russia in China's fuels imports rankings. For the membership score in dividing the levels of the cooperation intensity was based on the share of the biggest importer of fuels to China per period with the average scale is set accordingly.

¹⁹ Data available only till 2018

²⁰ <https://wits.worldbank.org/>

²¹<https://comtrade.un.org/>

Table 7: Energy trade (fuels) coding

1992-1995	1996-1999	2000-2003	2004-2007	2008-2011	2012-2015	2016-2019	Set membership & Cooperation Intensity scale
0.4-2	0-2.9	0-2.1	0-2.5	0-2.8	0-2.4	0-1.9	1 Basic
4.3-8.5	3-5.9	2.2-4.3	2.6-5.1	2.9-5.7	2.5-4.9	2-3.9	2 Low
8.6-17,1	6-8.9	4.4-6.5	5.2-7.7	5.8-8.6	5-7.4	4-5.9	3 Limited
17.2-21.4	9-11.9	6.6-8.7	7.8-10.3	8.7-11.5	7.5-9.9	6-7.9	4 Moderate
21.5-25.7	12-14.9	8.8-10.9	10.4-12.9	11.6-14.4	10-12.4	8-9.9	5 Enhanced
25.8+	15+	11+	13+	14.5+	12.5+	10+	6 Comprehensive

During the 1990s and early 2000s there was a limited cooperation intensity. The results after the period 2004-2007 showcase the steady increase in Russia's share in Chinese market that reached a comprehensive level of intensity in the period 2016-2019 indicating a higher level of interdependence between them in this category.

Table 8: Energy trade(fuels) results

Period	Percentage per period	Set membership	Cooperation Intensity scale
1992-1995	3.89	1	Basic
1996-1999	3.34	1	Basic
2000-2003	5.7	3	Limited
2004-2007	9.64	4	Moderate
2008-2011	7.53	4	Moderate
2012-2015	9.3	4	Moderate
2016-2019 ²²	10.9	6	Comprehensive

Source: Calculated based on data from World Bank WITS and International Energy Agency²³

General Cooperation Affinity: *Political dimension*

Political cooperation on this paper broadly denotes two aspects, the states government's willingness on working together on issues of global governance and the meetings between heads of state and government, government ministers, and members of parliament for building up a broader-based network of trust between the two countries.

The first subcategory address similarities in the voting behaviour in United Nations Security Council since adopted resolutions are binding and more consequential. While there has been an extensive research on what the joint vetoes of China and Russia there has been little effort to investigate the overall patterns and similarities in all the presented resolutions, those occasions when a vote has been taken in the United Nations Security Council. The similarity

²² Data calculated till 2018

²³ <https://www.iea.org/>

in their voting patterns provides an exceptionally good set of evidence for observing issues and alignments of states in international politics (Kim & Russett, 1996; Ferdinand, 2013).

The score membership addresses on the voting behaviour in the UNSC to examine the posture of these two states towards global governance. The measurement is dividing the total number of the resolutions that were not unanimously voted per year²⁴ divided with the total number of resolutions China and Russia had the same position. The percentage calculates the occasions when China and Russia voted the same way either yes or abstained. Based on a longitudinal evidence on common positions of the five permanent states since 1990 the highest level of cooperation is set to 45 % as it was formed between USA and UK.

Table 9: United Nations Security Council Voting similarity coding

% of similarity in voting patterns per period	Set membership	Cooperation Intensity scale
0-7%	1	Basic
8-15%	2	Low
16-23%	3	Limited
24-31%	4	Moderate
32-44%	5	Enhanced
45%+	6	Comprehensive

The results indicate a disparity in voting similarity between periods. A higher percentage indicates matching foreign policy interests. The voting data depicts relatively diverse foreign policy alignment. Interestingly there is a higher cooperation intensity in the period 1996-1999. Despite the joint vetoes their voting behaviour in security council does not indicated a constant coordinated effort and is quite volatile. However, the period 2016-2019 signals their highest cooperation level so far.

Table 10: United Nations Security Council Voting similarity results

Period	Percentage of voting similarity in SC	Set membership	Cooperation Intensity scale
1992-1995	11%	2	Low
1996-1999	36%	5	Enhanced
2000-2003	0%	1	Basic
2004-2007	36%	5	Enhanced
2008-2011	13%	2	Low
2012-2015	11%	2	Low
2016-2019 ²⁵	44%	5	Enhanced

Source: United Nations Digital Gallery²⁶

²⁴ According to Article 27 of the UN Charter: *Decisions of the Security Council on all other matters shall be made by an affirmative vote of nine members including the concurring votes of the permanent members; provided that, in decisions under Chapter VI, and under paragraph 3 of Article 52, a party to a dispute shall abstain from voting*

²⁵ Calculated as of September 2019

²⁶ <https://digitallibrary.un.org/>

For the second subcategory of the political dimension we consider high-profile state visits as an indicator of mutual trust. States visit enact trusting relationships and bring the focus on political leadership in predicting the behaviour of states (Hermann and Hagan, 1998). State visits have been an interesting component of China-Russia strategic partnership particularly due to the good relationships of Putin and Jinping even expressed in periods of crisis, like President Xi Jinping attending the Western boycotted 2014 Winter Olympics opening ceremony in Sochi (Chu, 2015). Both China and Russia have developed a network of trust among their political elites that is enhanced with frequent high-level state visits. This institutionalization of leadership dialogues is included by Nadkarni (2010) as one of the elements displayed in strategic partnership.

Table 11: States visit coding

State visits/Friendliness score	Set membership	Cooperation Intensity scale
1-3.9	1	Basic
4.0-4.9	2	Low
5.0-5.9	3	Limited
6.0-6.9	4	Moderate
7.0-7.9	5	Enhanced
8.0-9.0	6	Comprehensive

The results showcase an increase in the frequency of state visits between the official of the two countries since 2000. The period from 2008 and onward there is a comprehensive level of cooperation indicative of the two leaders' statements on their good relations and personal sympathy highlighting the role leadership in foreign policy and interstate relations.

Table 12: States visits results

Period	State visits score	Set membership	Cooperation Intensity scale
1992-1995	3.7	1	Basic
1996-1999	6.0	4	Moderate
2000-2003	7.6	5	Enhanced
2004-2007	7.9	5	Enhanced
2008-2011	8.0	6	Comprehensive
2012-2015	8.0	6	Comprehensive
2016-2019	8.2	6	Comprehensive

Source: Calculated based on Tsinghua University's Friendliness database and Ministries of Foreign Affairs²⁷

²⁷ <http://government.ru> and <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>

Conclusion

The proposed indicators General Cooperation Affinity and Critical Alignment Affinity are designed to analyse and disentangle the level of cooperation and alignment between the two strategic partners. According to the results there has been a continuous strengthening in the Sino-Russian relations and the last period 2016-2019 indicates an enhanced overall cooperation intensity higher than the previous periods. The second highest period to follow is 2004-2007 (table 11).

While in the three dimensions the results are more perplexing showing an increase in certain subcategories but not combined in the dimensions. The last period holds an enhanced level in political dimension and a moderate in military and political dimension (table 12).

Table 13: General Cooperation Affinity Overall score (author's calculations)

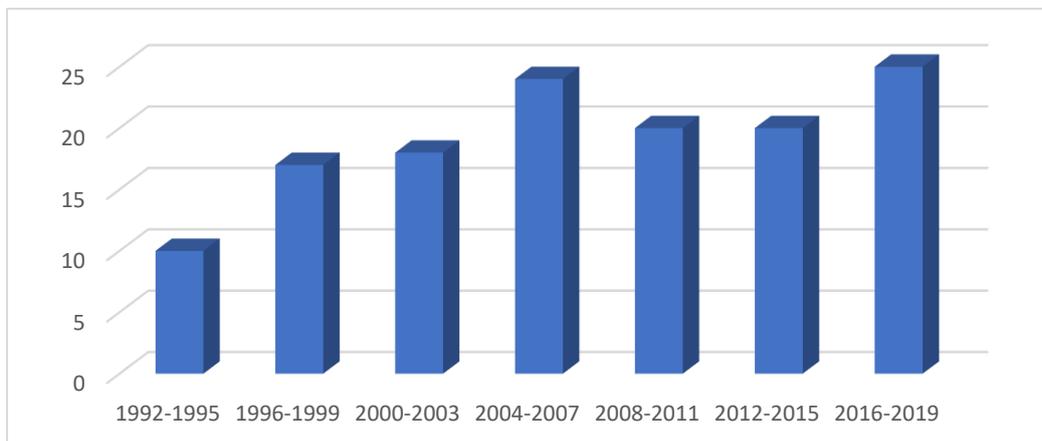
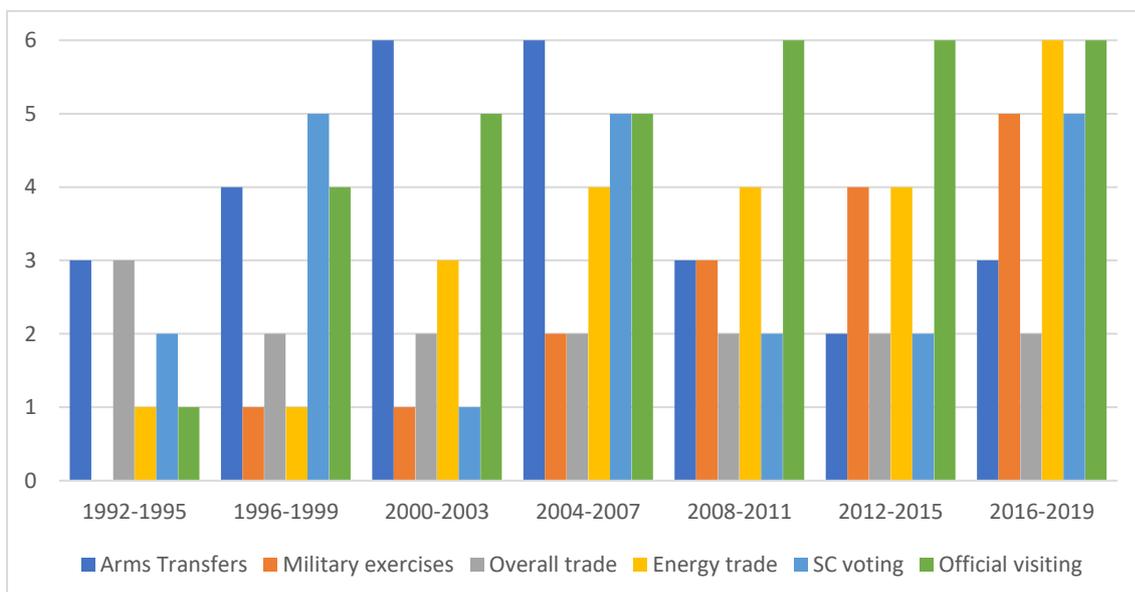


Table 14: General Cooperation Affinity results per dimension (author's calculations)



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