



THE 'REMEDIAL' DEFENCE COOPERATION BETWEEN RUSSIA-CHINA



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The virulent response of the West towards Russia in the 2014 Ukraine crisis became the turning point in revitalising Russia-China strategic partnership, especially in defence cooperation. As strategic partners who are set to challenge the United States-led international system, both Russia and China are aware of the shortcomings of ill-prepared military forces alongside obsolete military technology. Additionally, given Russia's current economic crisis, defence cooperation with China is crucial to prevent Russia from sinking back into the almost insuperable 1990s situation – especially its defence sector. China has emerged as a 'rescuer' to preserve Russia's Defence Industrial Complex (DIC) through large scale investments and financial aid. Russia on the other hand becomes the 'surrogate' to address the challenges of Chinese defence requirements. Russia, on its part, has set aside its concerns about technological theft by China and perhaps has even 'forgotten' the 1969 Sino-Soviet military confrontation in an effort to placate China. The sale of 24 Su-35 fighter aircraft and S-400 air-defence missiles is an indicator of revamped defence cooperation between the two countries.

The current defence cooperation between the two is contrived based on several factors, namely:

- Permutation of *military diplomacy* (Russia) and *economic sponsorship* (China)
- A reduced '*phobia*' towards each other as threats
- Conciliation of *strategic* interests
- Compatible military *technological* cooperation
- Power projection (*signalling*) to adversaries and partners alike

Today, Russia and China have reconstructed their defence engagement that has surpassed even the Soviet era level of interaction and since 2014, it has transformed to a more institutionalised and

intense engagement. The two countries have signed epoch breaking defence agreements such as the roadmap on military cooperation for 2017-2020 on 07 June 2017 which '*makes top-level design and general plan for the military cooperation between China and Russia in 2017-2020*'.¹ President Vladimir Putin's decision to run for the 2018 presidential election, and Chinese Premier Xi Jinping securing his political power and control post the 19th Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) held in October 2017, have only re-affirmed their 'vision' together as defence partners. Besides, the domestic defence reforms and programmes initiated by these two leaders in their respective countries are set to be smoothly executed as a result of political stability, while also ensuring that their ambitions for military modernisation and up-gradation of the defence industrial complex materialise.

One of the key shared defence 'visions' between the two countries is to orient towards playing a proactive role where the absence or minimalisation of the US influence has impacted the 'security blanket' it has provided to its sphere of interests or allies. Afghanistan's security and stability for instance has emerged as the top priority for both Russia and China post US drawdown since 2014. If reports are to be believed, *China is set to fully fund a new military base in Badakhshan, covering all material and technical expenses, including both lethal and non-lethal weaponry and equipment in Afghanistan*.² Through large scale joint military exercises and supply of defence equipment, the two also aim to supplant the defence shortages of long-term US allies such as Pakistan and Turkey. Unfortunately, for Russia's traditional partners such as India, its revived defence cooperation with China is a major concern as it amplifies the combat capability of the PLA. In addition, the sale of S-400 missiles to both India and China and Mi-35 attack helicopters to Pakistan runs counter to the de facto understanding of Russia not to sell advanced weapons capabilities to countries that have been a major threat to India's national security.

The revamped defence cooperation between Russia and China has come at a crucial time as Russia has re-emerged as a potential competitor occupying second position in the global defence market. China - — an emerging defence supplier nation - has succeeded in the proliferation of defence equipment such as Unmanned (weaponised) Aerial Vehicles (UAV). China is not far behind as a defence 'supplier' nation as it occupies third place, with Russia being the second highest supplier of global arms from 2012-2016.³ China's shortcomings in producing state-of-the-art military equipment prevent it from competing not only in the global market but also does not satisfy its domestic needs. The fact that Russia has recommenced the supply of high end defence technology to China and institutionalisation

of military technical cooperation (MTC) has further enhanced China's indigenisation process of its DIC.

Traditionally, Moscow reserves its best hardware for exclusively domestic use, selling only older models of Russian weapons, fearing technology theft. For instance, China is now able to get access to Russia's cutting-edge aviation technology. It is a victory for the Chinese who have been investing heavily in military hardware, but lacking in domestic skill at aircraft design.⁴ Military technical cooperation with Russia therefore, becomes a key aspect in technical up-gradation of China's defence industry. This goes on to say that China's appetite for military assistance from Russia is insatiable despite joining the 'elite club' of global arms trade market.

Joint military exercises in contested regions such as in South of China Sea and China's inroads in Indian Ocean region spurs China's power projection in Indo-Pacific region. Unlike Russia, whose well executed military diplomacy has worked in Syria, China is yet to prove its mettle in military diplomacy and hence needs Russia's military wherewithal to enable China preserve its regional and global interests and security. The amalgamation of Russia's rising military diplomacy and effective weapons display during the Syrian crisis has therefore made China more desirous of strengthening its defence relations with Russia.

Despite the growing inter-dependence in the defence sphere between Russia and China, it is however yet to achieve an infallible engagement. Undeniably, Russia has reclaimed its position as an important global defence market through its steadfast defence reforms and programs alongside large scale allocation of defence budget. The hostility and contest between Russia and the West has come as a boon for China in particular. As a result of 2014 economic sanctions, Russia's State Armament Programme (SAP) 2018-2025 has called for trimming down of its defence budget. While Russia has stated that it will not involve in 'senseless' arms race due to the rising tension with the US, cutting down of defence budget is said to impact its R&D.⁵ Moreover, though China needs the Su-35 to obtain access to the aircraft's new 117S engine – and Russia's latest and extremely powerful aircraft-based IRBIS radar system – beyond that, Russia has a very limited catalogue of military hardware that it can sell to Beijing at this point as observed by Konstantin Makienko, the deputy director of CAST.⁶ This period of eight years of SAP is likely to slow down Russia's technological progress if the budget cuts impact defence R&D. This will provide China the much needed 'window of opportunity' to upgrade its defence technology alongside Russia's MTC. China for now prefers to be an 'import' dependent nation of Russia's defence market till such time that its own defence industry makes headway in advanced

weapons technology. Russia may therefore consciously withhold technologies and weapons through which China will achieve matching capabilities or beyond.

Simultaneously, the fact that defence cooperation between Russia and China has moved beyond cooperation to competition, Russia realises that to preserve its position in global arms trade, the DIC is an important asset. The DIC has greatly contributed in Russia's growth and power projection in international relations besides being a key revenue generator for Russia. As an export oriented defence market, Russia has not held back in selling weapons to India, Southeast and Southwest Asian countries that are perceived as threats by China. Russia's defence deals with countries such as Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia and India are arguably deteriorating China's position in the Asian region. Also, Russia will not lose its focus on India as it is a huge defence market, and free from ambiguities and suspicion. Contextually, for Russia, its DIC will remain a vital component because Russia understands the impact of demographic trends and the future size of Russian armed forces is under question. To compensate for the limitation of possessing huge Armed Forces, Russia would continue to depend on its defence capabilities – especially its DIC that will play a major role in preserving its national security.

As regards Russia-China emerging as defence 'allies', until today, China has denied becoming part of any military alliance. However, given US' persuasive efforts to form a 'Quad', it would be interesting to see if China will compromise on its stand and form a similar arrangement with Russia. Should the US succeed in forming a NATO style security umbrella in the Indo-Pacific region, both Russia and China forming a similar military alliance is debatable as China is not a 'team player' and Russia has ventured in military adventurism as a 'solo' player. Either ways, India needs to carefully watch the growing defence cooperation between Russia and China, and more importantly, keep a closer watch on the developments taking place in the Indo-Pacific region. A lot depends on India's formulation of its policy interests in the region.

In conclusion, defence engagement between the two countries is 'more remedial' in nature today than in the past. Given the nature of how defence supplier nations function, Russia will not sell weapons unless these are inducted in its own defence forces or it possesses an anti-dote to the defence equipment sold. Also, though Russia enjoys a forward looking strategic partnership with China, it will never put down its guard given the 1969 military tension faced by these two prominent Cold War allies. There are also concerns about a possible confrontation down the road with China — a nation that still worries some Moscow defence circles. In other words, China is not completely obliterated

from Russia's threat perception enumeration. Russia will therefore contemporaneously monitor China's growing military capabilities and assertiveness in international relations.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Keywords: Russia-China relations, Defence Cooperation, military diplomacy, Defence Industrial complex.

Notes

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³ <https://www.sipri.org/node/4290>

⁴ Matthew Bodner, "In Arms Trade, China Is Taking Advantage of Russia's Desperation", *The Moscow Times*, 01 November 2016. <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/in-arms-trade-china-is-taking-advantage-of-russian-desperation-55965>

⁵ Lucie Beraud Sudreau, "Russia's defence spending: the impact of economic contraction", *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, 06 March 2017, <http://www.iiss.org/en/militarybalanceblog/blogsections/2017-edcc/march-f0a5/russias-defence-spending-7de6>

⁶ Ibid