The Sino-Russian partnership:

Why it matters for Australian security and defence

REPORT

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Executive summary

The Sino-Russian 'no limits' partnership is the core of an anti-Western axis that seeks to weaken and reshape the global order that has underpinned Australia's post-1945 prosperity and sovereignty. While not an alliance—which is primarily a Western concept rarely employed by Russia or China—the growing partnership presents a key challenge to decision-makers seeking to safeguard Australian interests in a contested world.

Sino-Russian cooperation and antagonism to the Western-led order isn't new—it drove their alignment against a UN-mandated process in the Korean War and against the Geneva Accords in the Vietnam War—but the depth of the partnership is new, to the extent that it's likely shaping Canberra's strategic thinking, including the upcoming 2026 National Defence Strategy.

The Sino-Russian partnership is targeting the Western alliances, institutions and social cohesion on which Australian security and prosperity depend. Beijing and Moscow are working together to advance geo-economic fragmentation, build alternative economic blocs and financial systems, and complicate trade and security considerations. Increasingly complex joint military exercises, together with diplomatic coordination, serve Beijing's interest in pressuring the regional balance and signalling Western decline. Russia's provision (sometimes involuntary) of advanced defence technology and operational experience has accelerated China's military modernisation, which is the key challenge plaguing Australian defence planners in the coming decade.

While the Russia–China relationship has grown since the end of the Cold War, its nature changed in recent years, most publicly in 2022 with the announced 'no limits' partnership. Traditional judgements of their lack of trust constraining their partnership are no longer accurate. Nomenclature, at least in private policymaking settings, should change. No longer can we hold that the differences between Russia, as a disruptive state at war, and China, as an economic partner, outweigh the similarities and commonalities that both bind them and threaten us.

Australia, and our friends, need to hold multiple truths simultaneously—China is an important economic power but also a strategic adversary. China and Russia are aligned and working together in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Beijing's role of the 'main enabler' for Moscow's war on Ukraine has supported Russia's ability to stay at war, their bilateral intelligence sharing has increased, and they both seek to impose their authoritarian model globally.

The Sino-Russian partnership has also been the anchor for a larger authoritarian grouping, sometimes called the 'axis' of autocracies, which includes Iran and North Korea.[1] That axis, including its arms trade and military exercises, has implications for Australian security. In the immediate aftermath of the Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel in October 2023—which came on top of Russia's war on Ukraine, including the battle-training of North Korean troops, hybrid warfare across Europe, and China's destabilisation of the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait—the axis was at its peak. It's also true that the weakening in the past 12 months of axis power regimes in Syria, Venezuela and Iran has caught Russia and China off guard, and they've proven unable to provide meaningful support, at least in the short term. But the axis remains a multi-nuclear nation group with China as its strongest point and Russia as its most disruptive. We will need to understand the lessons from recent axis degradation being learned by China and Russia, from US military and technological power to Western 'red lines' and regime survival.

This report examines five key elements related to the Sino-Russian partnership, now the most important bilateral relationship for them and most threatening to us:

1. The four drivers behind, and trajectory of, the intensifying relationship:
   a. their respective interests in countering the liberal international order;
   b. Russia's desire to remain a great power or at least be treated as one;
   c. China's need to improve its military operational capabilities; and
   d. bilateral economic and energy interests.
2. Practical defence and security cooperation; specifically, intensifying joint military exercises that now encompass air, naval and combined drills, and which have seen qualitative and quantitative enhancement from 2016 to 2026;
3. A defence-trade relationship boosting both Russia and China and hostile to us;
4. Implications for regional stability and the relevance of the partnership to Australia, including arms control and weakening of Indo-Pacific security; and

5. Australia's policy choices, which are limited by the shifting balance of power in the Indo-Pacific in China's favour, but which need to view sovereignty as the combination of domestic capability and international partnerships requiring increased investment in:
    a. national security;
    b. the US alliance; and
    c. strategic partnerships with like-minded nations such as Japan, South Korea and India.

The five sections of this report demonstrate that the 'no limits' partnership is a threat to Australia, regional security and global stability. Some argue that the relationship is opportunistic and will eventually deteriorate. But it's growing and, as long as it lasts, it will harm Australian security. Notwithstanding the mastery of Russian and Chinese propaganda, this paper shows that the partnership has already strengthened both powers and will continue doing so. It has the potential to affect Indo-Pacific security calculations, having already done so in Europe. Viewing Russia as only a European threat is a mistake. China and Russia might not always agree on what they stand *for* but are clear on what they are *against*—US global leadership and a liberal international order.[2] China backs Moscow's claim that its invasion of Ukraine is a 'special military operation' aggravated by the West, especially NATO expansion.[3] And Russia has vowed to support China in a Taiwan contingency,[4] and People's Liberation Army (PLA) domination of the Indo-Pacific, with Moscow's backing, would unacceptably constrain Australia's strategic choices.

That's why this report doesn't just examine their individual activities, but what the collective Sino-Russian effort means for Australia. Long before the advent of the second Trump administration, this growing partnership was committed to accelerating global fragmentation, reducing the stability of the global financial and economic order, creating alternative technology coalitions, and promoting illiberal projects such as China's Global Security Initiative. The combined propaganda of China and Russia has already amplified distrust of the West within the West, impacting our social cohesion, national security and international affairs.

Deeper strategic alignment and tactical coordination between China and Russia can also threaten US extended deterrence commitments—critical for regional security—both in terms of amplifying any concerns about US reliability and because of 'the potential that the US will have to deal with two near nuclear peers simultaneously'.[5]

Examining the status of the Sino-Russian 'no limits' partnership is a top defence and security priority for Australia and our partners. The aim of this report is to enhance awareness of the alignment and cooperation between the authoritarian regimes to both help to ensure that engagement with either of them is clear-eyed and to help increase understanding about why some national-level decisions are made to disengage from and, where necessary, confront them.

Key findings

- The Sino-Russian partnership has grown steadily since the end of the Cold War but has ramped up in recent years, as China and Russia both gain confidence in their collective capacity to disrupt, outcompete and defeat the West and reshape the Western-led order, notwithstanding democratic pushback against Russia's war on Ukraine and China's rising military aggression and economic coercion, most notably in the Indo-Pacific yet increasingly global.
- Sino-Russian cooperation encompasses both diplomatic coordination and intensified military cooperation, including through arms trade, military exercises and joint patrols.
- Joint military exercises have increased not only in quantity but also in quality, with more sophisticated and complex air, sea and combined operations, which have also expanded in geographical scope.
- The partnership is a direct threat to the Indo-Pacific and Australia, as it seeks not just to undermine the liberal international order, which has been the basis for our regional prosperity and stability, but also to replace it with an authoritarian-led order.
- While the 'axis' of authoritarian powers, led by China as its most powerful point and Russia as its most disruptive (and also comprising others such as Iran and North Korea), and which had a peak after the Hamas attacks on Israel in 2023, has suffered some recent losses, with China and Russia analysing the lessons of the degradation of aligned regimes such as Syria, Venezuela and Iran to reduce their own future vulnerabilities and be able to better exploit ours.
- Until the past year, the ability of the axis powers to undertake multiple lines of effort at once (for example, Russia carrying out its war on Ukraine and global hybrid warfare, or China increasing military aggression against Taiwan and the Philippines in the South China Sea as well as supporting Russia and increasing cyberattacks on nations such as Australia) was a defining difference from the US and its allies, which always had a dominant security priority.
- Australia's response to the growing power of the Sino-Russian partnership will need to comprise a combination of increased defence spending for national security, the doubling down of the US alliance as our key security foundation and the further strengthening of other partnerships, in particular with Japan, India and Europe.

Part 1: Trajectories and drivers binding China and Russia

The binding force of the Sino-Russian partnership is the objective to up-end American hegemony—which isn't just about the US but the entire post-World War II democratic alliance network. Australia is seen as a key node in that network. Around that primary focus, both China and Russia have long recognised the need for military and dual-use technology and the importance of economic drivers, such as energy interests. While most countries see economic prosperity as necessary to invest in military capabilities, increasingly China and Russia have assessed the most effective way to both retain regime dominance and outcompete the US is to invest in military development (and in China's case, widespread innovation in critical technologies) even if that's at the expense of other social services. Those drivers of military power, energy sustainability and technological dominance to shift the global balance of power are propelling Sino-Russian cooperation.

Countering the Western liberal international order

Immediately after the end of the Cold War, and in the context of the First Iraq War in 1990–91, both Russia and China identified their own military and technological weaknesses in comparison to the US and assessed the need for capability uplift to reduce their dependence on the West and then compete with the West.

Even then, there was cooperation between Moscow and Beijing. The first formal move to counter the West began with the formation of the Russia–India–China group in 1993. While Russia and China were both concerned about the West's economic and military superiority, they saw its liberal ideology as a common threat.

The binding force of the Sino-Russian partnership is the objective to up-end American hegemony

It meant that just as Western economic and political engagement with Russia and China was being premised on the hope that it would lead to greater liberalism and democratisation in both countries, the rulers in Moscow and Beijing were making preparations to undermine the liberal democratic order and replace it with an authoritarian one.[6] It would take until the past decade for most of the West to recognise that.

Following the global financial crises in the late 2000s, Russia and China had become more confident in the potential to change the power equilibrium with the West, and China effectively joined Russia by ending a strategy of biding their time and hiding their growing strength. The first BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) summit was held in 2009. And by 2014—just as the US and West had once again become consumed with Islamist terrorism due to the rise of Islamic State—Russia and China had begun taking a more aggressive and proactive international approach, most notably with the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and China's militarisation of the South China Sea.

Neither Russia nor China faced pushback.

The work Russia and China had started in the 1990s, in particular China's decades-long economic expansion, was, therefore, approaching its apogee at the same time the US and West were recovering from the financial crisis, prioritising the counter-ISIS mission and still convinced that Russia and China were economic partners more than strategic threats.

Despite the strength of the Western alliances, democratic nations effectively waited for national-level crises to act. Tokyo and Canberra were among the first to shift; Japan suffered substantial economic coercion from China during the 2010–2014 period following a dispute in the East China Sea, and Australia faced a confluence of security threats from 2015, including Chinese investment in critical infrastructure, cyberattacks and foreign interference. It would still take several years for other nations, including the US, to catch up.

It's noteworthy that, despite its longstanding friendship with Russia, India had been waiting for other nations to recognise the threats posed by China. Thus, Western nations' initial moves involved getting closer to Delhi. The most significant one was the 2017 revival of the Quad (Australia, the US, Japan and India), but other minilaterals included Australia–Japan–India (2015), Japan–America–India (2018) and Australia–India–France (2020). The biggest move from a capability perspective, in direct response to the belated acknowledgement of China's technological advancement, was the 2021 establishment of AUKUS—the trilateral defence and security partnership between Australia, the UK and the US.

While the Quad nations did all they could to present the grouping as not a military one, it was still self-promoted as, and seen by China to be about, the four nations being committed 'to supporting a peaceful, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific'. Notwithstanding its expression as a 'diplomatic partnership' and not a defence one, China still saw this grouping as a set of democratic maritime powers seeking to maintain the liberal order and constraining Beijing's authoritarian objectives. AUKUS merely confirmed that the West had rejoined the strategic competition playing field, which China and Russia had enjoyed largely to themselves for more than a decade.

It therefore shouldn't have been a strategic surprise to see the increasing national and minilateral activities from democratic partners be an additional impetus to China and Russia's already deepening partnership. In February 2022, the 'no limits' partnership was formed and, a year later in March 2023, Xi told Putin, 'Right now there are changes, the likes of which we haven't seen for 100 years, and we are the ones driving these changes together.'[7]

This was a new peak in the Sino-Russian alignment, and there was no hiding from it.

China hadn't just taken Russia's side over both Ukraine and Europe but saw Russia's victory as in Beijing's interests. And Russia supports China in Asia, for example objecting to concepts like the 'Indo-Pacific' and partnerships such as AUKUS and the Quad, which aren't even focused on Russia. As much as the West can genuinely state that it gave both Russia and China every chance to liberalise and act within the bounds of international rules, the reality is that opposition to the dominant Western-led order had been the building blocks of the Sino-Russian partnership, and it continues to bind them today.

Russia's great-power imperative

Another political driver of Sino-Russian cooperation is Moscow's desire to maintain its global great-power standing even in the face of its material collapse. From being a peer competitor to the US during the Cold War, the Russian economy rapidly lost ground after the Cold War. Although Russia's GDP had never been more than half of that of the US, even during the bipolar period, its decline was dramatic after the Cold War. By 2000, Russia's GDP was only about 2.5% that of the US, or about $250 billion to the US's $10 trillion. China had already overtaken Russia. Discussions on there being a 'G2' comprising the US and China as early as 2005—although not formalised—would have rattled Putin. Thus, Russia's imperative for cooperation with what had only recently been a more junior China is easily understandable.

The partnership maintained a level of privacy or understatement for the period in which both Russia and China assessed that they needed the West. For Putin, NATO's expansion and the growing democratisation of some parts of Russia's 'near abroad' were clear threats. Putin saw in Xi Jinping a kindred spirit because Xi was equally concerned about the expansion of liberal and democratic ideas. China's growing economic and technological might was an added attraction because it separated China from Russia's other partners, such as India and Syria, that were incapable of standing up to the West. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the unexpectedly firm Western response, including military and economic assistance to Ukraine, meant that Russia became even more dependent on Chinese assistance, without which Moscow would probably have needed to negotiate for peace. Once again, to the surprise of many across public and private sectors, China didn't see the global condemnation of Russia and protracted war as a reason to pause cooperation with Moscow. It would soon become apparent that Beijing's assessment was that a doubling down of the partnership was required.

China's need: improving military operational capabilities

Over the past decade, China has dramatically enhanced its military capabilities, aided by massive economic expansion. From approximately US$7.7 billion in 1995, China's official defence budget has multiplied many times over to almost US$250 billion in 2025, while an unofficial estimate puts it at US$471 billion in 2024.[8] China's defence budget is now second only to the US's (almost a trillion dollars) and twice as much as the third largest spender, Russia.[9] While still spending less than the US, China is assessed as America's pacing competitor, as the huge growth in China's defence budget has allowed it to significantly modernise its military equipment. From being largely armed with old Soviet-era weapons, China now fields at least two indigenously developed operational fifth-generation combat planes (the J-20 and J-35), several types of hypersonic missiles, and a growing navy that includes many more surface combatants, including three new large aircraft carriers, and new submarines.[10]

While the new weaponry with which China is equipping its military is impressive, uncertainty on two issues provides additional drivers for China's judgement of its need to cooperate with Russia.

One is that it's unclear how those weapons will perform in actual combat. There have been some mixed reports about Chinese weapon performance in recent military clashes. Its equipment appeared to have worked well in the recent India–Pakistan conflict, especially its PL-15 air-to-air missile and the J-10C fighter plane, although that may also have been the result of tactical surprise achieved by Pakistan in the early part of the operation. However, the performance of China's air-defence equipment appears to have been questionable in both Pakistan and in the recent US air raid on Venezuela.[11] Of course, foreign military operations aren't sufficient indicators of how those weapons will work in the Chinese military, but Beijing would be analysing each incident.

Second, and more serious, is the PLA's lack of recent military combat experience. The PLA hasn't engaged in active combat since the ill-fated attack on Vietnam in 1979, when it performed badly.[12] China's leadership may assess that as a critical deficiency, so closer defence ties and exercises with the Russian military, with all of its recent operational experience, are useful. There have been more recent but minor confrontations along the Indian border as well as in the South China Sea, but those aren't sufficient to indicate China's military operational effectiveness. Of note is that Russia's use of North Korean troops on the front lines of its war on Ukraine means that any survivors will come back to the Korean Peninsula fully battle hardened and more capable.

While it isn't in China's interests to have its troops join Russia's on the battlefield, and nothing compensates for combat inexperience, it can train and conduct military exercises with other more experienced military forces—meaning Russia. China is increasingly deploying the PLA in UN peacekeeping operations, which provides some limited operational experience, but large-scale military exercises with Russia are more useful.

In that regard, the joint exercising between China and Russia is comprehensive—and while most analysts agree that China is now the dominant partner in the bilateral relationship, it's Russian mastery of modern warfare from which China is taking lessons. For example, the joint strategic aerial patrols carried out by China and Russia benefit China's understanding of, and capabilities in, long-range air operations. And the same information sharing by Russia and learning of lessons from Russia's conflict experience can be seen in the joint ground and naval exercises conducted each year (discussed further below).

In particular, China and Russia have conducted amphibious exercises that would be beneficial in any Taiwan contingency. As analysts have pointed out, any Chinese invasion of Taiwan would be risky, because it requires an amphibious attack, which is among the most complicated types of military offensive operation, but Russian training and equipment could increase the chances of success.[13] Joint military exercises allow China to learn from the more experienced Russian forces and test China's own indigenously developed tactics and operational concepts.

In addition to China's practical combat readiness, the military exercises are a global signal about Russian and Chinese military cooperation. The exercises have regional impacts, from coercive and deterrence effects to forced resource expenditure. For example, in its scenario planning for potential Chinese military operations, Japan now must factor in the potential for Russia to join.[14] In addition, the exercises' regularity and openness also have a legitimising function: the region is simultaneously being deterred and desensitised to what should be viewed as aggressive, even if legal, activity.

Economic drivers

Both countries benefit from the energy trade and bilateral market access. The economic relationship is unbalanced in trade terms, as Russia constitutes only about 4% of China's foreign trade, while China makes up more than a third of Russia's.[15] On the other hand, Russia is an increasingly significant supplier of raw materials and energy resources that China's growing economy needs.

It's therefore a mutually beneficial partnership, especially because of the difficulties that Russia and China have faced with their traditional trade partners. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Western Europe has become inhospitable to Russia on many economic fronts—as a source of investment, as a partner in trade and as a destination for Russian energy. For Moscow, China represents an alternative on each of those.[16] Russia seeks enhanced Chinese investment in areas including the energy sector (oil, gas, nuclear), aerospace, and new sectors such as artificial intelligence, digital economy and green development.[17] Equally, with Western Europe drastically reducing imports of Russian oil and gas, Russia needs a new market, which China has readily provided.

From Beijing's perspective, although Russia isn't the ideal economic partner, it's an important substitute in some areas. China is deeply interested in Russian energy resources and minerals. While China has so far been successful in sourcing those from other parts of the world, access to Russian oil in particular means less impact from any disruption to either Venezuelan or Iranian oil. Beijing has also increasingly sought new investment destinations, including Russia, as its investments have run into difficulties in the Global South.[18]

And this is where the strategic reasons for the partnership (up-ending the global order) are the drivers for sustaining and growing economic cooperation: as Moscow becomes an increasingly important strategic partner, including by maintaining its disruption of the West and keeping the West preoccupied with Russia, China has an interest in ensuring a stable and growing Russian economy.

While China is undoubtedly the major economic and technological power in the relationship, a defeated Russia would weaken China in several ways, including by increasing the likelihood of the US actually being able to implement its longtime policy—from President Obama (pivot to Asia) to Trump (strategic competition with China) to Biden (small garden high fence)—of China being the pacing threat and the Indo-Pacific being the top priority beyond America's Western Hemisphere. If the US and its NATO allies are focused on Russia, there are simultaneously fewer resources to counter China and incentives to both tolerate China's malign activities and increase economic and technological dependencies on China. In other words, a military fighting Russia is good for China's economy: as China's Foreign Minister reportedly told the EU's foreign affairs chief, Kaja Kallas, in July 2025, China can't accept Russia losing the war against Ukraine as that would allow the US to focus on China.[19]

Part 2: Sino-Russian defence and security cooperation

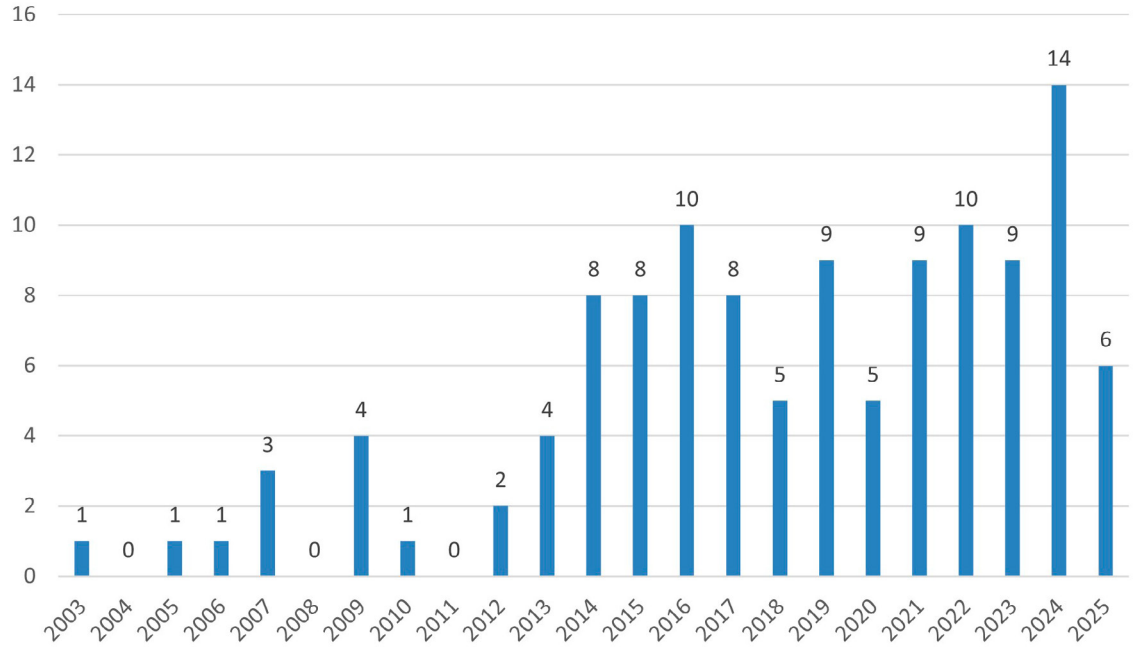
Joint military exercising is a core pillar of Sino-Russian cooperation. China and Russia have deepened their defence and security cooperation significantly over the past decade, in line with their goal to neutralise American and allied military dominance and their influence in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. This is reflected in the extensive bilateral and multinational military exercises, arms sales and technology transfers between China and Russia. Some of the high-profile joint military exercises include Exercise Vostok, Exercise Zapad/Interaction, naval patrols and strategic air patrols in the Pacific and the Sea of Japan.[20]

Sino-Russian joint military exercises

Sino-Russian bilateral and multinational exercises began with the stated goal of fighting separatism, extremism and terrorism—which had some element of truth but was dominated by propaganda to crack down on the human rights of their own citizens and those of their neighbours. Those beginnings, in which their own populations suffered, have expanded in number and global reach.

The growth in bilateral exercises between Chinese and Russian militaries is shown below (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Russia–China military exercises: bilateral and multilateral (2003 to 2025)



Sources: 'China–Russia joint military exercises', *ChinaPower*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, online; Ministry of National Defence, 'China, Russia conduct 10th joint strategic air patrol', PRC Government, 9 December 2025, online.

Twenty-year data on Sino-Russian joint military exercises, compiled by the ChinaPower project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, shows that joint exercises in the first decade were mostly minimalist, with some exceptions such as Peace Mission 2005 that involved several thousand troops from both nations. In some years in the first decade, there were no exercises.

But from 2014, there was a noticeable spike in military engagements, with the exercises becoming more complex, mature and ambitious. That shouldn't be seen as a coincidence but as a strategic decision taken by Russia and China to take advantage of American and Western preoccupation with ISIS at that exact time.

By 2024, they conducted 14 such exercises despite Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine; that ability for the axis powers to undertake multiple lines of effort at once was a defining difference from the US and its allies until recently.

In addition to sheer numbers, Russia and China also expanded the geographical scope of their exercises to include areas they perceive as strategically vital to both countries, such as the Sea of Japan.[21]

Naval cooperation

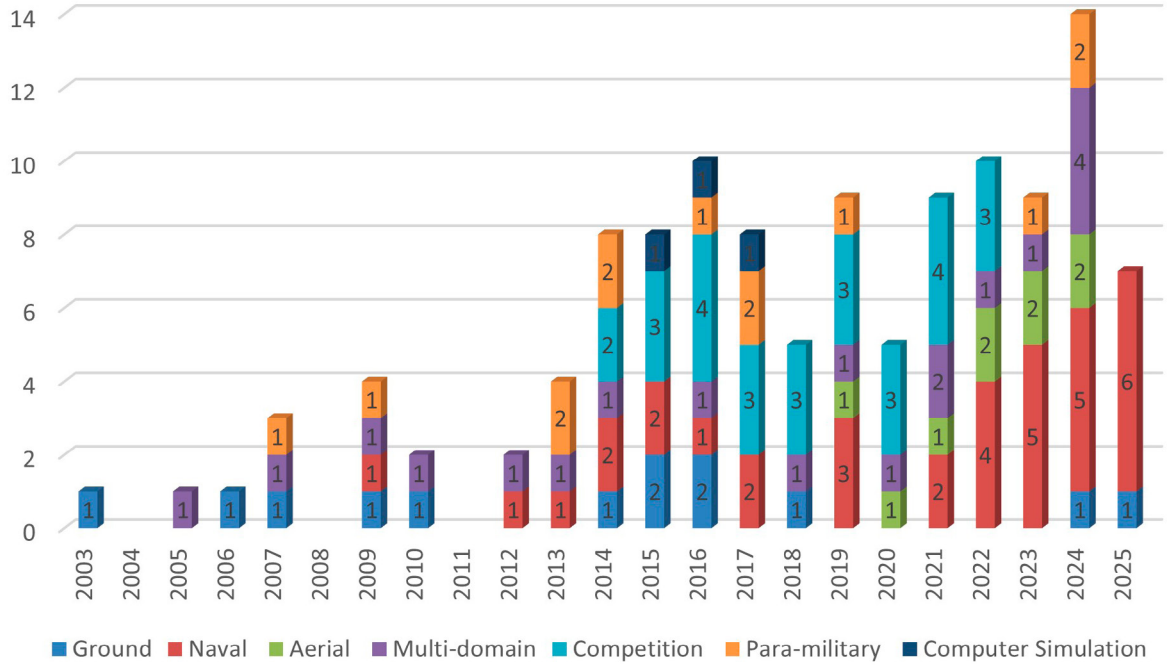
The first joint Russia–China naval exercise was held in the Gulf of Aden in 2009—while potentially by chance, it coincided with the peak of the global financial crisis that had consumed the US.

Another major exercise, Joint Sea, was held in April 2012.[22] It was held in Shandong Province in China, involving antisubmarine warfare and rescue simulations. In 2013, the two navies conducted further exercises, including in the Sea of Japan, which was the largest joint naval exercise in which the PLA Navy had participated. This time, Chinese warships were said to be engaged in 'confrontation training'. The exercise broadly focused on joint maritime air defence, joint escorts and maritime search and rescue operations.[23]

In May 2014, the two navies undertook another joint naval exercise in the East China Sea, called Joint Sea-2014. According to Li Jie, a Chinese naval expert, this was 'the first time the Chinese Navy has worked so closely with a foreign maritime force' in which the forces were 'mixed together', not operating separately. The exercise was also a mix of confrontation and drill, making it 'more like a real battle'.[24]

Figure 2 illustrates the growing focus on naval exercises in the past few years.

Figure 2: China–Russia joint military exercises: increasing naval



Sources: Data from 'China–Russia joint military exercises', *ChinaPower*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, online; Ministry of National Defence, 'China, Russia conduct 10th joint strategic air patrol', PRC Government, 9 December 2025, online.

Many of those exercises included amphibious operations, including Peace Mission 2007, Joint Sea 2013 and Joint Sea 2014.

The growing complexities in their naval exercises accompanied a clear strategic focus. In 2015, the Russian Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, stated that Russia and China wanted 'to shape a collective regional security system' because they were concerned about 'US attempts to strengthen its military and political clout in the Asia–Pacific region'.[25] By that time, the Russian and Chinese strategic alignment and agenda were no longer hidden, and the lack of pushback acted as an accelerant; individually and collectively, the exercises were important signals to the US and its partners that the Sino-Russian defence relationship was getting stronger and sent a simultaneous message to all regional nations that they shouldn't get in Moscow and Beijing's way.

In August 2015, the largest military exercise by the two navies, known as Joint Sea 2015 II, was undertaken.[26] Chinese Defence Ministry spokesperson Yang Yujun said the goal of the exercise was to 'further enhance their capabilities of jointly coping with maritime security threats' including in antisubmarine warfare, air defence and joint maritime search and rescue operations.[27]

Subsequent annual joint naval exercises were held in the South China Sea, the Baltic Sea, the East China Sea, the Sea of Japan and off the coast of Alaska. The 2017 exercise in the Baltic Sea was a significant demonstration of China's growing naval potency and, as one expert noted, a signal of China's support for Russia.[28]

Just last year, in August 2025, there was another important milestone with the first joint submarine patrol in the Sea of Japan.[29] That followed the annual Joint Sea 2025 / Maritime Interaction 2025 exercise and should be judged as yet another elevation of maturity in their military tactical cooperation.[30] Russian Rear Admiral Mikhail Chekmasov noted it was an unprecedented 'very complex process'.[31]

Joint air cooperation

Joint air exercises and strategic aerial patrols by the Chinese and Russian air forces have also grown in number and complexity in the past decade, with a visible increase since 2019.

Like the joint naval exercises, air patrols have served two key purposes for Russia and China: gaining military operational training and combat-like experience (for China) and political and strategic signalling to the US and its partners and allies (for both).

They've also increased tensions, and the risk of confrontation in the region. Japan has scrambled its fighter jets to counter such patrols, and a South Korean aircraft fired warning shots at a Russian jet that violated Korea's airspace.[32]

The data for the 2019–2025 period shows that Russia and China have conducted more than 10 joint air patrols and exercises, including multidomain exercises. Those have mostly been held in the East China Sea and the Western Pacific.[33] They've also taken part in several regional multidomain exercises, including Russia's Vostok-2022.[34] Similarly, air operations have been part of naval drills, such as the Joint Sea series of exercises.[35]

The increasing number and sophistication of the exercises is clear

The first joint strategic aerial patrol was conducted in 2019.[36] In the course of the patrol, Chinese H-6K and Russian Tu-95MS strategic bombers flew over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea, close to Japanese airspace.[37]

Since then, at least once every year the two air forces have conducted strategic bomber patrols, with the most recent and tenth iteration conducted in the East China Sea and Western Pacific in December 2025.[38] The patrols have typically involved Russian and Chinese strategic bombers (Tu-95MSs and H-6Ks) and escort jets.

The increasing number and sophistication of the exercises is clear. It has demonstrated a political and military alignment well beyond what Western analysts previously assessed was likely. Beyond the quantity and quality, Australian and partner analysis should factor in that neither Russia nor China is constrained by the anxiety that their exercising causes in the region. Most probably, they're incentivised to carry out more and regularise the activities as a political signal to the region, in particular to the US and Japan, that nothing can be done to prevent them. The stark reality for the US and its allies, including Australia, is that those activities are likely to improve the operational capacities of both parties, but particularly China's. According to recent reports on Russian air power and tactics, they appear to have improved significantly since the invasion of Ukraine, and this itself offers additional lessons for the Chinese military based on Russian combat experience.[39] Military analysis will need to assess whether the exercises could lead to, at least a limited level of, military force interoperability between the two countries.[40]

Part 3: Sino-Russian defence trade

Defence trade between Russia and China is a central aspect of the partnership, to the extent that it has kept Russia on the offensive in its war on Ukraine, now into its fifth year.[41]

The power balance has reversed. During the first part of the Cold War, the Soviet Union was critical in augmenting China's military capabilities. China's entry in the Korean War in October 1950 led to significant losses, and it was Soviet assistance that helped rebuild the Chinese military. That was especially true for China's air power, which more than tripled from 500 aircraft in 1950 to more than 1,500 aircraft by the end of the decade. Soviet military assistance during the Korean War, including around 700 MiG-15 fighter jets and 150 Tu-2 light bombers, amounted to approximately US$2 billion.[42] Significantly, Soviet help also extended to civil and military nuclear technologies.[43]

That cooperation came to a complete halt with the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s. It would effectively take decades for ties to improve and until the events of 1989—the fall of the Berlin Wall, marking the end of the Cold War, and China's violent crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators—for Russia–China military trade to be revitalised. The early 1990s saw Russia and China realise that a strong defence relationship was a mutually beneficial partnership.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s saw the loss of traditional arms markets and meant Moscow was keen to expand its defence markets. But Beijing, too, was motivated to seek accommodation with Russia, in terms of both capability compatibility and ideological alignment. The combination of China's military equipment being of 1950s Soviet vintage, Russian arms being cheaper compared to Western platforms, and Western arms embargoes following the Tiananmen Square crackdown, meant that Russia was a natural choice for China's military modernisation.[44]

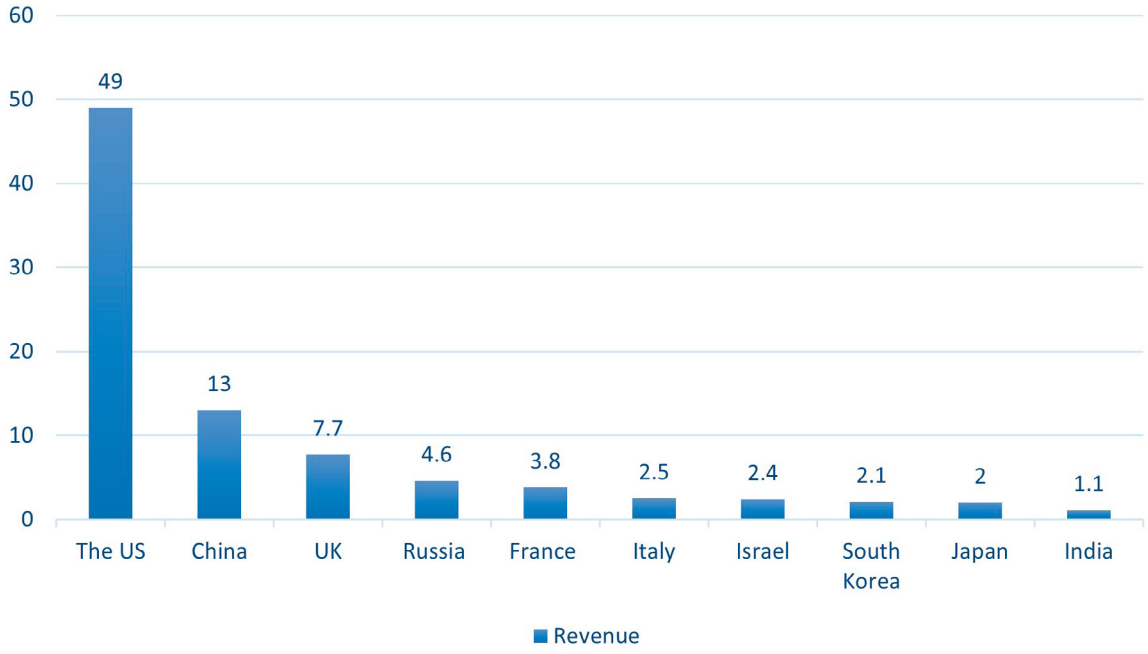
Where did China's increased defence spending go? China focused on acquiring air and naval platforms from Russia, including fighter aircraft, submarines and air-defence systems. In fact, China was the first country to buy Su-27 Flanker fighter jets in the early 1990s. By the mid-1990s, China was assembling Su-27s in China, which were reverse-engineered to make the J-11 fighter.[45] In the early 1990s, China also procured several variants of the Mi-8/Mi-17 transport and armed helicopter gunships. In addition to the J-11, China covertly purchased and refurbished the aircraft carrier *Varyag*, which debuted as China's first carrier, the *Shandong*. China's HQ-9 missile system is also reported to be a likely copy of the Russian S-300.[46] Similarly, the purchase of Kilo-class submarines along with continued assistance for maintenance and upgrades to quieter versions (NATO designated it the 'Improved Kilo') provided much-needed improvement over the Romeo-class submarines of the 1950s.

Whether it was the near-universal Western misjudgement on China's (and Russia's) liberalised future, successive US administrations' distraction with Saddam's Iraq from 1990, or sheer exhaustion from the effects of the Cold War, that realignment between Russia and China was either missed or ignored in the hope that increased threat capability wouldn't transition to reality. It wouldn't be the last time the West misjudged either China or Russia.

China's aim of sovereign capability was also missed. Although China initially bought entire weapon platforms, it increasingly shifted to buying critical components, such as advanced turbofan engines, to advance its own indigenous manufacturing capability. In fact, it was Moscow, not the West, that initially grew wary about selling some of the more advanced platforms to China. And despite the growing partnership of mutual benefit, the distrust also remained mutual—China was unhappy that Russia's best defence platforms were given to India (China's strategic adversary) and that there was no voluntary transfer of technology to China. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China's share was below 25% of Russian exports between 2007 and 2009, while after 2010 it declined to around 10%.[47] The West's assessment that mutual distrust would limit the partnership would prove incorrect.

Figures 3 and 4 and Table 1 illustrate the development of Russian and Chinese military trade.

Figure 3: Global arms-trade revenue (%); China stepping up



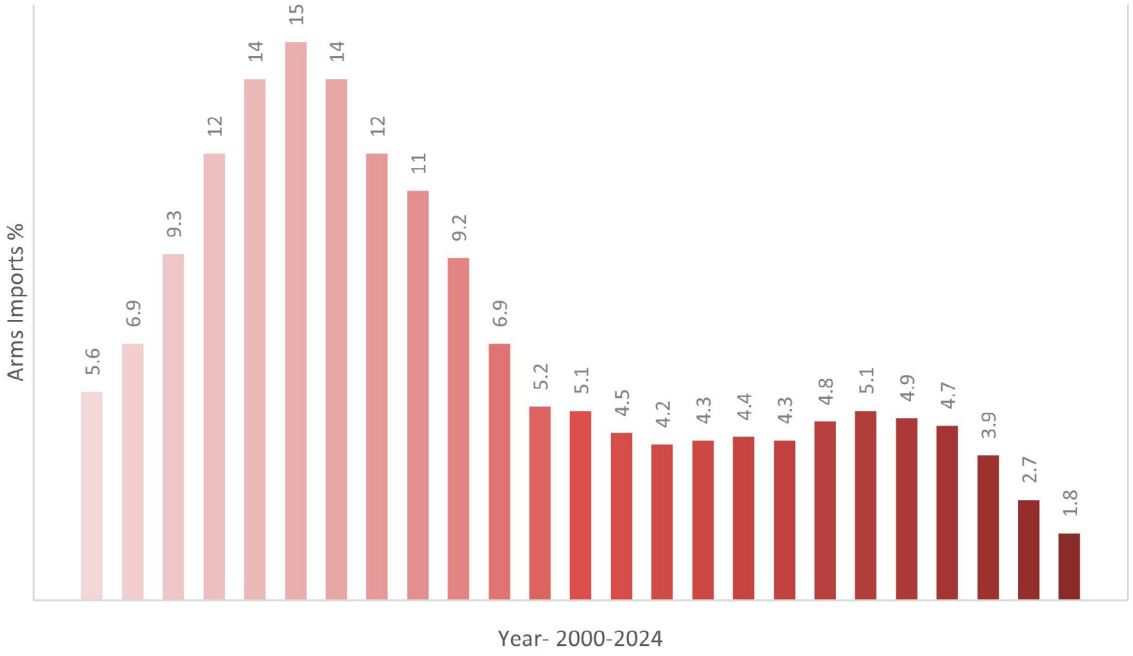
Source: Lorenzo Scarazzato, Nan Tian, Diego Lopes da Silva, Xiao Liang, Zubaida Karim, Jade Guiberteau Ricard, 'The SIPRI Top 100 arms producing and military services companies, 2024', SIPRI fact sheet, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), December 2025, online.

Table 1: Selected major military items transferred from Russia to China in the 1990s

Category	Specific platform	Capability enhancement effect on China
Aircraft	Sukhoi Su-27/30 Flanker fighters	Significantly enhanced PLA Air Force air-combat capabilities; China reverse-engineered to produce the J-11[48]
Air defence	S-300 surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems	Introduction of advanced air-defence capabilities; went on to influence China's own HQ-9 SAM system[49]
Naval vessels	Sovremenny-class destroyers	Important capability, especially with the SS-N-22 Sunburn (3M-80E Moskit) supersonic antiship missile[50]
Submarines	Kilo-class attack submarines (Project 877/636) including the 'Improved Kilo'	Augmented PLA Navy's submarine capability.[51] Helped China's own domestic programs such as the Type 039 (Song-class) and Type 039A (Yuan-class) submarines
Helicopters	Mi-8/17 transport/gunship helicopters	Filled major gaps in China's rotary-wing transport and armed support
Aircraft engines	Mass procurement of AL-31F turbofan engines to power the Russia-made Su-27s and its derivatives.	Foundation for China's local engine, the WS-10, and its subsequent variants[52] AL-31F turbofans were used in a variety of Chinese fighters including J-10, J-11, early J-20 fighters and for the initial J-15 carrier-based jets before moving to the WS-10
Air-to-air missiles	R-27 and R-73 air-to-air missiles.	Provided the PLA with major air-to-air capability for both beyond-visual-range and high-agility close-quarters dogfighting

Note: Author's own table using data from a variety of sources, including SIPRI.

Figure 4: China's share of global arms imports (%), 2000 to 2024



Note: Data indicated in the table for five-year periods ends with the indicated year. For instance, data for 2000 reflects data for arms imports from 1996 to 2000. Source: SIPRI data, taken from Chun Han Wong, 'How China built an arms industry to rival the West', Wall Street Journal, 21 December 2025, online.

Russia was right to be wary. While Western nations judged (again incorrectly) that China would be limited to the capability of a copycat through intellectual property (IP) theft, China would quickly build on the purchase, theft and subsidies to the point of now being a military powerhouse. In 2024, according to SIPRI Arms Industry Database, five Chinese weapons manufacturers were in the top 25 of the world's arms manufacturing companies.[53]

Moscow's calculations shifted after the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014

Moscow knew China was reverse-engineering Russian weapons systems. Yevgeny Livadny, chief of IP projects at Rostec, Russia's state defence conglomerate, said in December 2019 that 'Unauthorized copying of our equipment abroad is a great problem. There have been 500 such cases over the past 17 years.' He added that China had copied aircraft engines, Sukhoi planes, deck jets, air-defence systems, portable air-defence missiles, and analogues of the self-propelled medium-range surface-to-air system, Pantsir.[54] Russia did initially try to prevent that by demanding that China buy weapons and platforms in bulk. Moscow also sought assurances from China to not engage in theft in its contracts and, as a final step, even sought royalties for reverse-engineered weapon platforms. But according to Vadim Kozyulin, director of the Asian Security Project at the PIR Center in Moscow, none of those measures was effective.[55] That was partly because China 'was willing and able to pay in cash', which was too much of an incentive for Russia.[56]

Moscow's calculations shifted after the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014. Just as Beijing had looked to Moscow after the Western arms embargoes that followed the Tiananmen massacre, now it was Putin's turn to look to Xi. Russia's concerns about China's strength paled into insignificance compared with its need for arms-trade ties, and that resulted in increased arms sales to China after 2015.[57] China's time to have it all had come, and it isn't surprising that the previous foreign policy of 'hide [strength] and bide [time]' was dropped. China bought cheap Russian kit while continuing to reverse-engineer Russian weapons (Table 2). Simultaneously, China was stealing, mainly through hacking and cyber operations but also through traditional espionage (human intelligence), swathes of Western military and technology, mostly from US firms.[58] China's engagement in theft wasn't a new phenomenon—indeed, the May 1999 Cox Report had accused China of stealing classified information on US nuclear weapons[59]—but little was done until after a 2013 report from cybersecurity firm Mandiant that detailed the theft of military IP via Chinese cyber-espionage, leading to a September 2015 statement by President Obama that labelled China's cyber-enabled theft of US IP as 'an act of aggression that has to stop'.

Table 2: Major categories of defence items that China procured from Russia, 1987 to 2016

Year	Combat aircraft	Helicopters	Warships	Long-range SAM systems	Aircraft engines
2012–2016	4	62			424
2007–2011	11	106		16	202
2002–2006	145	72	8	4	70
1997–2001	79	55	4		4
1992–1996	45	30	2	4	
1987–1991	3	24			

Source: Siemon T Wezeman, 'China, Russia and the shifting landscape of arms sales', SIPRI commentary/backgrounder, 5 July 2017, online.

While China's IP theft and unfair trade practices may have temporarily paused (from 2015 to 2017, China signed agreements with the US, the UK and Australia to not steal IP through cyberspace for commercial gain), they didn't stop. Increasingly, Beijing wanted advanced technology as much as the weapon platforms.

At the same time China was signing those agreements with Western nations, Russia and China signed the Roadmap for Military-Technical Cooperation in 2017.[60] Since 2014, some of the major Russian military systems sold to China had included advanced platforms including Su-35 fighter jets, S-400 air-defence systems, heavy military transport aircraft (Il-76M), various armoured vehicles (BMD-4M) and reconnaissance drones (Orlan-10). Many of those sales included clauses for the transfer of technology to China.[61] The first 24 Su-35 jets were delivered in 2016. Sales of the S-400s were significant, with China becoming the first foreign country to receive them in 2018. Recent reports also show that a number of Chinese officials and defence manufacturers travelled to Russia during the early 2020s and signed contracts for Russian platforms including aircraft and armoured vehicles, ammunition and training for PLA paratroopers, with delivery deadlines of 2027.[62]

And, by 2020, despite the long-term distrust, the Sino-Russian partnership had firm foundations to the extent the relationship not only survived but thrived on a reverse of the dominant partner, including in terms of the arms supply direction. There's now some level of technology going from China to Russia, which has helped to sustain Russia's military operations in Ukraine.[63] A report from the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) notes the growing role of China as a 'critical supplier of goods and components needed to sustain Russia's defence industry' following the loss of Russian access to Western technologies (see Figure 5 on the following page).[64] In return, Russia is reported to have assisted China with advanced propulsion systems for China's next-generation Type 096 nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarines.[65] A Finnish military intelligence report noted that 'cooperation with China especially, but also with Iran and North Korea, has eased the production pressure on Russia's defence industry and enabled an increase in production despite the war.'[66]

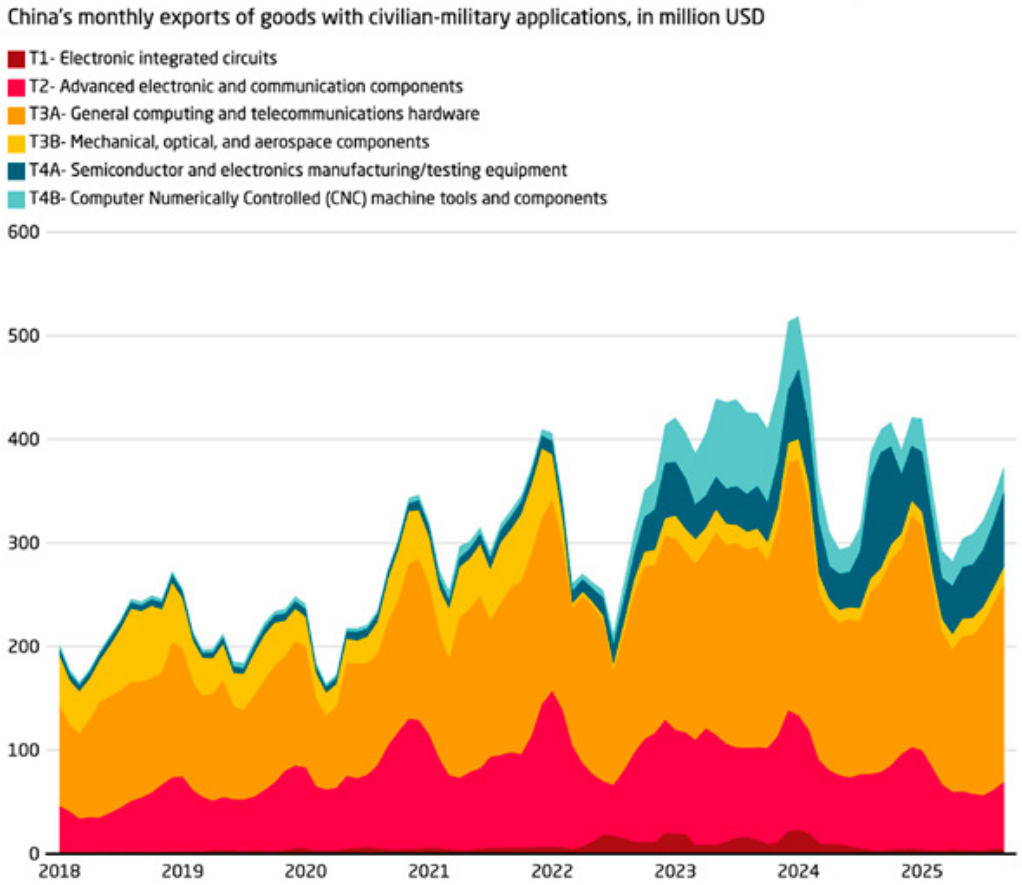
While much commentary is made on what's happened since the public announcement of the 'no limits' partnership, the signs of the pseudo-alliance were already there. A MERICS China–Russia dashboard that compiled data on Russia–China dual-use technology transfers shows that shipments of those items had gone up in late 2021. They did fall sharply thereafter, possibly due to China's initial wariness of being affected by Western sanctions on Russia straight after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The decline was temporary, as China became confident that the West wouldn't punish it for supporting Russia and, despite fluctuations, the total value exceeded US$4 billion in 2024 alone.[67] According to a *Wall Street Journal* report from December 2025, China's exports have enhanced Russia's war-fighting capabilities in Ukraine in a number of ways: by helping to increase the production of Iskander-M ballistic missiles; by supplying ammonium perchlorate, which is a critical component in ballistic-missile fuel; and by supplying drone bodies, lithium batteries and fibre-optic cables.[68]

That dependence on China overrides any ongoing Russian wariness about the implications of China's long-term military power and what it means for Russia's Far East and Arctic regions.[69]

Indeed, Sino-Russian defence ties go beyond traditional arms sales to now include increasing coordination on security issues such as missile defence and space.[70] Both continue to be loud and vocal critics of the US missile defence systems, arguing that they are destabilising, affecting their nuclear deterrence and strategic stability and weaponising outer space, even though they themselves are engaged in such missile defence programs of their own.[71]

Therefore, the fact that they don't have a formal military alliance, and the likelihood that distrust remains, should no longer be a Western focus. The Sino-Russian relationship is a defence partnership involving mutually beneficial trade, technological development and global outcomes. For Western policy planning, it should mean that China and Russia are not to be assessed in isolation.

Figure 5: Chinese dual-use exports help to sustain Russia's war effort



Source: Hugo von Essen, 'Joint military exercises signal deepening Russia–China strategic alignment', MERICS, 7 May 2025, online.

Part 4: Trendlines and implications for the rules-based order and strategic stability

Jan Adams, Secretary of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, describes a rules-based order as one of the four pillars of Australian foreign policy. Specifically, for Australia, a rules-based order is about adherence to international law, rules and norms, which are built through coalitions that promote and protect them to 'deter conflict, enable free trade, and underpin [Australian] security and prosperity'.[72] The international rules-based order has been criticised by non-Western nations as being by the West and for the West, while more recent criticism stemming from within Western nations is that the order is now dead. Both claims are exaggerated, as the post–World War II order served a majority of nations (including China) well, while small, middle and regional powers such as Australia still need to operate within a set of rules involving economic cooperation, individual freedom and collective security. It's true that the order is facing significant challenges, partly because of the changed balance of power (China's rise and breaches of international rules, which happened first), and partly because the primary founder of the order, the US, has changed its commitment to preserving the *status quo*.

This section focuses on what happened first—China's malign rise and Russia's return to disruption, which both changed the global balance of power and effectively turned the rules-based order into disorder before Trump became US President the first time. While there's no doubt we're in a different world in 2026, the rules-based order had shifted by 2015.

China's spectacular growth since the 1980s took it from a relatively marginal position in the global pecking order to being a peer competitor to the US. As a factor in the US economy, China's economy is now much bigger than the Soviet Union's ever was during the bipolar Cold War. And Beijing is now using that wealth to not only buy a much more powerful military but to have the Western world dependent on China's economy and technology in an unprecedented way.

This is why Russia is a global order disrupter, but China is a global order remaker. The Sino-Russian combination is a powerful threat to the West.

One area of impact will be global arms control. It's correct that global arms-control negotiations haven't progressed much in almost three decades. The Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, which is the primary multilateral arms-control negotiating body, hasn't been able to agree on its annual program of work since 1996 because of disagreement among the members about what should be given priority. The last successful treaty it negotiated was the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996. China and Russia have done little to solve or mediate at the Conference and are probably satisfied with that.

But it's their actions outside the Conference that have undermined even existing norms and treaties. For example, China's actions, such as anti-satellite (ASAT) weapon testing in January 2007, have arguably resulted in the restarting of antiballistic missile (ABM) programs and ASAT weapons testing by the US and India.

ASAT weapons testing will become a serious threat to the global use of outer space, not just to military assets but also civilian programs. This will have very unpredictable consequences for international politics, economics and other aspects of human lives.

Restarting ABM testing threatens to create further instability in global nuclear politics

Restarting ABM testing threatens to create further instability in global nuclear politics. Although the US formally abrogated the existing ABM treaty in 2002, that was partly the consequence of Chinese and Russian effort to shield North Korea and others that were developing long-range ballistic missiles. Russia and China knew those developments were affecting American security and dismissed years of American protests before the US ended the ABM treaty. The new research into ABMs has a nuclear dimension due to China's unprecedented nuclear expansion. China maintained a small arsenal of about 300 warheads for decades but suddenly, with little explanation or justification, began a massive and open-ended nuclear expansion around 2020 (consistently with China regularly taking advantage of US and Western distraction, that was during the peak of the Covid-19 crisis). China refuses to join US-Russia nuclear arms-control negotiations, seeking nuclear parity with the US and Russia (this could see a massive increase in China's nuclear arsenal, and the US and Russia currently have roughly 5,000 nuclear warheads each).[73] After so many decades of non-proliferation, it is China that's proliferating and, one option for the US is not just to watch but to seek to maintain nuclear superiority. Russia has its hands full in Europe but knows that the West has feared escalation[74] due to Moscow's nuclear sabre rattling, and so a new and potentially dangerous nuclear arms race isn't impossible. Countries such as Japan[75] and Poland,[76] which have to date lived under the US nuclear umbrella, have already begun discussing what nuclear proliferation may mean and whether their nuclear policies need updating.

Russia and particularly China have indirectly undermined the nuclear non-proliferation order by providing diplomatic cover to countries such as Pakistan, North Korea and Iran. That those actions haven't caused further damage is because others intervened. For example, Israeli military action destroyed a North Korean-built nuclear plant in Syria in 2007.[77] Earlier, the US and others helped to expose and undermine the AQ Khan nuclear proliferation network, which had close links to North Korea.

Beyond the hard issues of international security, China and Russia are also working to weaken and undermine the US dollar. The dollar's role as a reserve currency has been an important source of stability and basis for the international order. Despite various prognostications about the dollar's imminent demise as a reserve currency, it remains strong.[78] But both China and Russia would like to undermine the dollar because of the power that the reserve currency gives to the West. While it's true that other countries in the Global South and even Europe have from time to time expressed concerns about the centrality of the dollar, that's distinct from Russian and Chinese attempts to undermine the liberal international order.

Europe's criticism of the US comes from a desire to maintain the US-led democratic order, while China and Russia have an agreed objective to replace that order as a political ideology and practice. Both are totalitarian states that don't permit credible domestic political opposition or individual rights and freedoms. Their focus is on ruling-party control of the state and its citizens. They both see successful and unsuccessful rebellions in Europe and other parts of the world as being sponsored by liberal Western states. One response to that paranoia has been to align on systemic interference in Western democracies through social media and other forms of intervention while carrying out a global propaganda campaign against liberal ideas and Western policies.[79] Those efforts will become even more intense and include not just Russia–China alignment but more cooperation, including with Iran, depending on the outcome of the current conflict. The China–Russia–Iran axis isn't hypothetical, with all three providing each other with support against their regional adversaries,[80] including, for example, Russia and China supporting the Iranian fight against Israel and the US.[81]

With regard to regional politics, China and Russia have a mutual interest in supporting various regional powers that are either anti-Western or in conflict with the US and West. For example, in the Western Hemisphere, both Russia and China long supported the Maduro regime in Venezuela.[82] That has included economic assistance, weapons supplies and diplomatic support.[83] Despite the US removing Maduro from Venezuela, Russia and China will be seeking to identify the most effective ways to influence the regime. Similarly, Russia and China have long supported the Cuban Government. In Africa, Russia and China have consistently supported the South African Government of Cyril Ramaphosa, again due to its anti-Western positioning.[84] The same goes for Iran, which has also been a recipient of help from both.

China and Russia won't stop seeking new partners through economic, political and security linkages to undermine the West.

And, of security relevance for Australia, the Indo-Pacific isn't immune from the Sino-Russian partnership. In fact, in many respects the most serious and deepest level of cooperation between the two is likely to be focused on the Indo-Pacific. This is the sphere China sees as its own, but Russia has long-term links to countries of direct security interest to Australia, including Indonesia and India.

Russia supports China's expansive claims in the South China Sea and China's refusal to recognise the ruling from The Hague International Court of Justice.[85] Unlike most nations, Russia doesn't have its own 'one-China policy' to oppose any change to the *status quo*, but it supports Beijing's 'One China principle' and so is opposed to Taiwan.[86] In an interview with TASS, the Russian news agency, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that 'Russia recognizes Taiwan as an integral part of China and stands against the island's independence in any form.'[87] In the same interview, Lavrov cautioned Japan, stating the 'Japanese leadership has been seeking to accelerate the country's militarisation' and noted the 'detrimental influence of such an approach on … regional stability'.

Russia and China are stepping up cooperation against Australia's partners—Japan and South Korea. Both have unresolved territorial disputes with Japan, over the Kurile and Senkaku islands, respectively. China and Russia have conducted several joint air patrols near Japan as a possible deterrent signal to Tokyo. Similarly, both have supported the North Korean regime against Seoul. In the case of a Taiwan contingency, it's likely that Russia and China would seek to deter Tokyo and Seoul from supporting any Western coalition that forms to defend the island.

Similarly, Russia opposes the Quad despite the fact it includes India—a key Russian partner. In fact, the Indian Foreign Ministry had to take the unusual step of correcting Lavrov when he criticised the Quad on more than one occasion.[88] Russia also opposes the formation of the AUKUS partnership between Australia, the UK and the US despite it being publicly described as an Indo-Pacific-focused pact.[89] Similarly, Russia and China appear to have coordinated a propaganda effort to accuse the US of using aid to interfere in the elections in Solomon Islands in April 2024. Although that effort didn't gain much attention, there was clear indication that the two countries coordinated the campaign.[90] In all of these cases, Russia took its position despite there being no direct relevance to Russia.

Part 5: The strategic and pragmatic choice for Australia remains the US

In an era of heightened great-power competition, the strategic choice for Australia remains an easy one, even if implementation is difficult: the US and its alliance network.

Both Russia and China affect the Indo-Pacific, through their respective relationships with regional nations, from India in South Asia to Indonesia and most of ASEAN and to the Pacific. The combined power of their strategic partnership has serious implications for Australian defence and national security through their military capabilities and their mastery of the information domain, which influences how the region sees the world. Their actions and coercion threaten individual democracies and the region's stability. Australia's responses, therefore, must address both defence capability and strategic messaging.

For example, China's coercive power ensures regional countries avoid closer ties with Taiwan while not pushing back on Beijing's breaches of international rules, whether against Taiwan or the Philippines. Russia's friendships with the likes of India and Indonesia complicate Australia's ability to forge more intimate relations with strategically vital nations. In a Taiwan contingency, Russia's likely interference would complicate any Western attempt to defend a democratic partner.

The key to Australia's strategic choices is power—both our own (along with our allies and partners) and that of the Sino-Russian partnership outlined in the first three parts of this report. It's why Australia's political and military leadership focus so much on the region's balance of power or, as Foreign Minister Penny Wong has coined, 'strategic equilibrium', in which no single country dominates,

and none is dominated. Developments in the past decade, and particularly since the public acknowledgement of the 'no limits' Sino-Russian partnership in 2022, mean that Australia hasn't faced the threat of such an imbalance of power, or strategic disequilibrium, since the end of World War II. That's why, even when speeches remain country-agnostic, the Australian government means China, and the combined power of Russia and China, when it says that we're living in the most dangerous times since 1945.

While there has been a shift in the global balance of power, the US-led Western alliance network remains stronger than any other combination of aligned states. But almost counterintuitively, while we have war in Europe and the Middle East and not in the Indo-Pacific, the balance of power has changed most in Asia, to the extent that, without the US, neither Australia alone nor with any other regional partners can balance, compete with or deter China.

China is now wealthier than all the other major Asian powers put together; its US$19 trillion economy is far larger than the GDP of Japan, India, South Korea and Australia together (US$11.58 trillion total).[91] That wealth is buying China support in many parts of the world, especially in the Global South, giving Beijing significant political clout. Its economy is also now central to the global economy, forcing dependence on almost all others, giving Beijing one more lever that it has not been reluctant to use. For example, China has used economic coercion on individual countries ranging from Australia and Japan in this region to Lithuania and Sweden in Europe while becoming so confident of its might in 2025 that it threatened rare-earths export restrictions on the entire world.

Beyond economics, the world has become dependent on China's technology in many areas assessed as critical—from solar panels to electric vehicle batteries to commercial drones. The greatest threat is that such wealth is funding a massive military build-up that includes nuclear forces, making China by far the most powerful regional military force. Russian diplomatic and military support—as detailed in this report—makes China an even more formidable challenge regionally and globally.

Therefore, regardless of one's views on the Trump administration, Australia's defence and foreign policy response to our current state of regional instability, imbalance and disequilibrium remains founded on the American alliance. The US is essential—without it, no Asian balance is possible. That's why Canberra rightly continues to find ways to ensure US commitment to Australia and the region.

In 2025, Prime Minister Albanese and President Trump signed the United States–Australia Framework for Securing of Supply in the Mining and Processing of Critical Minerals and Rare Earths. That was an example of the two nations strengthening themselves individually and collectively with the aim of reducing China's control of this critical field and ensuring a steady and secure supply of materials essential for defence and other vital sectors.

China is now wealthier than all the other major Asian powers put together

On the security side, the US is necessary to provide advanced military equipment and intelligence on which Australia relies as part of its strategy to deter aggression and ensure stability in our region. Both military equipment and intelligence ensure that Australia and allied powers maintain an edge over potential bad actors in the region, which is necessary both for deterrence and, if deterrence fails, for defence. While other nations can help with quantity, no regional partner is a viable substitute. Building Australian defence sovereignty requires the combination of devoting greater resources to domestic capabilities while also having access to US military technology. AUKUS is the prime example of Australian policy that necessarily invests in our own national strength while giving the US the confidence that it has a partner deserving of its backing.

Reliance on the alliance doesn't mean censorship or blank cheques from Canberra. In fact, Australia's investment in our own defence and security means Canberra can speak truth to the power of Washington DC, including in the face of American actions that are unfair. As Prime Minister Albanese has stated, US tariffs on Australian exports were not justified, given the state of the bilateral trade relationship. Australia can also afford to support other countries, such as Denmark in relation to inappropriate behaviour relating to Greenland or Ukraine in the context of Russia's illegal war. Most importantly, Canberra should continue its practice of being able to be open with Washington DC on the threats posed by China and why US and allied support for regional countries—from Taiwan to the Philippines to South Korea and Japan—should remain strong even as both Australia and the US seek a more stable relationship with Beijing.

Australia can hold two truths at the same time—the US is our most important ally, and we can from time to time disagree. That's been a longstanding feature of the alliance and speaks to its depth and quality. It isn't a characteristic shared in Australia's relationship with Beijing. False equivalence of the US and China–Russia should be avoided. The US isn't a threat to Australian sovereignty and security. The Sino-Russian partnership is a threat.

A third truth should also be held: the alliance is our most important relationship, but it too is not enough. Australia must also strengthen our other partnerships with like-minded nations to both encourage the US to remain a global player and to ensure that authoritarian coalitions led by Russia and China don't sense they have the playing field to themselves. Russia and China have too often been able to depend on the disunity of liberal international actors. Australia is a well-known supporter of multilateral institutions, but the current period of multilateral reform and uncertainty means bilateral and minilateral relations are more important than ever.

In our region, it's likely that the upcoming National Defence Strategy will reiterate Australia's doubling down on its relationships with Japan (now as close to a formal alliance without a treaty) and India (despite reticence over its Russia policies, Delhi remains key to a collective that can constrain China). Others, such as South Korea and the Philippines, will continue to be seen as like-minded, while Australia will continue to offer practical alternatives to nations in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Further strengthening of those partnerships—as seen recently with Papua New Guinea—improves collective security and can introduce complications to Russia and China's security calculations and potentially deter them from misbehaviour.

Will the combination of investing in Australian national security, the alliance and like-minded partnerships be effective in practice, including as a credible deterrence to not just military war but economic and technological coercion?

Deterrence becomes increasingly difficult if an aggressive adversary has much more military power that it can deploy in the region. China is building such power. This requires a changed mindset, from control to denial, when considering military strategy and capabilities. Since 1945, the US's overwhelming military capacity allowed it and its partners to control the regional military equation. That military control and the welcoming of nations into the orbit of the US alliance network and the UN system was used to allow nations to be sovereign. Both US military control and our national sovereignty are now at risk in Asia because of China's military power and the Russia–China partnership. A region dominated by China and the Sino-Russian partnership would not only have different rules, which would be enforced when broken, but all regional nations would be told how to act within the rules.

Countering this is a thesis for a different report, focused on deterrence strategy and necessary individual capabilities. But Australia's strategic choice in the face of the threat from the group of authoritarian axis powers is an economic security strategy that doesn't just seek to 'balance' security and economics but is always able to say whether Canberra is in a position to make its own security decisions or whether a foreign adversary has a veto power. That means acknowledging that the Sino-Russian partnership has grown stronger over the past two decades and now resembles a very close partnership, even though it isn't a formal alliance. They've increased their defence trade, intensified their military engagement such that they now have at least some rudimentary force interoperability, and they are confident they are overseeing the end of the US-led democratic global order and replacing it with their own authoritarian one.

To avoid China, and its authoritarian axis, having such a veto on our national decisions, Australia will need to continue holding three principles as our own truths, which enable us to speak truth to any power: investment in national security, the alliance, and international partnerships with like-minded nations. We need to ensure that we don't respond by merely redistributing the existing pool of resources but by working together to increase the size of that pool and making China and Russia (as well as Iran and North Korea) feel like they are in the deep end, once again.

Notes

1 See, US–China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Report to Congress of US–China Economic and Security Review Commission*, November 2025, online; Andrea Kendall-Taylor, Richard Fontaine, 'The axis of upheaval: how America's adversaries are uniting to overturn the global order', *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2024, online.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ABM	antiballistic missile
ASAT	anti-satellite
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRIC	Brazil, Russia, India and China
GDP	gross domestic product
IP	intellectual property
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
MERICS	Mercator Institute for China Studies
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
SAM	surface-to-air missile
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
UN	United Nations


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