



EXPLAINER

Carl Janz and Colin Karotam

Russia's Pacific submarine fleet

Sino-Russian cooperation in a conventional Pacific conflict

Summary

- Russia's Indo-Pacific interests, including its deepening economic and strategic reliance on China, mean it cannot afford to see China lose a regional conflict which would leave Russia geopolitically isolated.
- Allied planners must therefore factor in Russia's employment of its sizeable Pacific-based nuclear-powered and conventional attack submarines in any potential conflict with China.
- Russia's Pacific submarine fleet is larger than that of China's Northern Fleet, giving Russia particular subsea potency in the northwest Pacific.
- In some cases, Russia is geographically better placed than China to engage in activities such as submarine cable cutting, interdicting key supply lines and undertaking sea-to-land strike against key ports and logistics nodes – particularly against Japan, a key Australian partner.
- As defence ties with Europe grow, Australia and Europe could seek to coordinate deterrence efforts on both of Russia's fronts, maximising chances of mutual success.

Introduction

Much attention has rightly been placed on how Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered attack submarines under the AUKUS deal will revolutionise Australian defence and deterrence capability. However, less attention is given

to the fact that Russia already operates eight of its own nuclear-powered attack submarines in our region and has strategic incentives to use them. Under the Sino-Russian 'no-limits' partnership, Russia's nuclear-powered attack submarines roughly double what China's growing arsenal already brings to the region, with Russia's capabilities offering a significant but often unappreciated potency. This has growing ramifications for Australia given the deepening Sino-Russian partnership is the cornerstone of an axis of authoritarianism threatening Australia's liberal-democratic interests. Sino-Russian attack submarine cooperation is inimical to Australia's intent to contribute to a favourable regional strategic balance and to hold at risk forces likely to target those interests.¹

Russia's strategic interests in the Pacific

Despite typically being viewed as a European power, Russia has extensive interests in the Indo-Pacific which have only grown since its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. China has become the main patron of Russia's war in Ukraine, offsetting the economic gap left by European sanctions after the invasion. China also provides dual-use technologies and advanced manufacturing tools used to fill shortfalls in Russian weapons production.² In an implicit recognition of its own junior position, Russian technology transfers to China have increased despite Beijing's repeated theft of Russian military technology.³ Meanwhile, India and Southeast Asia

have become Russian economic and diplomatic lifelines, and Russia's security cooperation with North Korea has reached new heights, including through troop deployments and military supply chain integration. In short, Putin has tied Russia's future to the Indo-Pacific.

Russia cannot afford China to lose an Indo-Pacific war by failing to take Taiwan

As a result, an Indo-Pacific conflict would have immediate consequences for Russia's economy and defence industry. When coupled with existing sanctions, a blockade or conflict around the First Island Chain would cut Russia off from virtually all maritime trade. Russia cannot afford China to lose an Indo-Pacific war by, for example, failing to take Taiwan. This would upend Sino-Russian attempts to subvert the liberal international order, weaken Russia's main patron and complicate Russia's expansionist ambitions. When asked what Russia would do if a war were to break out over Taiwan, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Russia was obliged under treaty to assist China to defend 'state unity and territorial integrity'.⁴ Russia has described itself as a 'Euro-Pacific' and 'Eurasian' power and has expressed an intent to 'transform Eurasia into a single continental space'.⁵ While the Indo-Pacific paradigm is broadly shared by liberal democracies, Russia operates within its own conception of strategic space. Therefore, Russian support for China in the Pacific may be even more concrete than China's support for Russia in Ukraine.

The Russian Pacific submarine fleet

Recognising the Pacific's importance, Russia began modernising its Pacific Fleet in 2013.⁶ Russia's submarine fleet, both conventional and nuclear-powered, has received particular attention and is considered the most potent component of Russia's naval combat capability.⁷ Moscow's level of hardware investment suggests genuine strategic intent and not merely posturing to shore up great-power status. Indeed, because of their quality and quantity, some assess Russia's Pacific Fleet submarine arm to be the third most potent in the Pacific after the United States and China.⁸

Russia is undergoing a doctrinal shift across all its fleets, phasing out SSNs in favour of SSGNs. The Yasen-class SSGNs – Russia's newest SSGN class planned to become the standard, along with its Yasen-M variant – have a multi-purpose role beyond the type's typical cruise-missile functions, featuring weapons such as anti-submarine torpedos, anti-ship missiles and hypersonic cruise missiles, the latter of which can hit land targets.⁹ As of 2026, China operates around nine in-service nuclear-powered attack submarines.¹⁰ This means the

addition of Russia's eight Pacific-based SSGNs and SSNs nearly doubles the countries' combined number. This will increase if Russia cooperates with China's North Sea Fleet, which operates five such vessels.¹¹ In total number of attack submarines (SSGNs, SSNs and SSKs), Russia bests China's northern fleet 18 to 17.^{12, 13} In the longer term however, China is set to outpace Russia in nuclear submarine production and has sought access to Russia's nuclear submarine technology, including its superior quiet propulsion systems. This indicates China's intent to improve its own sub-surface capabilities.¹⁴

Table 1: Number of Russian and Chinese nuclear and conventional attack submarines.

	Nuclear Ballistic Missile Submarines (SSBNs)	Nuclear Attack Submarines (SSGNs/ SSNs)	Conventional Attack Submarines (SSKs)	Total
Russian Pacific fleet	5	8	10	23
China's northern theatre Navy	0	5	12	17
Russia all fleets	13	21	19	53
China all fleets	6	9	46	61

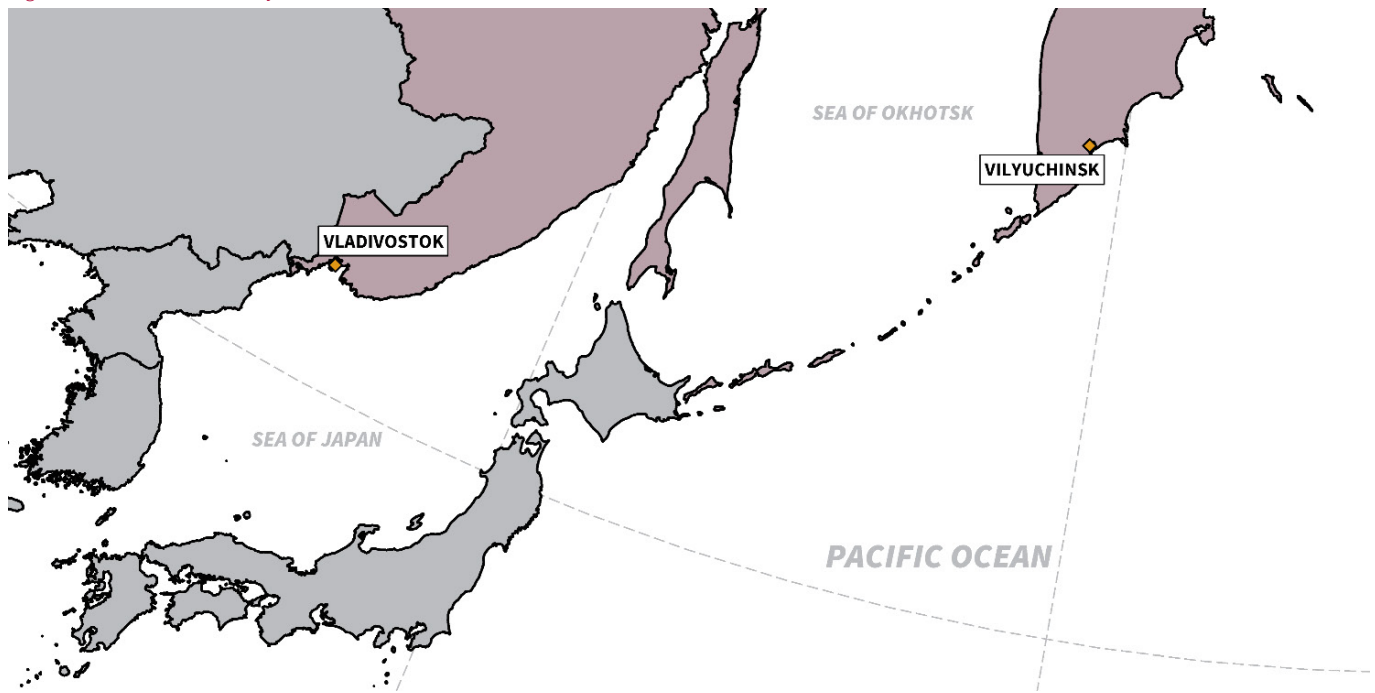
Source: *The Military Balance 2026*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Russia's nuclear submarines are hosted at Vilyuchinsk on the Kamchatka peninsula, placing them outside the First Island Chain and giving them an advantage on some types of missions relative to China.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Russia's SSKs are located at Vladivostok, giving them direct access to the Sea of Japan, an area that could be more difficult for Chinese submarines to access in a conflict scenario.

Sino-Russian joint operations

China and Russia traditionally have undertaken a range of joint exercises across the globe, but focus has shifted to Pacific flashpoints in recent years, including the Sea of Japan and South China Sea. Russia has repeatedly violated Japanese airspace during exercises with China,¹⁶ and in June 2026 Russian and Chinese nuclear-capable aircraft traversed the Japanese and South Korean Air Defence Identification Zones.¹⁷ Similarly, in December 2025 Russia and China undertook a joint aerial patrol between the Japanese Islands of Okinawa and Miyako in response to Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's comments that Japan may come to Taiwan's aid in an invasion scenario.¹⁸ Joint exercises have primarily focused on anti-submarine and anti-missile operations, air defence, and communications¹⁹—including between submarines.²⁰ Such exercises suggest Russia and China could carry out simultaneous operations within the same theatre by defending against common threats but pursuing different operational goals—or at least seeking to deter adversaries by demonstrating they could.

Figure 1: Vladivostok and Vilyuchinsk – locations of Russian submarine bases in the Pacific



Pink shaded area represents territories under Russian control, not undisputed sovereignty. Source: ASPI

Scenarios of Russian naval activity in the Indo-Pacific

Rhetoric, strategic logic, hardware investment and joint exercises all suggest that Russia may be preparing to undertake meaningful military action in the Indo-Pacific in coordination with China. Given this, it is worth exploring how this closer relationship could translate into activity inimical to Australian interests in the Indo-Pacific. To do this, three plausible scenarios are proposed below that describe circumstances where Russia may be willing to assist China's signalling in the northern Pacific to deter potential US, Japanese and other allied support in the event Beijing decides to undertake regional military action such as taking Taiwan by force.

Of course, deterrence signalling needs to be undertaken with a credible response force, so while all three scenarios imagined could be carried out at any time to achieve deterrent effect, they could equally be employed during a conflict. All three scenarios could be undertaken unilaterally by People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy submarines from the Northern Theatre Command, but the prospect of essentially doubling Beijing's nuclear attack submarine resources with the addition of Russian assets from the Pacific Fleet sharing the burden has a deterrent effect. Russian support in scenarios in the north could free PLA assets to focus on operations closer to Taiwan or the South China Sea.

The first scenario imagines either joint or unilateral Russian submarine activity near and over the swathe of undersea data cables connecting mainland US to Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and other countries in Southeast Asia. There are

multiple reports of Russia's form in cable disruption in the Baltic.²¹ While the cables in the Pacific south of the Kamchatka Peninsula are deep and difficult to access, they're an attractive target for an adversary and reports indicate that Russia has the capacity to damage cables several kilometres underwater.²² Alternately, SSGNs ported outside the first island chain on the Kamchatka Peninsula or SSKs from Vladivostok could undertake riskier operations closer to landing points where the water is shallow enough for submarines to reach.

Russian support could free PLA assets to focus on operations closer to Taiwan

The second scenario imagines joint PLA Navy SSN and Russian Pacific Fleet SSGN patrols east of Japan signalling an intent and capability to enforce a limited blockade on Japan in a regional conflict. Attack submarines are a potent threat to sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that could significantly complicate potential US and allied plans to use Japan as a support base and launching pad for operations to assist in the defence of Taiwan. A limited SLOC interdiction effect off Japan's east coast could be achieved using SSKs from Vladivostok. A similar effect could also be achieved through joint SSN and SSGN patrolling in the mid-Pacific to signal intent and capability to disrupt US and allied SLOCs between the US mainland, Alaska and Hawaii. Longer-range attack submarines would be well suited to this task.

The third scenario is reflective of a trend in Russian submarine development away from SSNs towards SSGNs. This likely

reflects a subtle shift in doctrine from prioritising on SLOC interdiction to focussing on strike missions against ports and other land targets.²³ Such roles appear more suited to Russian planning assumptions about smaller conflicts on its borders in the west. But the land attack role now available to its Pacific Fleet creates a plausible scenario wherein Russian SSGNs off Japan's east coast could threaten Japanese ports and land infrastructure that could support allied operations.

The plausibility of these scenarios is supported by activity and signalling we have already seen from Russia and China.²⁴ The common theme between all three scenarios is the potential deterrence messaging: a near doubling of China's attack submarine capability and the addition of Russian SSKs could significantly complicate US and allied plans to use Japan as a support base for operations. In fact, Russian and Chinese submarine operations would not need to be joint. The thought of simple coordination between Russian assets, creating dilemmas for allies in the north and leaving Chinese assets free to focus on Taiwan, could be enough to give the US and other allies pause.

Australia aims to maintain a stable and balanced region by deterring aggression that seeks to upend the regional status quo, along with allies and partners such as the US. The Russian Pacific Fleet, particularly its potent nuclear attack submarine arm, could be used to undermine that stability either on its own or in collaboration with China. Russia can therefore directly threaten Australia's security interests.

Conclusion

Strategists in Canberra and likeminded capitals will need to account for the fact that deterring an Indo-Pacific conflict also involves deterring Russian participation in that conflict. Given that Russia's primary goal is expansion into Europe, it's worth exploring greater defence cooperation with European partners to coordinate deterrence efforts across Russia's two fronts, particularly as Australian and European defence ties are already deepening. While theatre-merging has become a reality in modern grand strategy, it is important to keep in mind that from Russia's point of view, Europe and the Indo-Pacific have always been strategically linked. Australia and its allies and partners should expect Russia to act accordingly and should therefore factor meaningful Russian participation in a regional contingency into strategic planning.

Notes

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About the authors: Carl Janz is a Research Intern with ASPI's Defence Strategy Program. Colin Karotam is a Senior Resident Fellow with ASPI's Defence Strategy Program. AI contributed no ideas to this report.

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Explainers: Are short analyses that raise awareness of both existing and emerging security and defence policy challenges facing Australia and the region.

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