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Competition in the Disguise of Partnership:

Structural Analysis on China-Russia Relations

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| Abstract |

This paper examines China-Russia relations as of the mid-2020s. It first reviews the existing literature on China-Russia relations and clarifies their limitations. Next, it explores the conditions that differentiate a "long-term, trustworthy, and strong interstate partnership," which is indicative of "an enduring alliance," from an "unstable, temporary, and essentially distrusting partnership," which represents "a competitive coalition." As for the case study, it investigates China-Russia relations across three key domains (i.e., historical development, economic connections, and military relations) to determine whether they meet the criteria for an enduring alliance, as often argued in previous research. The following analysis reveals that although the two countries appear to form increasingly closer ties in the face of a common threat (i.e., the U.S), they do not fully satisfy the conditions necessary for a long-term, trustworthy, and strong interstate partnership. Instead, their relationship is largely characterized by instability, temporariness,

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and fundamental distrust. Consequently, it concludes that contemporary China-Russia relations are better described as "competitive coalition," rather than as an enduring alliance.

▪ Key words: China-Russia Relations, Great Power Competition, Historical Development, Economic Connections, Military Relations

I. Introduction

As of the mid-2020s, there is a growing consensus that "Pax-Americana" has come to an end. Indeed, a series of incidents both within and without the U.S – the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the 2008 financial crisis, and the intensification of perennial domestic issues like inequality, political polarization, elitism, and populism – have consistently strained U.S. resources over the past two decades, providing favorable conditions for the emergence of challenging powers and rogue states that oppose the American-led liberal international order. As such, one of the most frequently discussed issues is the cooperation between dissatisfied revisionist powers, with China and Russia standing out as the most prominent examples. Sharing common interests and threats, the argument goes, China and Russia are increasingly deepening their economic and military ties, effectively forming a strategic alliance against the U.S, which both countries now regard as a common adversary (Fong and Merrow 2024; Konstantinovsky and Carlough 2024; Kim et al. 2024).

The aberration of Russia and China's increasingly assertive posture since the 2010s have provided a practical backdrop for these arguments to flourish. In 2014, Russia incurred the "Crimean Crisis" which eventually resulted in the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation on March

18. The armed conflicts between Ukraine and Russia had continued in the form of limited warfare (i.e., the Donbas war), until it escalated into a full-scale war in 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine on multiple fronts with an unmistakable purpose of territorial conquest (Delanoe 2014; Mearsheimer 2022). In the meantime, China has continuously expanded its military influence in adjacent regions, including the South China Sea (i.e., the Nine-Dash Line), Taiwan (i.e., the One China principle), the East China Sea (i.e., the dispute over the Senkaku Islands), and India (i.e., the Sino-Indian border dispute). The fact that China has also enjoyed substantial advancements in military capacity over recent decades redoubles the impact of its assertive posture (Beckley 2017; Westcott 2021). The outbreak of the US-China trade war (2018-present) reflects the growing strategic competition between the two countries. Amidst the increasing divergence in foreign policy between these two countries and the U.S, the importance of anti-American intergovernmental organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS, both seemingly led by China and Russia, looms larger than ever before.

However, it remains rather unclear whether China-Russia relations can be simply understood as a newly formed strategic alliance against the U.S and its Western allies. For one thing, the two countries suffer a long historical animosity spanning from the mid-17th century to the end of the 20th century. Sharing an extensive border with geographical proximity, China and Russia had consistently engaged in territorial disputes both through direct military confrontations and indirect proxy conflicts, some of which resulted in territorial annexation (e.g., the Amur Annexation of 1858 and 1860, the Li - Lobanov Treaty of 1896, and the Russian Invasion of Manchuria in 1900) or nuclear close calls (e.g., the Sino-Soviet Border Conflict of 1969). Moreover, beginning from the mid-20th century, both countries have displayed military assertiveness in their respective spheres of influence (i.e., Eastern Europe for Russia and East Asia for China),

gradually fostering mutual perceptions of threat and enduring distrust. Not surprisingly, apart from the fact that they both have an autocratic political regime, they do not enjoy shared values as their Western counterparts (Kuisong 2000; Kaufman 2010; Trenin 2012). It is no coincidence that there is a lack of institutionalized partnership between China and Russia, which may explain why China's full-scale military support for Russia in the Ukrainian war (2014-present) has not been materialized, with mutual military assistance remaining optional rather than obligatory, even when one country engages in armed conflict with a third party (AFP in Washington 2024).

Under this background, this paper examines China-Russia relations as of the mid-2020s. The rest of this paper will proceed as follows. It will first review the existing literature on China-Russia relations and clarifies their limitations. Next, it will explore the conditions that differentiate a "long-term, trustworthy, and strong interstate partnership," which is indicative of "an enduring alliance," from an "unstable, temporary, and essentially distrusting partnership," which represents "a competitive coalition." As for the case study, it will investigate China-Russia relations across three key domains (i.e., historical development, economic connections, military relations) to determine whether they meet the criteria for an enduring alliance, as often argued in previous research. The following analysis will reveal that although the two countries appear to form increasingly closer ties in the face of a common threat (i.e., the U.S), they do not fully satisfy the conditions necessary for a long-term, trustworthy, and strong interstate partnership. Instead, their relationship is largely characterized by instability, temporariness, and fundamental distrust. Consequently, it will conclude that contemporary China-Russia relations are better described as "competitive coalition," rather than as an enduring alliance.

II. Literature Review

Previous research on China-Russia relations has increasingly advanced the view that the two countries have developed a close partnership, one that can be described as a "de facto alliance." Starting from the mid-2010s, a series of studies have claimed that the cooperation between China and Russia had evolved into a "concrete common front." While they admit that China-Russia relations have yet to reach a fully institutionalized formal alliance, they still argue that the two countries have achieved a "strategic partnership" or a "political marriage of convenience" in the face of mounting pressure from the US-led unipolarity. Facing shared challenges, such as NATO expansion, the international spread of democracy, the development of new U.S. missile defense systems, and Western intransigence regarding their key policies, rather than viewing each other as threats, China and Russia have procreated a mutually beneficial partnership, through which they have worked together to ameliorate historical antagonism and promote diplomatic cooperation. In this arrangement, China benefits from Russia's overt challenges to U.S. hegemony, while Russia equally gains from China's support in resisting U.S. dominance (Hsu and Soong 2014; Krickovic 2017; Carlson 2018). The growing military cooperation between the two countries, particularly since 2014, when Russia increasingly turned to China amid escalating tensions with the West, is frequently cited as compelling evidence in support of these claims. Moreover, as China-Russia relations are built on an increasingly consolidated mutual trust, the argument goes, they are rapidly moving toward a formalized alliance in the near future (Muraviev 2014; Lubina 2017; Bolt and Cross 2018; Korolev and Portyakov 2019; Groitl 2023).

More recently, a number of articles and reports have focused exclusively on the positive aspects of China-Russia relations, arguing that by accommodating mutual strategic interests, China and Russia have effectively

forged an “anti-Western alliance” against all odds. A series of events over the past three decades, including the Ukraine crisis, the decline of U.S. hegemony and the growth of the non-Western world, Russia’s “turn to the East” policy and China’s initiatives for “new assertiveness” in the South and East China Seas, and increasing China-Russia cooperation in energy sector, have resulted in the emergence of a “comprehensive strategic alliance” between China and Russia. The fact that both countries have sought to protect their autocratic regimes from Western criticism and to promote a “post-West” global order as the two most prominent revisionist powers redoubles their bilateral ties (Korolev 2020; Stent 2020; Guan 2022). In addition, the deterioration of both US-Russia and US-China relations, primarily caused by the Russo-Ukrainian war and the US-China trade war, has enhanced cooperation between China and Russia in key strategic sectors, such as energy production, bilateral trade, and joint military exercises. With Russia increasingly accepting its role as a junior partner to China, China-Russia relations now enjoy strong institutional foundations for an alliance, entering “their best period in history” (Kurylo 2024; Muraviev 2024; Yu 2025; Khan 2025; Hird et al. 2025; Chabarovskaya 2025).

Despite its contribution to understanding China-Russia relations in recent decades, previous research reveals significant limitations as it predicates the consolidation of enduring partnerships between the two countries. The perspectives of both the concrete common front and the anti-Western alliance rely on the assumption that China-Russia relations are naturally evolving into mutually beneficial, trust-based partnerships. By focusing almost exclusively on the positive aspects of their relationship, negative elements within China-Russia relations are largely overlooked, disregarding the possibility that the relationship may not inherently develop in such a favorable manner. As was briefly explained above, China-Russia relations contain many factors of instability, including historical animosity, insufficient shared values, and a lack of institutionalized partnership. Given

that the dynamics between great powers are inherently complex and rarely defined by linear growth, the simplistic characterization of China-Russia relations as either a common front or an alliance deserves reconsideration. In light of these limitations in the existing literature, the following section will develop an original analytical framework to reassess contemporary China-Russia relations, grounded in the premise that great power politics is fundamentally about competition, not cooperation or companionship.

III. Analytical Framework

Various attempts have been made to conceptualize interstate partnership under the banner of "alliance theory." A dramatic increase in a state's material power, for example, drives neighboring states to form an alliance as an act of 'balancing,' in addition to aggregating their own military capabilities (i.e., the balance of power). In much the same context, a rapid escalation in the threat posed by a particular state spurs adjacent states to forge military alliances (i.e., the balance of threat). On the contrary, rather than balancing against a rising or threatening neighbor, states may pursue other strategies, including "aligning themselves with the threat (i.e., bandwagoning),"[1] "maintaining neutrality and distancing themselves from conflicts (i.e., buck-passing)," "directly entering wars to support allies whose collapse is expected to jeopardize their own security (i.e., chain-ganging)," and "conciliating with a threatening state without capitulation (i.e., appeasement)." Meanwhile, even in the absence of a shared threat, states might form an alliance to contain mutual threats (i.e., tethering). Finally, small powers with unstable domestic politics may choose

1) Randall Schweller reframed bandwagoning as "the balance of interest," arguing that states may align with a revisionist power when they are dissatisfied with the existing international order (Schweller 1994).

to ally with major powers, particularly a hegemon, to consolidate their political legitimacy through external support (i.e., omnibalancing) (Morgenthau 1972; Walt 1985; Christensen and Snyder 1990; David 1991; Weitsman 2004; Waltz 2010; Richey 2020).[2)]

However, it is difficult to apply these traditional alliance theories to contemporary China-Russia relations. For example, the theory of omnibalancing is designed for small powers, which does not correspond to the realities of China and Russia. The concepts of bandwagoning, buck-passing, chain-ganging, and appeasement do not reflect the dynamics between the two countries, as neither of them adopts a submissive posture, nor do they commit to binding mutual military assistance. The concept of tethering is about an alliance in the absence of a shared threat, disregarding the role of the U.S in drawing China and Russia together in recent years. The balancing theories – the balance of power & the balance of threat – bear the same problem, as they do not adequately reflect the current conditions of China-Russia relations. A dramatic increase in a state's material power, a key premise for forming a balancing coalition under the balance of power theory, is more applicable to China than to the U.S, indicating that China-Russia partnership cannot be properly explained by this framework. Similarly, the rapid escalation of threat by a particular state, a primary driver for forming a balancing coalition according to the balance of threat theory, is more clearly represented by China and Russia rather than the U.S, as both have actively pursued military expansion and territorial conquest over the past two decades. This shows that China-Russia partnership does not fit well within the framework of the balance of threat either.

Moreover, essentially as 'theories of alliance formation,' these theories

2) Occasionally, it is argued that ideological similarity can also foster alliances, as exemplified by Arab countries often uniting under the banner of Arabism (Barnett 1998). However, this perspective remains marginal, as its causal relationship has not been properly tested.

may explain the conditions under which interstate partnership can be formed, but they often overlook the diverse nature of these partnerships. Even after their initial formation, interstate partnerships vary in form and nature based on their unique characteristics. Despite previous research describing China-Russia relations as a stable cooperative alliance, the persistent instability and incompleteness observed between the two countries indicate a more complex reality. To accurately analyze such relations, it is essential not only to examine the conditions that facilitate partnership formation but also to understand the nature of the partnership once it is established. Therefore, moving beyond the traditional theories of alliance formation, which primarily focus on the conditions and processes of forming interstate partnerships, it is necessary to suggest an analytical framework that delves into the specific features and nature of these partnerships – particularly in terms of their durability and underlying factors of instability – in addition to their formative conditions. In this regard, the rest of this section will delineate the conditions for a long-term, trustworthy, and strong interstate partnership (i.e., an enduring alliance) and those for an unstable, temporary, and essentially distrusting partnership (i.e., a competitive coalition).

1. Enduring Alliance

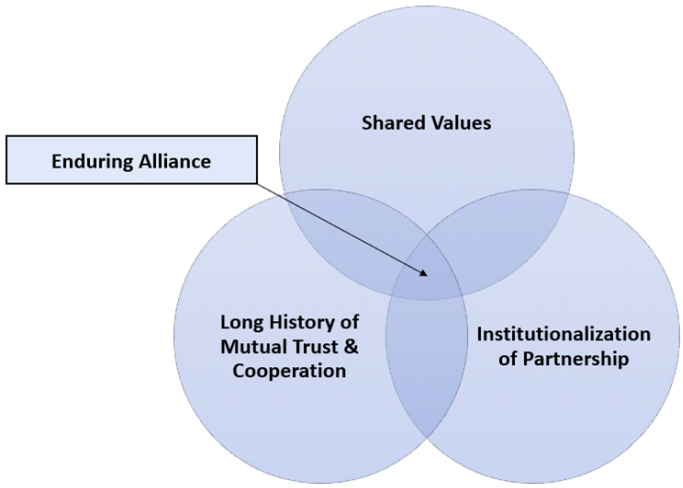
All interstate partnerships are primarily driven by national interests, with a key focus on enhancing security and safety. Although they may pursue some other goals, such as economic cooperation, cultural exchange, and joint development of technology depending on specific circumstances, except on very rare occasions, interstate partnerships essentially reflect military characteristics (Khanna et al. 1998; William 2007). Despite this common ground, however, they differ in member states' commitment to the partnership, leading to differences in their durability and steadiness. Alignment, for

example, refers to a set of mutual expectations between two or more states that they will support each other in disputes or conflicts against common adversaries. However, such “expectations” are not necessarily upheld by formal treaties or institutions, nor do they bind member states to any enforceable commitments. Moreover, its “issue-specific nature” drives countries to form shifting alignments on different topics, undermining the development of focused, long-term initiatives, and diluting the potential for an enduring partnership (Chun 2000). Coalition is another major term for interstate partnerships. It represents ad hoc cooperation among specific countries aimed at addressing an immediate shared threat or particular security issue with imminent consequences. Formed in response to an impending threat or urgent security challenge, it is more focused and less issue-specific than an alignment. However, it still lacks formal institutions or shared infrastructure, as its nature remains informal and temporary. Similar to alignment, it suffers from a lack of enforceable commitments. It usually revolves around the strategic achievement of a particular objective and often dissolves once that specific goal is accomplished. Accordingly, coalitions are typically formed between rival countries whose temporary convergence of interests can be addressed through informal cooperation (Lopez et al. 2011).

Compared to alignment and coalition, alliance is formal and enduring in nature. As the most advanced form of interstate partnership, it is a “formal treaty-based security arrangement” between two or more countries aimed at countering a common threat. Unlike alignment or coalition, it is underpinned by formal treaties and institutionalized mechanisms of cooperation that bind member states to enforceable commitments. With standing institutions and standardized protocols (i.e., joint defense strategies, interoperable military equipment, shared responsibilities, and specific arrangements on military bases and command structures), its members expect to fight together by default in the event of conflict. Such distinctive feature of “burden sharing” not only gives alliance a focused and

formalized character but also fosters its long-term durability (Duffield 1994; Barry 1996; McCalla 1996). In addition to the importance of institutionalization, the preservation of mutual credibility (i.e., mutual trust) and ideological solidarity (i.e., shared values) constitute other key elements of an enduring alliance. The perception of mutual reliability is cultivated through decades of consistent commitment to the partnership, as exemplified by Cold War-era alliances. As such, alliance functions as a "symbol of credibility" among its member states (Walt 1997, 165). Ideological solidarity represents a shared identity and common political values among member states. The sense of belonging to a larger political community minimizes intra-alliance conflicts and helps sustain cohesion, even after the original rationale for the partnership has faded or the external environment has undergone significant change (Deudney & Ikenberry 1993; Mueller 1996).

Figure 1. Conditions for Enduring Alliance



▪ Source: Author

Overall, as illustrated in Figure 1, the enduring alliance consists of 'the institutionalization of partnership,' 'a longstanding history of mutual trust,'

and 'shared values,' all of which are essential for a long-term, trustworthy, and strong interstate partnership. When any of these elements – institutionalization, mutual trust, or shared values – falls apart, whether due to drastically changing threat perceptions or domestic political deterioration, alliances may degenerate into alignments or coalitions, or collapse entirely, dissolving all forms of interstate partnerships (Walt 1997, 158-163).[3)]

2. Competitive Coalition

Interstate partnerships, however, often fall short of becoming enduring alliances. As briefly outlined above, alignments or coalitions represent more loosely coordinated arrangements among countries, distinguished by their limited and non-binding commitments. Indeed, even in the absence of all three pillars of an enduring alliance – institutionalization, mutual trust, and shared values – countries may still form interstate partnerships to address their urgent needs that happen to converge. Immediate common adversaries or overlapping security challenges are primary examples of converging urgent needs. Meanwhile, the necessity for mutual containment or full-scale

3) Historical examples such as NATO, the US-Japan alliance, and the US-South Korea alliance exemplify the defining features of an enduring alliance. Established in 1949, NATO remains the most prominent multilateral alliance, born of anti-communist solidarity and sustained by a comprehensive political, military, and administrative framework. Even after the Cold War, it expanded under principles of political liberalism and collective security, with the U.S continuing to provide security guarantees in exchange for European economic cooperation (Sayle 2019). The US-Japan alliance, formalized in 1951 and revised in 1960, evolved from post-WWII reconciliation to a highly institutionalized partnership, underpinned by Japan's economic resurgence and America's extended deterrence (i.e., the Yoshida Doctrine). As such, Japan supported U.S. war efforts in the Gulf War (1990) and the Iraq War (2003) while hosting roughly 55,000 American troops (Cha 2017). Similarly, the US-South Korea alliance, forged in 1953 after the Korean War, is rooted in mutual trust and shared values. With the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and the deployment of approximately 28,500 U.S. troops (USFK), South Korea supported the U.S in the Vietnam War (1955-1975) and the Iraq War (2003) while closely aligning with American economic and political objectives (Lee et al. 2021).

preparation for military conflicts with third parties can compel mutually suspicious countries to cooperate, often by signing non aggression pacts. When these elements come together, there is a strong incentive for countries to forge a peculiar partnership, even if they do not expect it to evolve into an enduring alliance. This type of interstate partnership is essentially 'competitive' in nature, as mutual distrust and underlying tensions render their relations purely transactional and self-interested, with each side avoiding any real sacrifices and seeking to advance its own advantages, even at the other's expense. Meanwhile, while it clearly falls short of an enduring alliance, as it is driven primarily by impending security concerns, it is more focused than an alignment and is therefore best characterized as a 'coalition' (Mazarr et al. 2018, 3-5).

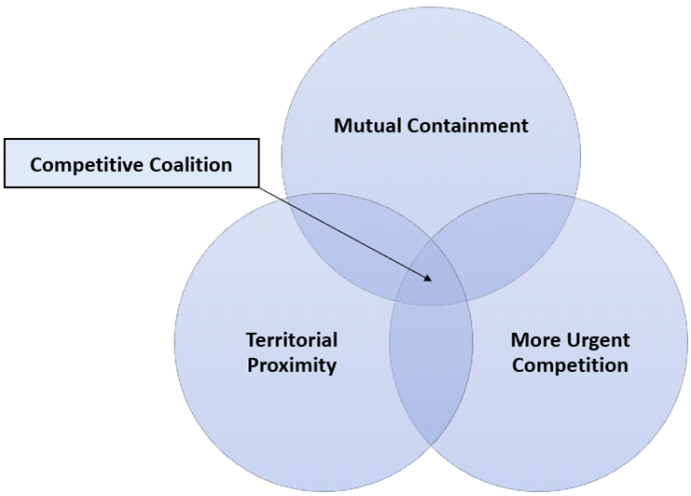
The concept of a 'competitive coalition' was first pioneered in the field of business management, where it was referred to as a "competitive alliance." As one of the four subcategories within strategic alliances, it refers to a partnership between direct competitors in the same industry, marked by a high potential for conflict arising from competing interests and mutual rivalry (Mehta and Samanta 1996). Members of such a partnership may pursue a set of common goals to navigate increasingly challenging market conditions, but they remain keenly aware that each is ultimately acting in its own interest. Thus, they strive to avoid unnecessary information leakage to their partners while simultaneously gathering as much intelligence as possible on them, so that they can seize a competitive edge should the partnership unravel (Obo 2006). The novel concept of a competitive alliance has been adopted in civil war studies, where the terms "alliance" and "coalition" are often used interchangeably. In most cases, rebel forces in a civil war consist of distinct military groups, each pursuing their own independent agenda. Driven by perennial distrust and outright animosity, they frequently clash with one another to the extent that mutual exploitation becomes the norm. However, when faced with a more powerful common enemy (i.e., government forces)

and the growing risk that unrestrained infighting could lead to mutual destruction, it is not uncommon for rebel groups to form wartime coalitions (Zeigler 2016; Popovic 2018). Nevertheless, plagued by anarchy, informal arrangements, and mutual suspicion, coalitions among rival rebel groups suffer from chronic fears of exploitation and unreliable commitments, lingering in the shadow of Hobbesian environs. Under the "power-autonomy trade-off," the risk of renewed inter-rebel war in the post-regime order remains persistently high (Buehler 2018; Balcells et al. 2022).

The accumulated findings from civil war studies were partially incorporated into the field of international relations by Marco Cesa in his seminar work "Allies yet Rivals: International Politics in 18th Century Europe." Using two criteria of 'power symmetry (i.e., symmetrical or asymmetrical)' and 'the presence of a strong common cause (i.e., homogeneous or heterogeneous),' he categorized alliances into four major types: the aggregation alliance (the symmetrical-homogeneous), the guarantee alliance (the asymmetrical-homogeneous), the deadlocked alliance (the symmetrical heterogeneous), and the hegemonic alliance (the asymmetrical-heterogeneous). By introducing the concept of "heterogeneity," he demonstrated that interstate alliances can be vulnerable to the same sources of instability that afflict rebel coalitions in civil wars (Cesa 2010, 61-66). Moreover, his theorization of the "deadlocked alliance" revealed the underlying dangers of interstate partnerships between competing great powers. Facing an impending common adversary and a growing need to contain each other's military assertiveness, "the symmetrical heterogeneous" powers (i.e., competing great powers) may forge an interstate partnership. However, as they possess comparable strategic capabilities and pursue their individual agendas alongside a shared objective, they become trapped in a zero-sum dilemma, as continued support often results in unilateral benefits, yet dissolving the alliance could turn partners into formidable adversaries, potentially jeopardizing everyone's interests. Neither side is willing to allow the other to secure disproportionate gains, fearing a shift

in the balance of power. Consequently, each party frequently impedes the other's initiatives, all while avoiding overt signs of rupture in the alliance. In such a situation, rivalry remains the defining feature of the relationship, even as the partnership continues (Cesa 2010, 73-75).[4)]

Figure 2. Conditions for Competitive Coalition



▪ Source: Author

4) The concept of a deadlocked alliance is historically illustrated later in the study by the example of the Franco-Austrian Alliance (1756-1792). It marked a striking reversal of centuries long rivalry between France and Habsburg Austria. Spurred by Britain's 1756 pact with Prussia, Austria's Count Kaunitz and France's Choiseul negotiated the First Treaty of Versailles in 1756. Bound to mutual defense, they fought together in the Seven Years' War against Britan and Prussia which served as their common enemies. French armies captured Hanover, while Austrian forces reclaimed Saxony and Bohemia, but Prussia's decisive victories at Rossbach and Leuthen, combined with France's global colonial losses and mounting fiscal strain, forced both countries to seek separate peace agreements between 1762 and 1763. The immense cost of the war and mutual dissatisfaction with each other's performance deteriorated their relationship. Though formal ties lingered into the 1780s, France increasingly aligned with Spain, and Austria with Russia. The alliance ultimately collapsed with the outbreak of the French Revolution, as Austria invaded France in an attempt to restore the monarchy, bringing an end to this "deadlocked alliance" (Cesa 2010, 176-210).

Taken together, a competitive coalition signifies an unstable, temporary, and mutually suspicious interstate partnership driven by converging urgent needs. As illustrated in Figure 2, a series of preceding studies that inform the concept of competitive coalition identifies three overlapping elements as the most decisive urgent needs: territorial proximity (i.e., shared or adjacent spheres of influence, whether in the form of intra-industry competition, inter-rebel competition, or common borders), mutual containment (i.e., deterring each other's expansionist drives), and more urgent competition (i.e., temporary suspension of hostilities in the face of a greater common threat). For example, companies competing within "the same industry" form a partnership to "seize a competitive edge" by covertly monitoring each other while simultaneously pursuing shared objectives to "navigate increasingly challenging market conditions." Similarly, rebel forces in a civil war, by definition "operating within the same territory," often form wartime coalitions in response to the dual threat of "unrestrained infighting" and the presence of "more powerful government forces" which stand as their common adversary. In a similar context, symmetrical heterogeneous powers form a deadlocked alliance in the face of an "impending common adversary" and an increasing need to "contain each other's military assertiveness," the latter of which is closely related to territorial proximity, as exemplified by the Franco-Austrian Alliance (1756-1792). As necessary conditions for a competitive coalition, these elements compel mutually competing countries to form a partnership without expecting the emergence of an enduring alliance. However, countries engaged in this type of interstate partnership are haunted by fears of exploitation and unreliable commitments. To prevent disproportionate gains by their counterparts, they frequently obstruct each other's initiatives while simultaneously maneuvering for a competitive advantage in anticipation of a potential breakdown in the partnership.[5)]

5) In addition to Marco Cesa's illustration of the Franco-Austrian Alliance (1756-1792),

IV. Case Studies

As China and Russia increasingly emphasize their interstate partnership, the following analysis should assess the depth of their mutual commitment to determine which category of interstate partnership explains their relationship more accurately. Accordingly, the following sections will analyze their bilateral relationship in three key dimensions: historical development, economic connections, and military relations. Examining their historical development will clarify whether the two countries have built a longstanding foundation of mutual trust, shared values, and institutionalized partnership, the three essential elements of an enduring alliance. It can also provide insight into the general mechanism that has historically shaped their bilateral relations. While historical analysis offers a broad understanding of China-Russia relations, a closer examination of their economic and military ties reveals the specific structures behind their partnership,

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German-Soviet relations (1918-1941) provide a more recent historical example that epitomizes the defining features of a competitive coalition. Isolated in the aftermath of World War I, they signed the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922, followed by a series of economic and military agreements in the mid 1920s. Under these arrangements, Germany supplied the Soviets with advanced weaponry and industrial goods in exchange for training grounds and raw materials. Despite these ties, both sides remained deeply suspicious. Germany unilaterally joined the Locarno Treaties with France and Belgium in 1925 and persecuted communists at home, prompting the Soviets to sign non-aggression pacts with Poland and France in 1932. Nazi propaganda and Stalin's retaliatory propaganda measures further intensified tensions, culminating in Soviet Union's expulsion of German facilities in 1933 and unilateral joining of the League of Nations in 1934, and Germany's alignment with Japan and Italy through the Anti-Comintern Pacts in the mid 1930s. By 1939, faced with material shortages and mutual containment pressures, Berlin and Moscow reestablished ties via the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and subsequent economic agreements, replicating their earlier transactional exchange of arms for raw materials and territory access. However, as both prepared for future confrontation, mutual suspicions persisted, and the partnership collapsed on June 22, 1941, when Germany launched "Operation Barbarossa" (Wheeler-Bennett 1946; Ericson III 1999, 169-178).

especially as both countries have increasingly prioritized collaboration in these two domains. In addition, since these areas directly involve issues of adjacent spheres of influence, mutual expansionist drives, and the presence of a greater common threat, which serve as the key indicators of territorial proximity, mutual containment, and more urgent competition, they also help determine whether the recent partnership between China and Russia is driven by the necessary conditions for a competitive coalition.

1. Historical Development

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, China-Russia relations were characterized by persistent hostility and deep-seated animosity, resulting in mutual distrust and strain that still persist today. Russia's eastward expansion beginning in the mid-17th century had already triggered significant conflicts with China, which were temporarily settled only after the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689) and the Treaty of Kyakhta (1727). Territorial conflicts reemerged in the mid-19th century when Russia aligned with Western imperialism, compelling China to sign a series of unequal treaties under the muzzle of a gun. Beginning with the Treaty of Aigun (1858) and the Treaty of Peking (1860), Russia steadily encroached on Chinese sovereignty during the "Belle Époque," culminating in the Li-Lobanov Treaty (1896) and the Russian invasion of Manchuria (1900), which led to Russia's full occupation of Manchuria and reduced China to a quasi-protectorate status. When Russia retreated into internal affairs following the October Revolution in 1917, China – then governed by the Beiyang government – aligned with anti-communist White forces to oppose the Bolshevik Red Army during the subsequent Russian Civil War (Kaufman 2010; Trenin 2012). The uneasy bilateral ties continued throughout Sino-Soviet relations. Between 1923 and 1949, the Soviets aided both the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a

strategy to hinder the unification of China. In 1948, Stalin directly advised Mao not to cross the Yangtze River, a warning that was ignored in 1949 when the CCP captured Nanjing by crossing the river (Zhao 2022, 23-49).

The establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) immediately sparked diplomatic tension with Soviet Russia. Instead of subordinating itself to Soviet leadership, China propagated the "Sinicization of Marxism" with its unique ideological elements, causing a division within the communist bloc. However, the onset of the Cold War and the fact that they shared an extensive border exposed mutual geopolitical vulnerabilities, prompting Mao's state visit to Moscow in 1949 and the signing of "the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance" in 1950. The economic and military cooperation between them reached its pinnacle during the 1950s. The Soviets became China's largest supplier of industrial goods, while China permitted the Soviets to use its naval bases at Lüda and provided military aid to Vietnam during the First Indochina War at Stalin's request. In addition, after overcoming initial discrepancy, they cooperated closely during the Korean War (1950-1953) to counter the US-led multilateral forces (Kissinger 2011, 113-147). These acts of cooperation, however, did not result in institutionalization of partnership as mutual distrust and conflicting values still persisted between them. Their mutual defense treaty was not reinforced by a network of civilian and military structures, specific administrative protocols, and the formal deployment of troops, mirroring sporadic pacts and agreements in the German-Soviet partnership. Indeed, it focused predominantly on territorial issues, such as the return of properties like the Changchun Railway, Port Arthur, and Port Dalian to China, as well as the recognition of Outer Mongolia's independence. China received a $300 million Soviet loan, but it was required to repay this by channeling its surplus production of strategically important resources, including hundreds of thousands of tons of copper, rubber, tungsten ore, and antimony, to the Soviets (Shen and Xia

2015, 69-100).[6]

The result was the Sino-Soviet split. Between the late 1950s and early 1960s, a number of issues emerged with a sign of deteriorating bilateral ties. The Soviet government's duplicity in its approach to Taiwan (i.e., a lack of support for China's recovery of Taiwan) enraged Beijing, while China's adventurous border conflicts with India and arbitrary implementation of "Great Leap Forward" resented Moscow. Moreover, Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policies induced China's hostile response, according to which Moscow no longer deserves Lenin's heritage. Eventually, Khrushchev derided the failures of the Great Leap Forward and the people's commune in China, while Mao ridiculed the Soviet management of the Cuban Missile Crisis, describing it as "reckless adventurism and capitulation that resulted in humiliating defeat" (Shen and Xia 2015, 241-344). In 1963, when the territorial dispute rose again, more than 60,000 refugees fled northern Xinjiang into the Soviet Union (i.e., Yi-Ta incident), further escalating bilateral tensions. Thereafter, along with withdrawing economic and military assistance, the Soviet Union fortified its border with China and sought closer ties with the West. Concurrently, China began to regard the Soviets as the greatest threat to its security, abandoning reciprocal programs and moving closer to the U.S and its Western allies. The split culminated in the Sino-Soviet border conflict of 1969, during which the Soviets even considered a preemptive nuclear strike (Kuisong 2000; Zagoria 2015). The rest of Sino-Soviet relations continued in mutual hostility until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Following the Sino-American rapprochement in 1972, China explicitly opposed Soviet foreign policies, launching the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979, and militarily assisting the Mujahedin fighting the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. The Sino-Soviet border was heavily militarized, with nuclear arsenals deployed

6) The Sino-Soviet partnership was a profound dilemma for Stalin. Until his death, Stalin never fully trusted China and feared that it might become a "Second Tito" once it recovered from the war.

on both sides. Their mutual defense treaty, officially expired in 1979, was never resumed (Kissinger 2011, 236-274).

The dissolution of the Soviet Union rearranged bilateral relations once again. The emergence of American hegemony, coupled with persisting geographical proximity and perception of mutual military threats, recreated the geopolitical vulnerabilities they faced in the late 1940s, prompting them to sign "the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation" in 2001 and "the Complementary Agreement between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the Eastern Section of the China-Russia Boundary" in 2004, which reestablished diplomatic relations and resolved territorial disputes, respectively.[7] Evolving international conditions over the past two decades have introduced additional elements of favor to the bilateral ties. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine since 2022 necessitate China's economic support, while China's rapid economic growth and expanding military influence in East Asia require Russia's political backing as they draw a series of Western sanctions similar to those imposed on Russia (Hobsbawm 1996, 558-562; Delanoe 2014; Beckley 2017; Westcott 2021; Mearsheimer 2022).

Nevertheless, mutual distrust and strain stemming from centuries of historical animosity still define China-Russia relations. The 2001 Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship does not mandate mutual military assistance in the event of third-party attacks, falling short of a full-scale mutual defense agreement. In fact, aware of each other's military assertiveness, they have often taken actions aimed at undermining the strategic interests of their counterparts. In 2008, for example, China openly opposed Russia's violation of Georgian sovereignty during the Russo-Georgian war, preventing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) from extending political support to Russia's war efforts (Turner 2011). Moreover, despite pro-Russian rhetoric,

7) Since the early 2000s, China and Russia have shared a border stretching 4,209.3 kilometers, constituting the world's sixth-longest international border.

China has refused to recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea or legitimize its territorial conquests during the Russo-Ukrainian War (Macikenaite 2025). Similarly, despite its advocacy of "One China Policy," Russia has maintained unofficial ties with Taiwan since the late 1960s. Along with mutual visa programs for students, Russia and Taiwan operate representative offices on each other's soil, performing de-facto diplomatic relations. Although Russia added Taiwan to a list of "unfriendly countries" in 2022 following its invasion of Ukraine, bilateral trade has continued in increasing scale, with Taiwan supplying Russia with various industrial goods and machine tools, and Russia exporting natural resources like oil, coal, and gas at discounted prices (Vradiy 2017; Kraemer 2024). Moreover, despite its pro-Chinese rhetoric regarding the South China Sea, Russia has long cooperated with Vietnam by selling arms and engaging in joint oil and gas exploration within the "Nine-Dash Line" against the will of China (Hamilton 2025).[8] Even in the ideological domain, the schism between China and Russia is unmistakable. "Tianxia (all-under-heaven)" and "Community of Common Destiny for Mankind," China's state-sponsored ideologies standing for a China-centered concentric world order, and "Putinism," the unofficial term for Russia's nationalist-imperialist sociopolitical system, are fundamentally incompatible, undermining conventional claims that they are ideologically aligned simply because they both maintain autocratic regimes (Tingyang 2009; Taylor 2018).

Overall, the historical developments of China-Russia relations have not been rooted in mutual trust, shared values, and the institutionalization of partnership. Instead, their bilateral ties have been shaped by territorial proximity, mutual containment, and more urgent competition, resembling the volatile nature of a competitive coalition rather than an enduring alliance. The following sections on economic connections and military relations will further elucidate this point.

8) This aligns with "Russia's turn to the East," which began in the early 2000s. Contrary to conventional views, Russia does not intend to become a junior partner to China, either on the global stage or within its regional sphere.

2. Economic Connections

Economic connections between China and Russia are fundamentally characterized as a 'profit-driven relationship.' Their mutual trade has certainly increased over the past two decades, growing from around $8 billion per year in the 1990s to nearly $200 billion by 2024. Russia's deteriorating relations with Western countries since 2014 have further contributed to the expansion of bilateral trade. In 2014, they signed a $400 billion gas deal for the next 30 years (i.e., Power of Siberia), which began operations in 2019. The Chongqing-Xinjiang-Europe railway and the Western Europe-Western China Highway, a set of cross-border infrastructures between China and Russia, have also been activated since the mid-2010s. Between 2022 and 2023, 40% of Russia's imports and more than a third of all car sales in Russia came from China. The imposition of comprehensive Western sanctions on Russia increased its dependence on the Chinese yuan as well. By 2024, almost 90% of the trade between China and Russia was conducted in their national currencies (i.e., the yuan and the ruble), and almost 30% of Russia's international trade was made through Chinese yuan. Today, China stands as Russia's largest trading partner and a major purchaser of Russian military equipment, while Russia is China's leading supplier of oil and gas (Larin 2020; Blackwill and Fontaine 2024).

Nevertheless, statistical growth of economic connections does not automatically indicate that China-Russia relations have evolved into an enduring alliance.[9] In fact, a number of factors indicate ominous signs in their bilateral economic ties. For one thing, the rapid growth in economic ties between China and Russia did not materialize until after Russia

9) Between 2001 and 2024, U.S. imports of Chinese goods and services grew from about $100 billion to over $400 billion. Even at the height of trade war tensions in 2025, China remains the third-largest export market for the U.S., while the U.S. continues to be China's largest export market and primary trading partner (Siripurapu and Berman 2024).

explicitly embarked on territorial expansion in 2014. Prior to that, mutual suspicions and competition for influence in Eurasia often overwhelmed rhetoric of friendship and cooperation, hindering the development of a genuine economic partnership. For example, in 2002, Russia rejected a bid by China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) for the Russian oil firm Slavneft due to anti-foreign sentiment in the Duma. In 2003, Russia declined China's proposal to construct a pipeline to deliver oil and natural gas directly from Siberia into the Chinese mainland, preferring instead to maintain energy routes that pass through its trunk lines. In 2006, CNPC's attempt to acquire a significant stake in OAO Rosneft was denied again for comparable reasons. Furthermore, between 2011 and 2014, pricing disagreements prevented Gazprom from initiating natural gas deliveries to China (Chang 2014). The changes following Russia's invasion of Ukraine were dramatic. The construction of the Power of Siberia pipeline began shortly after Russia's annexation of Crimea. In 2022, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the proportion of Russian exports and imports transacted in yuan surged to 16% and 23%, respectively, up from 0.4% and 4% before the invasion. The yuan's share of the Russian stock market jumped from 3% to 33%. By 2024, more than a third of all Russian exports were traded in yuan, compared to just 0.4% prior to 2022 (Fong and Merrow 2024). As such, the rapid expansion of economic ties between China and Russia appears to be more a product of the unique circumstances of the conflict than the result of genuine mutual trust or institutionalized partnership.

Competitive hotspots like the Russian Far East (RFE) and Central Asia, along with the dysfunction of intergovernmental organizations such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS, constitute additional unstable factors in their bilateral economic ties. Despite its abundant natural resources and potential as an economic hub, the RFE has remained difficult for Moscow to develop, hampered by ineffective planning. Chronic

underinvestment, a declining population, and poor infrastructure have left the region vulnerable to Chinese incursions, resulting in large-scale illegal immigration and exploitative resource extraction, and fueling a persistent sense of insecurity toward China. Since the early 2000s, Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin, have repeatedly warned that without successful autonomous development, the RFE will become little more than a "raw materials base" or "storehouse of natural resources" for China (Fortescue 2016). Similarly, despite superficial cooperation, Central Asia remains battleground for Sino Russian rivalry over the region's oil and gas reserves. Russia has sought to solidify its dominance on the southern flank through initiatives like the SCO Energy Club, while China has poured substantial investments into Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to counterbalance Moscow's influence. As their rivalry is rooted in uncompromisable causes such as volatile oil prices, growing domestic demand, and the imperative to diversify resource bases, competition, rather than cooperation, continues to define their engagement in Central Asia (Malashenko 2013; Kazantsev et al. 2021). In the meantime, the SCO and BRICS, the two most prominent intergovernmental organizations presumably led by China and Russia, have failed to meet their foundational goals. Despite various initiatives aimed at challenging the US-led liberal international order, neither an SCO bank nor a single SCO currency has materialized to this day. Although BRICS has seen more success than the SCO with the establishment of the New Development Bank and the BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement, it has still struggled to consummate BRICS Pay (an alternative to the SWIFT system) and introduce a common currency, falling short of its original "de dollarization" objectives (Umarov 2024; Nye Jr 2025).

Most importantly, the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War starkly revealed that the economic connections between China and Russia do not extend beyond a profit-driven relationship. In March 2022, immediately

following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, China leveraged its influence in the NDB to suspend all new transactions with Russia, prompting the NDB to sever its financial ties with Russia. Meanwhile, despite the yuan's increasing share in both bilateral trade and Russia's international transactions, the Bank of China and other smaller Chinese banks halted yuan based transactions with Russian counterparties in June 2024 to avoid secondary sanctions imposed by the U.S and its Western allies. By 2025, over 98% of Chinese banks are refusing direct yuan payments from Russia. Under these measures, Russia's ability to settle payments in yuan with Chinese institutions are effectively blocked, further deepening its economic isolation. Moreover, China's increasing imports of Russia's oil and gas have been driven by steep discounts of up to 30% below market rates, offered by Russia in its desperation to find new markets after losing access to the European market following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Gold 2022; Rosen 2022; Soldatov and Borogan 2024). In this way, China-Russia economic connections remain purely transactional and profit-driven, avoiding any real sacrifices and pursuing unilateral advantages at the expense of the other. Even as the most collaborative aspect of their relationship, they fall short of representing the hallmarks of an enduring alliance.

3. Military Relations

Military relations between China and Russia have followed a similar pattern to their economic ties. Following the end of the Cold War, both China and Russia have strived to expand their military capabilities within their own spheres of influence. With rapid economic growth effectively channeled into military development, China has emerged as an undisputed major military power since the 2010s. By the 2020s, with approximately 2,035,000 active-duty personnel and an annual defense budget of nearly

$296 billion, China possesses the world's largest conventional military force (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2024). Russia began to recover from the Soviet collapse under Vladimir Putin's presidency, which began in 2000. The concentration of political power into the highest office was accompanied by substantial military development and modernization. As of the 2020s, with an estimated 5,977 nuclear warheads and cutting edge delivery systems such as the Status-6 Ocean Multipurpose System ("Poseidon") and the RS-28 Sarmat ("Satan II"), Russia is the world's largest nuclear power (Kristensen et al. 2024). Not surprisingly, China has aggressively expanded its military influence in East Asia since the 2010s, while Russia forcibly annexed the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and eventually launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. All these actions have been firmly resisted by the U.S and its Western allies. Aware of each other's substantial military capabilities and expansionist ambitions, China and Russia have concluded that to avoid a two-front war against one another and Western powers, they must secure mutual neutrality, or, ideally, establish a military partnership. The fact that they share the world's sixth-longest international border reinforces their sense of necessity (Beckley 2017; Mearsheimer 2022).

Accordingly, their military relations have reached a certain level of cooperation, particularly in non aggression treaties, technology and arms exchanges, and joint military exercises and patrols. The 2001 Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation and the 2004 Complementary Agreement on the Eastern Section of the China-Russia Boundary have effectively served as non aggression pacts between the two countries. Meanwhile, beginning with the introduction of Russia's SU-27 fighters in 1996, China has imported various Soviet-era weaponry, including Sukhoi Su-30, Kilo-class submarines, and Sovremenny-class destroyers, to promote the development of its own strategic assets, such as the Type 052D destroyer, Shaanxi KJ-500, and Chengdu J-20. By the 2020s, Russia has become one

of Beijing's principal arms providers, accounting for over 25% of all foreign military sales to China. Since the late 2010s, China and Russia have also conducted joint military exercises and patrols. In 2018, Russia invited China and Mongolia to take part in its Vostok 2018 military exercise, the first-time countries outside the former Soviet Union joined its official drills. Russia extended a similar invitation to China for the Vostok 2022 military exercise. In the meantime, China and Russia conducted joint air patrols over the Pacific in July 2019 and December 2020, followed by joint patrols over the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan in 2022, and across the Western and Northern Pacific Ocean in 2024. More recently, their joint bomber flight near Alaska was also detected on July 24, 2024 (Hsiung 2021; Kurylo 2024).

Nonetheless, just like their economic ties, their military relations stop short of an enduring alliance. Unlike Article 1 of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance (1950) and Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (1949), which explicitly guarantee mutual military assistance in the event of third-party attacks, Article 9 of the 2001 Treaty of Friendship merely requires the contracting parties to "hold contacts and consultations" to address emerging threats, deliberately avoiding any explicit mutual defense commitment (Wilson 2002). This has indeed resulted in China's military neutrality in the Russo-Ukrainian War. Although it faces accusations of aiding Russia by exporting dual use goods and technologies, China has neither delivered fully assembled weapons to Moscow nor deployed any divisions of People's Liberation Army to Russian territory (AFP in Washington 2024). Facing the extensive Western intervention in support of Ukraine and escalating wartime conditions, Russia turned to North Korea and Iran for direct military support, formalizing these partnerships through the North Korean-Russian Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2024 and the Iranian-Russian Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2025.[10]

10) Article 4 of the 2024 North Korean-Russian Treaty explicitly stipulates that if

As of 2025, North Korea is supplying Russia with vast quantities of artillery shells, ballistic missiles, and over 14,000 troops, while Iran is providing thousands of military drones, effectively solidifying their positions as Russia's formal military allies. Given that both North Korea and Iran are China's traditional allies, Russia's unilateral pursuit of official alliances with these countries has already strained China-Russia relations (Seo 2024; Czulda 2025).[11]

Other areas of cooperation – technology and arms exchanges, and joint military exercises and patrols – have also been unstable. As China has increasingly sought independence in its defense sector primarily through reverse-engineering, Russia has responded by suspending exports of key strategic assets and detaining alleged industrial spies. For instance, in 2004, the Russian Foreign Ministry halted sales of the Su-35 and Tupolev Tu-22M after discovering that China had reverse-engineered these aircrafts to develop the Shenyang J-11. More recently, between 2019 and

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either side is put in a state of war, "the other shall provide military and other assistance with all means in its possession without delay," thereby constituting a formal mutual defense treaty. Although the 2025 Iranian-Russian Treaty does not contain an equivalent clause, its 47 extensive articles outline a military partnership much broader in scope than the 2001 Treaty of Friendship, which consists of 25 articles.

11) After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Tehran's estrangement from the West paved the way for closer ties with Beijing, particularly during the Iran-Iraq War, when China became a major arms supplier to Iran. In 2016, the two countries formalized their relationship through a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," broadening cooperation across energy, trade, infrastructure, and military sectors. By July 2019, Iran had granted visa-free entry to all Chinese nationals, underscoring deepening bilateral relations. In June 2020, Iran joined 53 countries in supporting China's Hong Kong national security law at the UN Human Rights Council. Their partnership was further solidified in March 2021 with the signing of a "25-year Cooperation Agreement," which included a proposed $400 billion Chinese investment in Iran's economy in exchange for a steady supply of discounted oil. Although the two countries have yet to sign a binding military pact on par with the "Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance" between China and North Korea, China-Iran relations have long been regarded as a significant strategic partnership for both sides (Belal 2020; Saleh and Yazdanshenas 2024).

2022, Russian authorities arrested a series of its scientists, including Dmitry Kolker and Alexander Shiplyuk, on charges of passing sensitive military information to China (Gilli and Gilli 2018; Coalson 2022; Sauer 2024). Meanwhile, although their joint military exercises and patrols have drawn concern from U.S. security analysts, they remain largely symbolic and have not translated into concrete military assistance in each other's conflict zones, such as the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, or Ukraine (Chang-Liao 2023). Their mutual reluctance to become involved in each other's conflicts is further underscored by the malfunction of the SCO and BRICS in military activities. The original initiatives of the SCO extended beyond economic cooperation, aiming to enhance collaboration on security and military activities. However, institutional shortcomings and divergent national interests have hindered it from developing into an effective geopolitical alliance. Along with perennial regional conflicts such as the enduring India-Pakistan rivalry and the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border clashes, which have caused an opprobrium that the SCO is the "Shanghai Contradiction Organization," China's dominant influence within the organization has prevented it from offering military support during the Russo-Georgian and Russo-Ukrainian wars. As of 2025, the SCO has not provided military assistance in any active conflicts (He and Feng 2025). Similarly, BRICS has failed to achieve its early objectives of establishing an anti-Western world order by uniting Global South countries. The expansion of membership has increased "intra-organizational rivalries," as it now includes both democratic and authoritarian regimes of different economic sizes, making it extremely difficult to reach political consensus. Without original institutions or an alternative ideology, BRICS has largely served as a platform for China and Russia to extend their global influence, reducing it to a mixture of rhetoric and symbolism. Indeed, it played no role in armed conflicts directly affecting the security of its member states, such as the Doklam standoff (2017), the Galwan Valley clash (2020), or the

Russo-Ukrainian war (2022-present) (Bhatt 2024).

Most importantly, the fragility of China-Russia military relations stems not merely from a mutual reluctance to become involved in each other's conflicts. Despite the 2004 Boundary Agreement, it is revealed that Russia has regularly rehearsed for a potential invasion by China. Under direct orders from Valdmir Putin, the Eastern Military District has been trained to use nuclear weapons to repel second-echelon units from China, indicating the adoption of the "escalate to de-escalate" strategy against China in the event of a full-scale Sino-Russian war. Furthermore, Moscow has bolstered its eastern defenses by deploying additional nuclear-capable missiles (e.g., Iskander-M and Kh-47M2 Kinzhal) in the Russian Far East near the Chinese border, most of which are directed only at Chinese territory. These preparations for a potential war with China have continued even after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which has allegedly brought the two countries closer together. For example, in late 2023, Russia conducted a series of military exercises involving nuclear-capable Iskander missiles in two regions adjacent to the Chinese border (Seddon and Cook 2024; Sonko 2024). These actions reveal that beyond their mutual reluctance to be drawn into each other's armed conflicts, China-Russia military relations are undermined by profound mutual distrust, further limiting any prospect of an enduring alliance. Overall, much like their economic ties, military relations between China and Russia are purely transactional and self-interested, with neither side willing to make substantive sacrifices, and each seeking to advance its own advantages, often at the other's expense.[12)]

12) A recently leaked Russian intelligence document, allegedly from the F.S.B.'s Department for Counterintelligence Operations (D.K.R.O.), reaffirms the profound mutual distrust and suspicion between China and Russia. The document reveals an intense, covert intelligence battle between the two countries, despite their outward display of friendly partnership. On the eve of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the F.S.B. launched "Entente 4," a program specifically designed to disrupt Chinese espionage. With Russia's security resources heavily committed to Ukraine, the document reflects fears that China might exploit the situation to advance its

V. Analysis

The examination of China-Russia relations across three key dimensions shows they lack 'a longstanding history of mutual trust,' 'shared values,' and 'institutionalization of partnership,' which are essential conditions for an enduring alliance. Historically, their relationship has been defined by persistent hostility. From the 1850s to 1917, Russia's imperial expansion reduced China to a quasi-protectorate status. Although they signed a mutual defense treaty in 1950 following the establishment of the PRC, the lack of institutionalization and growing mutual suspicion led to the Sino-Soviet split by 1961, which culminated in the Sino-Soviet border conflict of 1969. Their mutual defense treaty was never resumed, and along with the US-China Rapprochement (1972-1991), the rest of Sino-Soviet relations continued in mutual hostility until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Despite the rearrangement of bilateral relations following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, competition in foreign affairs and public diplomacy still define their post-Cold War relationship, as they have repeatedly taken actions aimed at undermining the strategic interests of their counterparts.

Economic connections between China and Russia are fundamentally profit-driven. While mutual trade has increased over the past two decades, competitive hotspots such as the Russian Far East (RFE) and Central Asia,

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interests. It details increased Chinese efforts to recruit Russian officials, experts, and others close to power, as well as intensified surveillance of Russian students in China and Russians married to Chinese nationals. To counter these threats, the F.S.B. has been instructed to intercept Chinese communications, especially on WeChat, and block any transfer of strategic information to China. The document also notes China's growing interest in Russia's military operations and advanced scientific research, particularly targeting specialists in key strategic sectors. Additionally, it underscores Russia's enduring anxieties about Chinese territorial ambitions along their shared border and the expansion of Beijing's influence in Central Asia and the Arctic (Judah et al. 2025; Judah and Sonne 2025).

along with the ineffectiveness of intergovernmental organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS, introduce instability into their bilateral economic ties. In addition, the NDB's suspension of all new transactions with Russia in 2022, Chinese banks' halt on yuan based transactions with Russia in 2024, and Russia's significant discount of up to 30% on oil and natural gas for China following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine underscore that the economic connections between China and Russia are purely transactional and profit-driven, avoiding any real sacrifices and pursuing unilateral advantages at the expense of the other.

Their military relations have reached a certain level of cooperation, including non-aggression treaties, technology and arms exchanges, and joint military exercises and patrols. However, the absence of an explicit mutual-defense clause in the 2001 Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship, China's increasing practice of reverse-engineering, which has provoked aggressive reactions from Russia, and the unbridgeable gaps between joint military exercises and substantial military assistance in each other's conflict zones all reveal strict limits in their military cooperation. Indeed, China's military neutrality in the Russo-Ukrainian War and Russia's turn to North Korea and Iran for direct military support demonstrate their mutual reluctance to become involved in each other's conflicts. Furthermore, Russia's regular rehearsal for a potential Chinese Invasion and the fortification of its Eastern border with nuclear-capable missiles expose profound mutual distrust. Much like their economic ties, military relations between China and Russia are purely transactional and self-interested with neither side willing to make substantive sacrifices, and each seeking to advance its own advantages, often at the other's expense. Figure 3 below summarizes these findings.

Figure 3. Three Key Dimensions in China-Russia Relations

China-Russia Relations

Category of Analysis

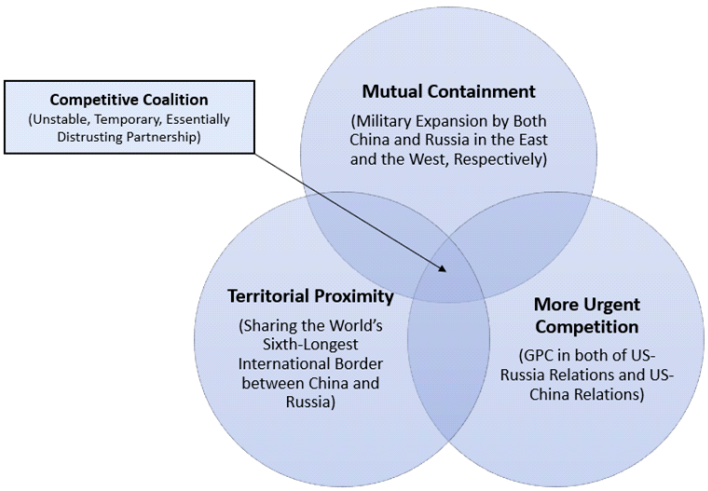
	Historical Development	Economic Connections	Military Relations
Status	**Mutual Distrust & Strain**	**Profit-Driven Relationship**	**Profound Distrust Underpinning Transactional & Self-Interested Relations**
Examples	• Russian Empire's Territorial Conquest of China (1850s-1917) • Sino-Soviet Split & Border Conflict (1961-1969) • US-China Rapprochement (1972-1991) • Persistent Competition in Foreign Affairs & Public Diplomacy (1991-Present)	• Competition in the Russian Far East and Central Asia & Dysfunction of the SCO and BRICS • The NDB's Suspension of All New Transactions with Russia in 2022 & Chinese Banks' Suspension of Yuan-based Transactions with Russia in 2024 • Russia's Significant Discount of up to 30% on Oil and Natural Gas for China	• Strictly Limited Cooperation in Non-Aggression Treaties, Technology and Arms Exchanges, & Joint Military Exercises and Patrols • China's Military Neutrality in the Russo-Ukrainian War & Russia's Turn to North Korea and Iran for Direct Military Support • Russia's Regular Rehearsal for a Potential Chinese Invasion & the Fortification of Its Eastern Border with Nuclear-Capable Missiles

▪ Source: Author

The in-depth analysis of China-Russia relations shows that their bilateral partnership has been driven by 'territorial proximity,' 'mutual containment,' and 'more urgent competition,' all of which serve as converging urgent needs between them. Their first treaty of alliance in 1950 was forged at the onset of the Cold War, when they shared an extensive border and recognized each other's military potential, leading to mutual geopolitical vulnerabilities. After a long period of split, they reunited through a treaty of friendship signed in 2001, a time when they had to address American hegemony while sharing world's sixth-longest international border and perceiving mutual military threats. Indeed, following the end of the Cold War, both China and Russia have sought to expand their military capabilities within their respective spheres of influence. Their resolve to increase military influence has manifested in

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine since 2022, as well as China's military expansionism in East Asia, all of which have been firmly resisted by the U.S and its Western allies. Aware of each other's substantial military capabilities and expansionist ambitions, they have concluded that to avoid a two-front war against one another and Western powers, they must secure mutual neutrality, or, ideally, a form of partnership, however fragile it may be. Resembling the volatile nature of a competitive coalition rather than an enduring alliance, China-Russia relations have not fully satisfied the conditions necessary for a long-term, trustworthy, and strong interstate partnership. Instead, as depicted in Figure 4, their relationship is defined by instability, temporariness, and fundamental distrust, representing a "competitive coalition."

Figure 4. Structure of China-Russia Relations



▪ Source: Author

Accordingly, several implications can be drawn from the findings of this paper. First, it should be noted that statistical growth in trade volumes or numerical increases in arms exchanges and joint military exercises do not

automatically constitute an enduring alliance. Unless all three elements of a longstanding history of mutual trust, shared values, and institutionalization of partnership converge, such numerical indices do not guarantee the emergence of an enduring alliance. Conversely, even under conditions of perennial mutual distrust, conflicting values, and a lack of institutionalization, the overlapping factors of territorial proximity, mutual containment, and more urgent competition may serve as converging urgent needs, compelling mutually competing states to form a partnership, one that is inherently unstable, temporary, and mutually suspicious. As China-Russia relations verify, such a relationship is fundamentally rooted in competition rather than genuine alliance, representing a "competitive coalition."

Second, it may explain why China and Russia persist in their territorial expansions and why China refrains from fully supporting Russia's war effort in Ukraine. Given their vast national power, in a true alliance, neither side would feel compelled to seize additional territory at an enormous cost, nor would China hesitate to fully support Russia, even at the risk of significant losses. Their independent quests to solidify influence in East Asia and to reclaim former Soviet lands suggest that they view each other as competitors rather than allies. Deprived of mutual trust, both countries face a de facto two-front war against the United States and each other. This drives Russia to reclaim territory while it still has the capacity and compels China to consolidate its regional dominance before its rivals can react. This underlying mutual rivalry may also explain why neither shows the kind of unwavering solidarity displayed by the Western allies in crises like the Ukraine war or the Taiwan issue, as neither wants to strengthen the other at its own expense.

Finally, the unstable partnership between China and Russia is likely to face severe crises in the following two scenarios. First, if the United States significantly improves its relations with either China or Russia, the loss of a common adversary could undermine "more urgent competition" that bind

Beijing and Moscow together, prompting each to view the other as a more immediate strategic threat. This is already taking shape as Washington appears to adopt a "Reverse-Kissinger Strategy" toward Russia, fueling growing discomfort in China-Russia relations. Second, if either country's aggressive territorial expansion advances to a point where it becomes burdensome to the other, or if one side gains disproportionate influence that jeopardizes the other's security or economic interests, their relationship is likely to fracture. Historical precedents, such as the German-Soviet and Sino-Soviet relationships, suggest that they may view each other as greater threats than the U.S and its Western allies once they feel overwhelmed by their suspicious partners. Already, China's discontent with Russia's invasion of Ukraine is observable, and Russia's unease with China's military expansion in Taiwan, the South China Sea, and along the borders of India foreshadows such a split. At present, with Washington engaging both Beijing and Moscow and neither side expanding its territory to a level that the other finds fatally threatening, their unstable partnership may hold for now. However, given the already observable gaps in their relationship, the likelihood that their partnership may evolve into an enduring alliance is very low. As long as external support is coupled with underlying fissures, their relationship will remain a "competitive coalition."

VI. Conclusion

This paper examined China-Russia relations as of the mid-2020s. It first reviewed the existing literature on China-Russia relations and clarified their limitations. Next, it explored the conditions that differentiate a "long-term, trustworthy, and strong interstate partnership," which is indicative of "an enduring alliance," from an "unstable, temporary, and essentially distrusting partnership," which represents "a

competitive coalition." As for the case study, it investigated China-Russia relations across three key domains (i.e., historical development, economic connections, and military relations) to determine whether they meet the criteria for an enduring alliance, as often argued in previous research. The following analysis revealed that although the two countries appear to form increasingly closer ties in the face of a common threat (i.e., the U.S), they do not fully satisfy the conditions necessary for a long-term, trustworthy, and strong interstate partnership. Instead, their relationship is largely characterized by instability, temporariness, and fundamental distrust. Consequently, it concluded that contemporary China-Russia relations are better described as "competitive coalition," rather than as an enduring alliance. Against the backdrop of high-profile events, such as Russia's 80th anniversary Victory Day parade (May 9, 2025) and China's 2025 Victory Day parade (September 3, 2025), through which the two countries masquerade their "deepening" ties, the need for a more accurate understanding of China-Russia relations grounded in precise structural analysis has become more critical than ever.

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| 국문초록 |

협력 이면의 전략 경쟁: 중-러 관계의 구조적 분석

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오늘날 중국-러시아 관계는 동맹 관계로 볼 수 있는가? 본고는 최근 논의되는 것과 같이 2020년대 현재 두 국가가 밀월 관계를 넘어 실제로 동맹 관계를 형성하고 있는지 비판적으로 탐구한다. 우선 중-러 관계에 대한 기존 문헌을 검토하고 그 한계를 특정한다. 다음으로 이론적 검토와 이를 뒷받침하는 대표적인 역사적 사례를 바탕으로 "굳건한 동맹 (Enduring Alliance)"과 "경쟁적 연합 (Competitive Coalition)"을 구분하는 조건을 탐구한다. 사례 연구에서는 "역사적 발전 (Historical Development)," "경제관계 (Economic Connections)," "군사관계 (Military Relations)" 세 가지 주요 영역에서 중-러 관계를 분석한다. 사례 분석 결과, 중국과 러시아는 미국이라는 공통의 위협에 직면하여 상당히 밀접한 관계를 형성하는 것처럼 보이지만, 굳건한 동맹관계에 필요한 조건을 완전히 충족하지 못하는 한편, 양국 관계가 "불안정성 (Instability)," "일시성 (Temporariness)," "근본적인 불신 (Fundamental Distrust)"으로 특징지어지는 것을 알 수 있다. 따라서 본고는 현대 중-러 관계는 "굳건한 동맹"이 아닌, "경쟁적 연합"으로 설명하는 것이 보다 현실에 부합하는 분석임을 주장한다.

▪ 주제어: 중-러 관계, 강대국 경쟁, 역사적 발전, 경제 관계, 군사 관계