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# Power Transitions and Strategic Rivalries: Chinese Russian Dynamics in the Indo-Pacific

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## Abstract

It investigates how the Indo-Pacific region has escalated tensions between China and Russia from the perspective of Power Transition Theory by analyzing how a rising power confronts a hegemon. Using the focus on China's rise and the emergence of new U.S. strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific, the study explains casting light on the changes of Sino-Russian relations, which to the home on the alliance pattern, balancing behavior and the mutual threat perception. Utilizing a qualitative methodological approach, the research draws on case studies, policy documents, official speeches, and expert interviews to assess the nature and extent of Sino-Russian coordination. It explores whether their partnership constitutes a deliberate balancing coalition aimed at contesting U.S. dominance or a fragile alignment born out of geopolitical expedience. Special attention is paid to regional flashpoints such as the South China Sea, Central Asia, and joint naval operations to illustrate the practical implications of their cooperation. The findings indicate that although rhetorical convergence and selective coordination are evident, deep-seated mistrust and divergent strategic ambitions inhibit the formation of a unified strategic front. Taken as a whole, what Power Transition Theory has offered is a useful framework for apprehending changing geopolitical architecture of the Indo-Pacific that stubbornly combines strategic competition with good neighborly cooperation.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, Power Transition Theory, China-Russia Relations, Strategic Cooperation, Regional security.

## 1. Introduction

In the 21st century, geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific has become a focal point as the newly emerging power dynamics and erosion of post-Cold War unipolar order. In the United States, the need to retain the strategic primacy is causing both China and Russia to develop more assertive foreign policies in the region. But both Beijing and Moscow have traditionally been seen as Eurasian powers, and now both view the Indo-Pacific as a core of their strategic

planning. China's expanding maritime presence and economic footprint, coupled with Russia's renewed military and diplomatic engagement, have raised questions about the nature of their bilateral alignment. Their partnership is often portrayed as a counterbalance to the U.S.-led "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy, but the depth and durability of this cooperation remain contested (Kaplan, 2021); (Gabuev, 2021)

By applying Power Transition Theory (PTT) as an analytical framework, this study asks if there is a transformation of Sino-Russian coordination in the Indo-Pacific due to changes in the global hierarchy, with China's rise as a near peer competitor to the United States. Under this condition of PTT, global conflict is most probable when a dissatisfied rising power reaches parity with a dominant hegemon (Organski, 1958); (Tammen, Kugler, Lemke, Alsharabati, Efir, & Organski, 2000). Within this framework, China emerges as the principal challenger to U.S. regional hegemony, while Russia's alignment with China may reflect a strategy of opportunistic balancing rather than a fully institutionalized alliance. Accordingly, this study seeks to determine whether the China-Russia relationship represents a coherent balancing coalition or a fragile, convenience-based partnership driven by tactical convergence.

## 2. Methodology

This thesis uses an empirical qualitative analytical approach based on Power Transition Theory (PTT) to analyse China and Russia's strategic relationships in an Indo-Pacific context. The conception of PTT and its adaptation in (Tammen, Kugler, Lemke, Alsharabati, Efir, & Organski, 2000) suggests that major wars and systemic instability are most probable when a rising power's level of power reaches parity with a dominant hegemon who is dissatisfied with the status quo. This theoretical framework is particularly applicable to the Indo-Pacific environment, where China's rise has called into question U.S. maritime and diplomatic primacy, and Russia has worked with China in some ways to counterbalance Western influence.

Moreover, the methodology involves a thematic analysis of qualitative data derived from multiple sources, including official policy documents, strategic white papers, joint declarations, expert interviews, and speeches by state leaders. Case studies are used to analyze key areas of Sino-Russian engagement, such as military coordination in the South China Sea, diplomatic actions in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and energy cooperation in the Russian Far East. Supplementary secondary sources—including scholarly articles and strategic assessments—inform the interpretation of primary materials (Liff, 2018); (Christensen, 2006). Russia's limited regional capabilities and China's expansive ambitions are evaluated through this lens, enabling a nuanced understanding of how secondary powers interact under shifting systemic pressures. By framing the China-Russia partnership as either a revisionist coalition or a convenience-based alignment, the methodology allows for a

critical assessment of the underlying strategic logic driving their cooperation.

### **Research Objectives and Hypothesis**

The aim of this study is to explore the changing character of Sino-Russian strategic interaction in the Indo-Pacific, paying attention to both points of convergence and limits on structure. Specifically, the research seeks to (1) examine the strategic relationship between China and Russia in the light of the region's changing balance of power, (2) evaluate the extent of alignment and divergence in their foreign policies, (3) assess the influence of the U.S. presence and regional alliances (AUKUS and the Quad) on cooperation between them, and (4) ascertain whether China–Russia partnership is a balancing coalition or a fragile alignment dictated by situational convenience.

There are two interrelated hypotheses that guide the research. We allege that (H1) is the strategic cooperation between China and Russia in the Indo-Pacific is mainly tactical--based on the shared opposition to U.S. influence but conducted under the constraints of divergent long term objectives and structural asymmetries. The second (H2) suggests that as China approaches hegemonic parity with the United States, Russia's alignment will become increasingly cautious and selective due to concerns over its subordinate status in the partnership. Together, these hypotheses reflect the broader question of whether China and Russia represent a revisionist bloc capable of systemic disruption or a temporary alignment shaped by converging grievances rather than enduring strategic trust (Lo, 2017); (Gabuev, 2021); (Mearsheimer, J. J., 2014).

### **3. Literature Review**

Scholarship on Power Transition Theory (PTT) in the Indo-Pacific has predominantly centered on the U.S.-China rivalry, emphasizing the structural tension between an incumbent hegemon and a rising challenger (Tammen, Kugler, Lemke, Alsharabati, Efir, & Organski, 2000); Kugler & Lemke, 1996). However, recent literature increasingly acknowledges the strategic relevance of Russia as a secondary actor in shaping regional alignments. Within this context, several scholars interpret the China-Russia partnership as a balancing coalition aimed at undermining U.S. dominance (Mearsheimer, 2010); (Walt, 1987). These analyses highlight the alignment of both states in military exercises, diplomatic forums, and energy cooperation as evidence of strategic convergence. For instance, Korolev (2019) and (Gabuev, 2021) argue that both powers perceive the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific framework—including alliances such as AUKUS and the Quad—as threats to their regional interests, prompting closer collaboration.

Yet, a significant body of literature urges caution against overstating the strategic depth of Sino-Russian cooperation. Lo (2015) and Charap and Troitskiy (2021) emphasize historical distrust, asymmetrical power capabilities,

and diverging long-term interests as critical constraints. According to these critiques, while the partnership may exhibit tactical alignment, it lacks institutionalization, strategic trust, and mutual dependence.

Further, analysts such as Blank (2022) add that Russia's limited economic and naval footprint in the Indo-Pacific limits Russia's ability to play a full complement of a regional counterweight to U.S. or China. Furthermore, China's leadership in initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Global Security Initiative suggests an asymmetric partnership in which China dictates the pace and scope of cooperation, raising concerns about Russian subordination.

Some scholars take a more nuanced view, suggesting that Sino-Russian alignment is less ideological and more transactional, driven by mutual resentment toward Western-led institutional frameworks rather than shared strategic visions (Gabuev, 2021); (Christensen, 2006). For example, arms sales, joint exercises under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and diplomatic coordination in multilateral forums reflect common interests but also highlight the limits of partnership depth. As China consolidates its regional presence and maritime dominance, Russia's peripheral role and economic dependence increasingly reflect an asymmetrical relationship. Consequently, while the literature provides valuable insights into the operational and rhetorical aspects of China-Russia coordination, it also raises important questions about the durability and strategic coherence of their partnership within the Indo-Pacific security order.

#### **4. Historical Existence and Interests**

Historically, China and Russia exhibited limited engagement in the Indo-Pacific, but in the 21st century, both have intensified efforts to expand their influence, viewing the region as central to their broader strategic objectives. China's historical connection to the Indo-Pacific can be traced to ancient maritime routes such as the Maritime Silk Road, which fostered trade and cultural exchange across Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. During the Tang and Yuan dynasties, and later under the Ming dynasty's Admiral Zheng He, China developed a formidable naval tradition (Lai, 2011). However, following a prolonged period of self-imposed isolation during the Qing dynasty, China re-emerged as a regional power after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. Its contemporary strategic vision is shaped by a "Middle Kingdom" worldview, in which regional dominance is pursued through economic expansion and maritime assertiveness (Lai, 2011).

In contrast, Russia's engagement with the Indo-Pacific has historically been more peripheral. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the Russian Empire extended its presence eastward into the Pacific, establishing trade and diplomatic ties with East Asian powers such as China, Japan, and Korea (Khan, 2023). During the Cold War, the Soviet Union maintained a modest military and

ideological footprint in the region, supporting communist regimes and challenging U.S. maritime supremacy. Following the Soviet collapse in 1991, Russia's strategic focus shifted westward, but in recent years, Moscow has sought to re-engage the Indo-Pacific as a counterweight to Western influence, particularly through military diplomacy and energy cooperation (Khan, 2023) .

While China and Russia have very different historical trajectories, both countries today see the Indo-Pacific as a zone of strategic importance. Maritime expansion; infrastructure investments; regional leadership ambitions define China's engagement; Russia's interest is in challenging the Western encirclement and in preserving influence in important subregions, such as Central Asia. Four key areas where the two powers have converging interests are economic and trade development, energy cooperation, military engagement, and geopolitical influence. For the first time in NATO history they have begun their reorientation toward the Indo-Pacific, as an adaptive response to ongoing global power shifts in which historical legacies figure into their strategic priorities, yet do not constrain them.

#### ***A) Economic and Trade Interests***

Now China and Russia are more aware that the Indo-Pacific region is an important place to create infrastructure, procure resources, and gain markets. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is China's economic strategy of connectivity through ports, railways and logistics corridors across. Southeast and South Asia. Furthermore, these infrastructure projects are not only meant to help Beijing secure maritime trade routes but also further enhance China's regional influence by creating economic dependencies. (Khan, 2023). For Russia, the Indo-Pacific offers vital energy markets, particularly in China, India, and Japan. Russian energy exports (oil and natural gas) are a central plank of Moscow's regional outreach and infrastructure projects such as the Power of Siberia pipeline are symbols of deepening Sino-Russian economic interdependence (Bolt, 2016).

Both powers also wish to diversify the object of their trade relations and diminish their dependence on Western markets. Regional institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) are platforms where Moscow and Beijing collaborate to put in place trade policies as well as to lead the process of non-Western economic integration. (Kaura, 2019). While China dominates in capital exports and investment initiatives, Russia's comparative advantage lies in energy and defense industries. This asymmetry is reflected in their economic partnership: China provides financing and technological infrastructure, while Russia supplies raw materials and strategic commodities. Notably, these arrangements reinforce a structural imbalance that may, over time, raise concerns in Moscow about economic dependency on Beijing (Gabuev, 2021). At a strategic level, economic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is not merely transactional but also political.

Both countries aim to challenge Western economic dominance by offering alternative development models to regional states. However, while China's economic footprint is extensive and proactive, Russia's engagement remains constrained by limited financial capacity and dependency on resource exports. As a result, the economic dimension of Sino-Russian cooperation, while expanding, remains asymmetrical and susceptible to long-term structural tensions.

***B) Military and Security Interests***

Military and security considerations form a core dimension of China and Russia's strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Both powers seek to expand their presence in key maritime zones, project power beyond their traditional spheres of influence, and counterbalance the U.S.-led security architecture. In the South China Sea, China is most visible in terms of military modernization and assertiveness, building artificial islands that it militarizes and aggressive A2/AD systems to control the access and denial of sea lines of communication. (Hamilton, 2025); (Meraner, 2023). These developments reflect Beijing's strategic ambition to dominate regional waters and deter foreign intervention. China's naval expansion complements its economic outreach and reinforces its position as the primary challenger to U.S. maritime primacy in the Indo-Pacific.

Russia's military engagement in the region, though more constrained in scope, also reflects its ambition to assert strategic relevance. While lacking the same naval capacity as China, Russia has expanded its security ties with countries such as India, Vietnam, and Myanmar, and has participated in joint naval drills with China in the Sea of Japan and the South China Sea (Hamilton, 2025); (Kaura, 2019). These activities serve both symbolic and operational purposes, showcasing Moscow's commitment to a multipolar security order. Russia's defense diplomacy is also shaped by long-standing arms sales and joint exercises, which serve as tools for maintaining influence and demonstrating strategic autonomy despite its limited regional power projection capabilities.

The two states have similar concerns about U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), AUKUS, and bilateral security arrangements with Japan, South Korea and Australia. Beijing and Moscow perceive these alliances as instruments of containment and thus consider them a threat to their regional ambitions. (Hamilton, 2025). In response, China and Russia have increased military dialogues, coordinated exercises, and aligned narratives in multilateral forums to signal resistance to Western military encirclement. However, their approaches diverge in critical respects. While China actively contests maritime boundaries and asserts sovereignty in disputed waters, Russia adopts a more conservative posture focused on deterring Western presence and reinforcing ties with sympathetic regional actors. This divergence limits the depth of their military coordination, even as tactical cooperation becomes more visible.

**C) *Geopolitical Influence and Regional Leadership:***

China and Russia are trying to extend their geopolitical influence and become regional leaders in the Indo-Pacific by breaking with the prevailing American led security and economic architecture. The long-term strategic goal of China is to replace the United States as the dominant power in the region. The promotion of alternative regional institutions, such as the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) are operationalized as they are meant to represent Chinese interests and reduce Western influence. (Iwasaki, Oikawa, & Urata, 2025). China also promotes a Sinocentric vision of regional order, combining economic inducements with security posturing to build coalitions that align with its strategic vision.

Russia, while lacking China's economic leverage, pursues a more reactive and balancing-oriented approach. Moscow aims to ensure that no single power, including China, dominates the region. To that end, it deepens relations with states wary of Chinese expansion, such as India and Vietnam, while also strengthening multilateral ties through forums like the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) (Kaura, 2019); (Iwasaki, Oikawa, & Urata, 2025). Russia's geopolitical engagement is thus characterized by a dual strategy: supporting China in challenging U.S. influence, while simultaneously safeguarding its own strategic autonomy and influence in key subregions, especially Central Asia and the Arctic.

Despite a growing strategic alignment, underlying tensions persist. Russia remains cautious of China's increasing assertiveness, particularly in regions like the South China Sea and Central Asia, which Moscow historically considers within its sphere of influence (Hamilton, 2025). This ambivalence reflects Russia's broader objective of preserving a multipolar balance rather than enabling Chinese hegemony. As a result, the Sino-Russian relationship in the Indo-Pacific is defined not only by shared interests in counterbalancing the West but also by latent competition for regional leadership. This dynamic limits their ability to present a coherent alternative to U.S.-led frameworks, reinforcing the perception of their partnership as pragmatic rather than strategic.

**D) *Regional Stability and Security Architecture***

China and Russia aim to reshape the Indo-Pacific's regional security architecture to reflect their strategic priorities and reduce the dominance of Western-led frameworks. China has taken a leading role in promoting alternative security norms through institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and its Global Security Initiative (GSI), which emphasize non-interference and economic connectivity as foundational

principles of regional order (Lindley, 2022). By embedding security objectives within economic cooperation platforms, China advances its influence while marginalizing U.S.-centered alliances. It also leverages multilateral forums, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), to institutionalize its presence and promote a regional order aligned with Chinese interests.

Russia, although more limited in its institutional capacity, seeks to influence regional security arrangements through strategic partnerships and multilateral diplomacy. It positions itself as a stabilizing force advocating for a multipolar order and opposes what it views as the militarization of the Indo-Pacific by the United States and its allies (Hamilton, 2025). Moscow engages in joint military exercises and anti-terrorism cooperation under the SCO framework, while also participating in regional security dialogues via the East Asia Summit and APEC. These engagements allow Russia to assert its presence and signal alignment with non-Western norms of sovereignty and mutual respect.

Despite these parallel efforts, China and Russia diverge in their approaches to regional stability. While China focuses on institutional leadership and economic-driven integration, Russia emphasizes traditional security concerns, particularly countering NATO and U.S. influence. This divergence is reflected in their priorities within multilateral forums—China often advances initiatives related to economic development and digital infrastructure, whereas Russia emphasizes strategic balance and military restraint (Iwasaki, Oikawa, & Urata, 2025). These differing emphases impede a unified diplomatic strategy, as both states pursue overlapping but distinct visions of regional order. Consequently, while China and Russia share broad goals of revising the regional security architecture, the lack of operational coherence and divergent normative frameworks limit the effectiveness of their joint efforts.

## **5. China and Russia's Actions in the Indo-Pacific**

China and Russia have both taken proactive and strategic steps to advance their interests in the Indo-Pacific, with a focus on strengthening military, diplomatic, and economic engagements. Despite differing historical backgrounds and regional roles, their actions reflect similar aspirations for increasing influence, securing strategic advantages, and challenging Western dominance in the region. The key actions can be categorized into three major areas, as follows:

### ***A) Military and Strategic Partnerships***

1. China's military expansion in the Indo-Pacific: China has made dramatic expansion of its military in the Indo-Pacific region, especially in the South China Sea, where it has built military bases on artificial islands. These developments, combined with the increased development of its naval and air capabilities, have caused concerns from neighboring countries and global

powers particularly, the United States. For example, China's process of military modernization includes increasingly advanced anti access/area denial (A2/AD) systems aimed at being able to best control key maritime zones and to build in breadth its power in the region. (Meraner, 2023). Additionally, China has strengthened military cooperation with key regional players, enhancing its strategic leverage (Meraner, 2023).

2. **Russia's Military Engagements:** Russia has also pursued a robust military strategy in the region, focused on deepening military ties with China, India, and Southeast Asian nations. Joint naval exercises in the Sea of Japan and South China Sea, along with anti-terrorism cooperation, have become key elements of Russia's strategic approach. Within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Russia and China have coordinated military actions, particularly in Central Asia, which extends into broader Indo-Pacific dynamics (Kaura, 2019). Russia has maintained strong defense relations with India, supplying advanced military technology and engaging in joint exercises (Hamilton, 2025). Furthermore, Russia's military engagements in Southeast Asia, particularly with Vietnam and Myanmar, reflect its effort to retain influence in the region (Hamilton, 2025).

### ***B) Diplomatic Engagement and Multilateralism***

1. With big strides in the diplomatic fields like East Asia Summit (EAS) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), China has been potentiated as a vital force in the governance of region. (Iwasaki, Oikawa, & Urata, 2025). By doing so, China also demonstrates its leadership role through its initiatives like the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) which help in promotion of economic integration. (Iwasaki, Oikawa, & Urata, 2025). Additionally, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has served as a tool for fostering political influence, investing heavily in infrastructure projects across Southeast Asia and South Asia (Iwasaki, Oikawa, & Urata, 2025).
2. **Russia's Diplomatic and Multilateral Engagement:** Russia has similarly utilized multilateral frameworks to assert its influence in the Indo-Pacific. Through organizations like the SCO and APEC, Russia has worked to foster a multipolar world order, advocating for regional cooperation and the balancing of U.S. dominance (Kaura, 2019). Russia has also participated in the East Asia Summit, enhancing its relationships with ASEAN countries (Iwasaki, Oikawa, & Urata, 2025). By promoting a vision of shared regional governance, Russia aims to challenge U.S. influence while fostering closer ties with China and other regional powers, thus solidifying its role in the region.

### ***C) Economic Outreach and Infrastructure Development***

1. **China's Economic Diplomacy:** China's economic strategy in the Indo-Pacific is marked by substantial investments through the Belt and Road Initiative, which focuses on infrastructure development, particularly in port construction, railways, and highways. These projects not only facilitate trade but also foster economic dependencies, allowing China to extend its political influence (Iwasaki, Oikawa, & Urata, 2025). China's investments in energy infrastructure, particularly in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, are central to securing critical energy resources necessary for its economic growth. These actions aim to consolidate China's leadership and enhance its economic footprint across the region.
2. **Russia's Economic Initiatives:** Russia's economic strategy in the Indo-Pacific focuses on expanding trade relations, particularly in energy exports. The Russian Far East is seen as a key area for economic development, and projects such as the Power of Siberia gas pipeline to China are central to deepening Russia's energy ties with key regional players (Bolt, 2016). Additionally, Russia has sought to enhance its trade relations with ASEAN countries and other regional powers through agreements and infrastructure projects. By diversifying its economic ties and pursuing a strategic balance with China, Russia aims to secure its position as a key player in the region (Iwasaki, Oikawa, & Urata, 2025).

Thus, China and Russia have taken a multifaceted approach to assert their interests in the Indo-Pacific, and actions in the military, diplomatic and economic spheres show that they have common goals of increasing influence, securing strategic advantages and countering the U.S. presence in the region. China's aggressive buildup of military might and the movement of its economic diplomacy through the Belt and Road Initiative have given it an overwhelming influence over the region's future. While focused on securing its own strategic interests and balancing its relationship with China, Russia has also increased its military, diplomatic and economic presence in the Indo-Pacific to maintain its presence. The role of both states in the dynamics of the region will be to maintain their influence, which will help them to define the balance of power in this most important global arena.

## **6. Coordination between China and Russia in the Indo-Pacific**

Despite their different approaches to regional strategies, China and Russia have found much in common in the Indo-Pacific region with respect to their common interest in undermining US regional dominance and gaining greater influence in the region's security and economic spheres. Mutually held concerns and the aim to compensate for western influence drives their cooperation, which covers many pillars including military and security cooperation, economic and trade cooperation, and diplomatic coordination in the regional forums.

### **A) Military and Security Cooperation:**

1. **Joint Military Exercises:** A key aspect of China-Russia cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is their joint military exercises, which enhance interoperability between their armed forces and serve as a direct counter to perceived U.S. and allied threats. These exercises include naval drills in the Sea of Japan and the South China Sea, areas of significant geopolitical tension (Weitz, 2021). The "Vostok" military exercises, held in Russia's Far East, are one of the largest demonstrations of Sino-Russian military coordination, showcasing their ability to conduct large-scale operations together and project power across the region (Weitz, 2021).
2. **Sino-Russian Security Dialogue:** Through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China and Russia have deepened their security cooperation, particularly in the realm of counterterrorism and military collaboration. While the SCO's core focus is Central Asia, the organization provides a strategic framework for advancing both countries' interests in broader regional security (Weitz, 2021). This partnership extends to the Indo-Pacific, with both nations aiming to balance the influence of NATO and the United States in the region.

## **B) Economic and Trade Cooperation**

1. **The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia's Far East:** Economic cooperation between China and Russia within the Indo-Pacific is closely tied to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which provides the basis for the developing of infrastructure connectivity for the region. In particular, Chinese investments are concentrated on ports, railways, and energy pipelines in Russia's Far East – an area that is wealth in natural resources. (Lindley, 2022). By integrating Russia's Far East into China's economic framework, the two nations aim to foster regional economic growth and increase mutual interdependence. This cooperation is mutually beneficial, as China seeks to secure critical resources, while Russia aims to enhance its economic integration with the Asia-Pacific market.
2. **Energy Partnerships:** Energy cooperation remains a cornerstone of the Sino-Russian partnership. Russia, as a leading energy exporter, has become a key energy supplier to China, which is heavily dependent on external sources for its energy needs. According to (Downs, Losz, & Mitrova, 2024), the Power of Siberia gas pipeline, inaugurated in 2019, exemplifies this growing energy partnership, providing a secure supply of natural gas to China and reducing Russia's reliance on European markets. This collaboration not only strengthens bilateral economic ties but also enhances China's energy security and Russia's market diversification in the Indo-Pacific.

## **C) Diplomatic Coordination in Regional Forums:**

1. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): The SCO is a critical platform for Sino-Russian coordination in the Indo-Pacific (Weitz, 2021). Though its primary focus remains Central Asia, the organization serves as a key forum for China and Russia to advance their broader geopolitical goals (Weitz, 2021). By participating in the SCO, both nations seek to foster regional stability, enhance security cooperation, and promote an alternative multipolar world order that counters U.S.-led regional architectures (Weitz, 2021). The SCO thus offers a stage for developing their interests on matters of vital interest, like counterterrorism and economic development in the wider Asia Pacific region.
2. East Asia Summit (EAS) and BRICS: China and Russia's diplomatic coordination extends to broader regional forums such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and BRICS, the bloc consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (Trenin, 2013). At the EAS, both states advocate for a multipolar world order and emphasize the need to reduce Western influence in regional governance (Trenin, 2013). By being part of BRICS, China and Russia both offer alternatives to the traditional Western influenced institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. (Trenin, 2013). These platforms allow China and Russia to align their diplomatic efforts and advocate for reforms that reflect their shared interests in reshaping global governance structures.

### **7. Limitations in China and Russia's Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific:**

Although China and Russia have strengthened their cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, their shared strategic objectives are often hindered by a range of geopolitical, economic, and security challenges. These constraints reflect both states' distinct interests and priorities, as well as the complex regional dynamics involving other global powers, and these limitations can be classified as follows:

#### ***A) Differing Long-Term Strategic Goals***

1. China and Russia have different long-term strategies when it comes to countering U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific, which limits their ability to completely align in the region. In reality, China's foreign policy is based on the expansionist policies, especially in the territorial disputes of the South China Sea and the East China Sea, to get maritime dominance. In contrast, Russia adopts a more cautious stance, focusing on the defense of its eastern territories rather than actively expanding its military influence in the Indo-Pacific. This divergence complicates their coordination on regional security issues, particularly concerning maritime security and territorial disputes (Hamilton, 2025).
2. Russia's geopolitical concerns in Central Asia and the Arctic: Although both states share interests in Central Asia. However, China's increasing economic presence, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has sparked

concerns in Russia, which views the region as its traditional sphere of influence. Similarly, both states seek to exploit the Arctic for energy resources and trade routes, but China's growing ambitions in this region have raised concerns in Russia about its sovereignty and control over Arctic resources.

### ***B) Geopolitical Rivalries and Economic Competition***

1. **Energy Competition:** Despite the broad cooperation, China and Russia encounter competition in several economic and geopolitical arenas in the Indo-Pacific, which can hinder the depth of their partnership. Both states are major energy exporters, but their competition for access to Indo-Pacific energy markets complicates their cooperation. As the largest consumer of energy in the region, China seeks long-term energy contracts with states such as India and Japan, which are also key partners for Russia. This competition can lead to tensions as both states vie for influence over energy resources, particularly in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean (Kaura, 2019).
2. **BRI vs. Eurasian Economic Union (EEU):** The Belt and Road Initiative, led by China, aims to establish extensive infrastructure and trade routes across the Indo-Pacific, often overlapping with Russia's plan for regional integration through the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) (Khan, 2023). Although both initiatives aim to enhance regional connectivity, they represent competing economic models, particularly in Southeast Asia and South Asia, where both states seek to secure economic influence. This competition may undermine their ability to coordinate infrastructure projects effectively.

### ***C) Regional Tensions and Third-Party Relations***

The actions of China and Russia in the Indo-Pacific are frequently perceived as threats by regional powers, complicating their strategic cooperation.

1. **India:** India maintains a complex relationship with both China and Russia, characterized by historical defense ties with Russia but increasing concerns over China's growing assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea and along its shared border with (Khan, 2023). This creates tensions for Russia and China as they try to reconcile their partnership while managing India's security concerns and strategic autonomy, particularly with India wary of deeper Chinese influence in its neighborhood.
2. **Japan and the US:** Japan and the US see the China-Russia partnership as a problem, and both are key allies in the Indo-Pacific. In fact, the U.S. marks the growing axis as a direct test of its regional interests, while Japan, a longtime U.S. ally, is worried about China's territory claims in the East

China sea and presence of its militaries in the region. (Kaura, 2019). Therefore, China and Russia's cooperation creates a delicate balance as they seek to strengthen their partnership while managing relations with these key regional powers (Kaura, 2019).

#### ***D) Diplomatic and Security Concerns***

1. **Diplomatic Tensions in Multilateral Forums:** Both China and Russia face challenges in aligning their diplomatic and security efforts in the Indo-Pacific, despite cooperating in various multilateral forums and joint military exercises. While both countries participate in several multilateral forums such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), their priorities often diverge, with China focusing more on economic cooperation and regional integration through initiatives as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while Russia places greater emphasis on security issues and countering U.S. influence (Iwasaki, Oikawa, & Urata, 2025). This discrepancy in priorities complicates their ability to present a cohesive diplomatic strategy by creating divergent objectives within multilateral forums, thereby impeding the alignment of their regional goals. For instance, Initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have economic focus in China while Russia is focused on security and counter U.S. and NATO influence. (Iwasaki, Oikawa, & Urata, 2025). This divergence creates tension in multilateral forums such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and APEC, where China's push for economic cooperation topic often conflicts with Russia's security concerns (Iwasaki, Oikawa, & Urata, 2025). Accordingly, the paper concludes that the two states' different approaches are what hinders the development of a unified diplomatic strategy, leading to disjointed efforts and competing influence, eventually limiting their ability to coordinate regional power projection.
2. **Security Cooperation:** Although China and Russia have conducted joint military exercises, such as the "Vostok" and "Sea Cooperation" drills, tensions still exist regarding the extent of their military coordination (Weitz, 2021). Russia, with its established military presence in the Pacific, is cautious about becoming overly dependent on China for regional security due to Russia's strategic reliance on China as an ally in countering U.S. and NATO influence, as well as to fill the gap in the Russian resources (Hamilton, 2025). Moreover, Russia's historical defense ties to nations like Vietnam and India create tensions with China, which has its own security concerns with these nations, particularly as China seeks to expand its influence in Southeast Asia (Hamilton, 2025). Therefore, although China and Russia have engaged in some military cooperation, their different strategic moves and historical defense ties continue to complicate the depth of their security partnership in the region.

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## **8. U.S. presence and Indo-Pacific alliances impact Sino-Russian coordination or rivalry**

The Indo-Pacific has become a strategic hotspot due to increased U.S. engagement and alliance-building efforts that explicitly aim to contain China's rise and maintain regional stability. The U.S. "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy, reinforced by frameworks like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and AUKUS, has created a dense web of security cooperation and power projection aimed at deterring unilateral changes to the status quo. This strategic alignment exerts pressure on both China and Russia, prompting greater synchronization in their diplomatic and military stances. For instance, joint naval drills in the East China Sea and coordinated rhetoric at forums such as the UN Security Council have signaled a shared resistance to Western dominance (Kaplan, 2021); (Yoshihara & Holmes, 2022). The U.S. presence, therefore, not only constrains China and Russia individually but also acts as a centripetal force drawing them closer together in strategic coordination.

However, this growing alignment is not without contradictions. Russia's strategic priorities remain more Eurocentric and defensive, while China's ambitions in the Indo-Pacific are expansive and assertive. The asymmetry in power and interests often results in tactical rather than strategic cooperation, as seen in Russia's limited engagement in the South China Sea disputes and its cautious stance on Taiwan (Lo, 2017). Moreover, Russia's economic constraints and geopolitical sensitivities regarding Chinese influence in its traditional spheres of interest—such as Central Asia and the Russian Far East—temper the depth of coordination (Gabuev, 2021). Therefore, while U.S. alliances accelerate tactical convergence between Beijing and Moscow, they also expose the structural limitations of this partnership, revealing that coordination often masks deeper rivalries and strategic mistrust.

## **9. China-Russia partnership a balancing coalition, or a fragile alignment shaped by convenience**

At a theoretical level, the China-Russia partnership bears the hallmarks of a balancing coalition, aligning with classical realist interpretations of power dynamics. According to balance-of-power theory, secondary powers will often align to counter a hegemonic threat (Walt, 1987); (Mearsheimer, J. J., 2014). In this case, China and Russia have found common cause in opposing perceived U.S. unilateralism and NATO expansionism. Their strategic declarations, energy cooperation, military exchanges, and shared positions on global governance indicate a deliberate effort to shift the global power equilibrium. The partnership's resilience in the face of Western sanctions—particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine—demonstrates how external pressure can catalyze deeper collaboration, especially in economic decoupling and defense diversification (Callahan, 2024); (Medeiros, 2019).

Despite this outward convergence, the China-Russia relationship remains fundamentally fragile and shaped by strategic convenience. Both states prioritize sovereignty and strategic autonomy, making them reluctant to institutionalize their partnership beyond transactional cooperation. For instance, while Russia welcomes Chinese investments, it remains wary of becoming economically subordinate, particularly as China's Belt and Road Initiative expands through Central Asia. Similarly, China avoids entangling alliances that could compromise its flexibility in managing relations with other regional powers (Lo, 2017; (Gabuev, 2021). These tensions are accentuated by their differing economic models, demographic trajectories, and military doctrines. Therefore, the relationship is essentially better conceived of as a pragmatic alignment, robust in the short run but susceptible to long run divergence unless underpinned by stronger institutional or ideological convergence.

### **Conclusion and Future Prospective**

The focus of this study was the strategic dynamics of China-Russia relations in the Indo-Pacific from the perspective of Power Transition Theory. Instead, it finds that their partnership is tactical rather than deep strategic integration. Although the two states have considerable common interest in resisting U.S. dominance and rearranging the regional order, they are hindered from cooperating due to asymmetrical capabilities, divergent long term goals, and mutual strategic ambivalence. Due to China's expansive economic and maritime assertiveness and its leadership in regional institutions, it is the dominant actor. In contrast, Russia's role is that of a strategic supplement: using energy diplomacy, military links, and multilateral forums to retain its relevance. Rhetorical solidarity and selective coordination, particularly in military exercises and energy infrastructure, offer the only institutional depth in China-Russian partnership in the Indo-Pacific, which is generally opportunistic. Their engagement only implies a joining of the grieves and not a shared, well thought strategic vision. The future prospects of the partnership will be likely influenced by external pressures and regional responses. Such intensification of U.S. alliances and continued Western sanctions on Russia may entice a further tactical convergence. But in the long term, growing symmetry of subordination, especially China's control over Central Asia and the Arctic, could heighten Russian concerns. In addition, regional states like India, Vietnam and ASEAN countries will greatly influence the strategic environment, whether by hedging against China-Russia coordination or by engaging them through multilateral diplomacy. Future research should explore the durability of asymmetrical alignments in contested regions and assess whether rising powers can sustain strategic cohesion without institutional binding mechanisms. In the Indo-Pacific transforming into a multipolar arena, the China-Russia axis will either consolidate itself into structured coalition or turn into a disintegrated coalition due to internal contradictions and competition.

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