



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

EURASIA PROGRAM

SETTING THE STAGE

An Overview of Chinese and Russian Interests and Influence in the Indo-Pacific

ROBERT E. HAMILTON





This publication was funded by the Russia Strategic Initiative, U.S. European Command. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense or the United States Government.

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

The views expressed in this report are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, a non-partisan organization that seeks to publish well-argued, policy-oriented articles on American foreign policy and national security priorities.

© 2024 by the Foreign Policy Research Institute

December 15, 2024



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

| EURASIA PROGRAM

SETTING THE STAGE

An Overview of Chinese and Russian Interests and Influence in the Indo-Pacific

Robert E. Hamilton

About the Author

Colonel (Retired) Robert E. Hamilton, PhD, is the Head of Research at the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Eurasia Program. In a 30-year career in the US Army, spent primarily as an Eurasian Foreign Area Officer, he served overseas in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Germany, Belarus, Qatar, Afghanistan, the Republic of Georgia, Pakistan, and Kuwait. Hamilton also worked as an Associate Professor of Eurasian Studies at the US Army War College. He is the author of numerous articles and monographs on conflict and security issues, focusing principally on the former Soviet Union and the Balkans. He is a graduate of the German Armed Forces Staff College and the U.S. Army War College and holds a Bachelor of Science degree from the United States Military Academy, a Master's Degree in Contemporary Russian Studies, and a PhD in Political Science, both from the University of Virginia.

Eurasia Program

The Eurasia Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute was founded in 2015 with the aim of examining the political, security, economic, and social trends shaping Europe and Eurasia. Our research agenda covers the increasingly tense competition roiling the region from several angles. It has a multi-year focus on the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and Central Asia, emphasizing how geography, economics, ideology, and history continue to shape politics and security in these regions. The program also publishes analyses of Russian foreign policy, including Russia's role in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The Russia Political Economy Project, along with the Bear Market Brief, analyzes the linkages between Russia's economy, society, and its political system. The Eurasia Program's thematic initiatives also include the Democracy at Risk rubric, which examines the trends of democratization and authoritarian pushback in the region.

Table of Contents

2	Introduction
4	Brief History of China-Russia Relations in the Region
6	Chinese and Russian Interests in the Indo-Pacific
10	Chinese and Russian Influence in the Indo-Pacific
12	Conclusion

Introduction

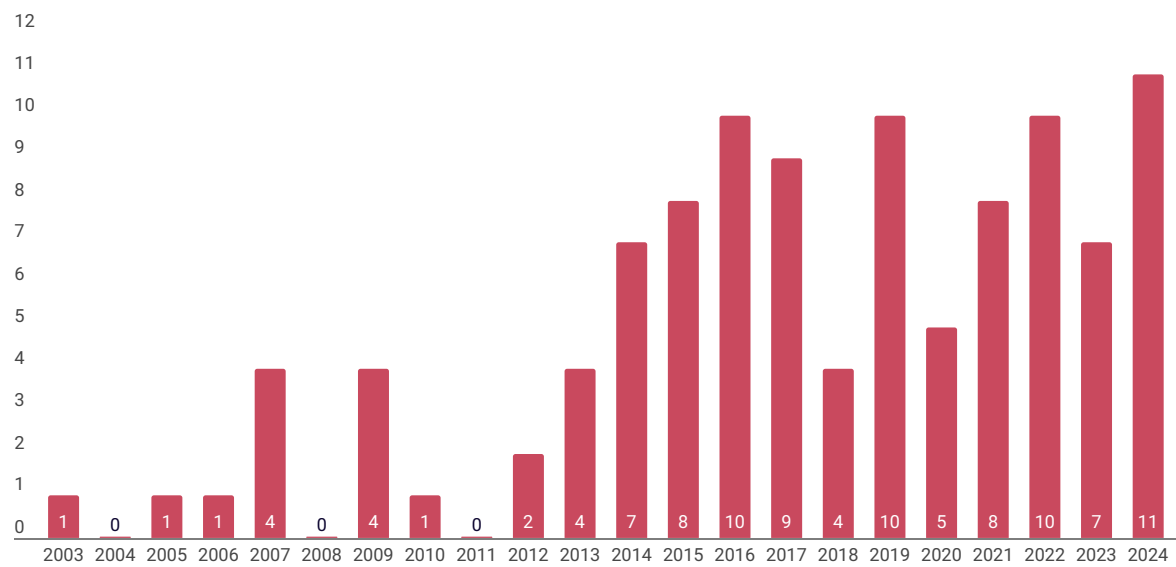
In late September, a US HC-103J Super Hercules spotted four foreign vessels operating about 440 miles southwest of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska. Upon closer inspection, the patrol turned out to be Russian Border Guard and Chinese Coast Guard ships. While this marked the northernmost location at which the US military has spotted Chinese ships operating, the presence of the joint Chinese-Russian patrol fit an increasingly common pattern. This sighting was the third time in three months that the US has spotted either Chinese or Russian ships close to Alaska. In both 2022 and 2023, the US Navy sent assets to shadow joint Chinese-Russian naval patrols operating in the Aleutian Islands region.¹

The Chinese and Russian navies have also been operating together near US partners and allies closer to their own shores, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. In 2021, a Chinese-Russian patrol circumnavigated Japan's main island. China's official description of the event claimed the flotilla was focused on "maintaining international and regional strategic stability," while Russia's Defense Ministry said its goal was to "maintain peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region." In an understatement that certainly masked some alarm, Japan merely characterized the patrol as "unusual."² Since then, the pace of Chinese-Russian naval patrols and exercises in the region has increased, with several in 2024 alone. One of these, Ocean 2024, involved some 90,000 troops and more than 500 ships and aircraft, according to the Kremlin, and was the largest of such exercises in 30 years. Ocean 2024 came on the heels of another joint naval patrol in the northern Pacific and another set of drills in the waters off Japan.³

Naval patrols are not the only example of increased military cooperation between Beijing and Moscow in the Indo-Pacific region, and the two are also stepping up their regional cooperation in other ways, especially diplomatically and economically. In fact, as the Indo-Pacific increasingly bifurcates into two mutually exclusive blocs—one composed of the US, partners, and allies and the other headed by China but with increasing support from Russia—the forces of convergence between Moscow and Beijing are arguably stronger here than anywhere else. There are several reasons for this. First, China and Russia have vital interests at stake in the region, which is geographically contiguous to both. Next, the region represents key access to global commerce and markets for both, especially since Russia has largely lost such access to Europe after it invaded Ukraine, and there is the large diplomatic, military, and economic footprint of the US, which often serves as the "binding agent" between the two.

This report, the first in a series of five on Chinese-Russian relations in the Indo-Pacific region, provides a brief history of their regional relations, examines the interests of each in the region, and gauges the level of regional influence each enjoys. It then concludes by assessing how compatible their regional interests are, comparing their relative influence, and discussing how their relationship in the Indo-Pacific region might impact and be impacted by their relationship in other regions. To define the region, this report uses the boundaries of the US Indo-Pacific Command Area of Responsibility (US INDOPACOM AOR). Within these boundaries, five countries or regions stand out as critical to understanding China-Russia relations: the Korean Peninsula, Japan/East China Sea, Taiwan, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)/South China Sea, and India.

Annual Joint China-Russia Military Drills



Source: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)



Chinese and Russian naval vessels conduct drills on anchorage defense in the waters of the Sea of Japan on July 23, 2023. (eng.chinamil.com.cn)

Brief History of China-Russia Relations in the Region

The story of China-Russia relations in the region begins with Russia's eastward expansion in the late 17th Century. While Russia already had a long history of diplomatic relations with European powers by this time, China did not. Indeed, the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk, which delineated territorial boundaries between the two, was China's first treaty with a European state and China's first diplomatic interaction "in anything approaching the Western sense."⁴ Over the next several centuries, Russia's presence in the region grew, often at China's expense. In the mid-19th Century, Russia used China's weakness during the Taiping Rebellion and the Opium Wars to make extensive territorial demands. In a series of treaties, Russia extracted territorial concessions along the Amur River, the coastline, and the western border in Xinjiang. Unsurprisingly, China began to see Russia's regional presence as threatening.

But Beijing was unable to do much to stop Russia's land grabs. In the early 20th Century, during the Boxer Rebellion, Russia seized three provinces in Manchuria, occupying them with some 100,000 troops and refusing to withdraw after the rebellion ended. In 1905, Russia got a comeuppance when its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War allowed Japan to seize much of the territory Russia had gained in Manchuria. The defeat stung, but Russia continued to seek gains at China's expense. In 1911, Russia supported Mongolia's attempt to separate from China, and in 1915 the Tripartite Treaty between Russia, China, and Mongolia formalized the latter's autonomy. After the 1917 Russian Revolution,

Mongolia declared independence and Soviet troops moved in, pulling it further out of Beijing's orbit.

After the cataclysms of the 1930s, which saw the rise of Japanese militaristic expansion, and the Second World War, during which Chinese Communists and Nationalists fought Japan and each other, the Communist victory in China opened the way for a rapprochement with the Soviet Union. The two concluded a Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance in 1950, ushering in a decade of expanding cooperation. The Soviet Union extended China financial, technical, educational, and military assistance, and the two declared "the eternal, unbreakable friendship and cooperation of Soviet and Chinese peoples."⁵

By 1956, Khrushchev had consolidated power in the Soviet Union and began denouncing Stalin. While Soviet Communists fell in line, Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) did not.

But this friendship and cooperation proved less eternal than either side hoped. By 1956, Khrushchev had consolidated power in the Soviet Union and began denouncing Stalin. While Soviet Communists fell in line, Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) did not. Mao began accusing Khrushchev of deviating from the path of true Marxism and attempted to ensconce himself as the leader of the global Communist movement. This did not go down well in Moscow. The excesses of Mao's "Great Leap Forward" and his denunciation of Moscow's attempt to establish "peaceful coexistence" with the capitalist world



Mao Tse-tung facing Nikita Khrushchev, during the Russian leader's 1957 visit to Beijing, (Library of Congress).

convinced the Soviet leadership that Mao was a security liability instead of a strategic asset.⁶ By the mid-1960s, Beijing and Moscow had moved to a “full-blown and dangerous geopolitical confrontation,” which culminated in a bloody border clash in 1969.⁷ Ironically, the US stepped in to deescalate things. When it concluded that Moscow was considering preemptive strikes on Chinese nuclear facilities, Washington convinced Moscow to abandon these plans.⁸

Mao's death in 1976 reduced—but did not eliminate—Chinese-Soviet tensions. Mao's successor Deng Xiaoping hoped to mend ties with Moscow, but the war between China and Vietnam along with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, both of which occurred in 1979, made this impossible. Gorbachev's appointment as Soviet leader in 1985 laid the foundation for an improvement in ties, which were further strengthened by the 1989 Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and a reduction in the number of troops along the Chinese border. In May of that year, Gorbachev visited China, the first Soviet leader to do so since

the 1960s, though the Tiananmen Square protests overshadowed his visit.

The 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union shocked the CCP leadership, who were determined to prevent such an outcome in China. For the first half of the 1990s, Russia's tilt toward the West and China's international isolation in the wake of the violent Tiananmen Square crackdown put a brake on the expansion of their bilateral relationship. But by the end of the decade, Russia had soured on the idea of Western integration. That, and China's sense of vulnerability to US coercion after the 1995–96 Taiwan Straits Crisis, pushed the two countries together again. Putin's election as Russian president in 2000 and Xi Jinping's ascension to leadership of the CCP have further strengthened their relationship, which now rests on their personal ties—the two have met over 40 times since Xi took office in 2013 and have used glowing language to describe their relationship—and shared resistance to what they call “US hegemony.”

Chinese and Russian Interests in the Indo-Pacific

In Beijing's view, it has vital interests at stake in the Indo-Pacific. These revolve around two imperatives: restoring what it sees as its territorial integrity and establishing a geographic sphere of influence throughout much of the region. Both have the potential to bring about a confrontation with the US, which it believes stands in its way on both counts. As to restoring territorial integrity, Taiwan stands alone in terms of its importance. Of the four territories where China saw its territorial integrity as incomplete or challenged—Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan—only the last still resists control by Beijing. China may be prickly about criticism of its policies in the other three regions, but the CCP leadership has been clear that it sees Taiwan's integration as a vital national interest, and one worth fighting for.⁹ Chinese anxiety over Taiwan has been rising as its relationship with the US has been deteriorating. Adding to this anxiety is a new generation of Taiwanese political leaders who feel emboldened to challenge the "one country, two systems" model.¹⁰

Outside of Taiwan, a detached assessment of China's interests in the Indo-Pacific suggests they are important but not vital. However, Beijing often insists that some of these other interests are also vital and takes action to back this claim. This is especially true in the South and East China Seas. Here Beijing insists the issue at stake is one of its sovereignty and territorial integrity when, in reality, its claims are more about maximizing its own freedom of action, limiting that of its neighbors, and minimizing US presence and

influence. In the South China Sea, China's claims revolve around the so-called nine-dash line, which extends from southern China throughout most of the region.¹¹

Inside the nine-dash line, China claims and occupies the Paracel Islands, which Vietnam also claims. Beijing also lays claim to the entire Spratley Island chain, as do Taiwan and Vietnam; the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei each make partial claims. Since 2013, China has been building artificial islands and setting up military bases in both island chains, hoping to operationalize its claims and coerce its competitors into giving up theirs. Finally, China has occupied the Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea since 2012; although, Taiwan and the Philippines also claim it. Of these claims, the Paracels are the most important to China; despite Vietnam's claim to them, China insists they are not in dispute and has deployed a significant military presence there.¹²

Outside of Taiwan, a detached assessment of China's interests in the Indo-Pacific suggests they are important but not vital.

In the East China Sea, Beijing claims the Senkaku Islands, which Japan administers. China's claim here is more instrumental than emotional: the goal is to weaken the US-Japan alliance and establish itself as the regional hegemon rather than control important territory, since the islands bring no real military or economic benefit.¹³ China's interests on the Korean Peninsula are largely negative: it has long seen the peninsula as a source of vulnerability, given its proximity to China and China's historical role there. While CCP leaders may dislike Pyongyang's



Guided-missile destroyer Ji'nan (Hull 152), guided-missile frigate Changzhou (Hull 549) and comprehensive supply ship Chaohu (Hull 890) attached to a naval detachment of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) sail in formation during a maritime training exercise on November 8, 2024. (eng.chinamil.com.cn/Xu Chongkang)

unpredictability and nuclear saber-rattling, they dislike the US role and presence there even more.¹⁴

Outside of its relationship with Russia, China's ties with India comprise its most important bilateral relationship in the Indo-Pacific region. The two Asian giants have had a relationship that has historically been fraught at best. They have long been political and economic competitors, with periodic military clashes erupting as well, especially along their disputed border high in the Himalayas. The most recent clash there came in 2020 and killed 20 Indian and four Chinese soldiers. After that clash, India "severed direct air links with China, banned hundreds of Chinese mobile applications, and added layers of vetting on Chinese investments."¹⁵ Recently, however, the two announced that they have reached a deal to resolve the military standoff and are working to "consider other aspects of [the] bilateral engagement in a calibrated manner."¹⁶ Although history

suggests it will be difficult to achieve, a sustained *détente* between China and India would significantly ease Russia's burden of maintaining close ties with both.

Although it has been an Asian power for centuries, Russia has not often acted the part. Instead, it has often seen its most important political, economic, and military relationships as those with European states. Although Russian leaders since Peter the Great have spoken of the value of the Far East, when Russia has turned eastward, it has often been because of a dispute with the West or a feeling of being excluded from the West. The current turn continues this pattern: it began after Western countries imposed sanctions on Russia for its 2014 seizure of Crimea and accelerated after Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Previous "turns to the East" have been largely China-centric, something Moscow hopes to avoid this time. Russia's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept envisions a more robust role in the region,

noting that Russia is a “Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power,” and two-thirds of its territory lies in Asia.¹⁷

To carve out a significant role for itself in the Indo-Pacific Russia must first contend with two facts: the growing power disparity between it and China, and the fact that China has higher-order interests at stake in the region. Moscow will be hypersensitive to being relegated to the role of Beijing’s junior partner in the region and will also be concerned about being pulled into disputes in which it sees no vital interests at stake. The latter is especially true given the fact that Russia is fully committed in Ukraine where it sees vital interests at stake. It is also in jeopardy of losing its foothold in Syria, which is critical to its ability to project power in the Mediterranean and into Africa.

Russia’s interests in the Indo-Pacific are somewhat contradictory. On one hand, it sees itself locked in an existential struggle with the West, especially the US, and sees China as a natural partner in that struggle. This has become truer as NATO’s profile in the region has risen. The perceived need to combat NATO’s influence has caused greater alignment between Chinese and Russian perceptions of the regional security environment. On the other hand, Moscow has historically had close relationships with some of China’s biggest regional adversaries. Keeping China on-side in its confrontation with the West while maintaining its partnerships with China’s adversaries and negotiating the power imbalance between itself and China in the region will be a tall order.

In the South China Sea, Russia had long supported Vietnam’s claims before suddenly flipping to China’s side in 2015. Predictably, Russia’s view of the US was the main cause of its sudden change in policy. Noting the warming of ties between Washington and Hanoi, Russia—perhaps in a bid to punish Vietnam—flipped its support to China while

condemning the “intervention” of the US, which it blamed for “aggravating” the conflict in the South China Sea.¹⁸ While it publicly backs China’s position in this dispute, Russia continues to cooperate with Vietnam in other areas. It sells arms to Hanoi, and Russian oil companies are cooperating with Vietnam to exploit oil reserves inside China’s nine-dash line. China has noticed and responded: on at least one occasion, Russia has moved vessels out of the region after China complained. China has also sent Coast Guard ships to shadow Russian-Vietnamese oil and gas exploration there.¹⁹ Moscow also cooperates with other states broiled in territorial disputes with China.

The perceived need to combat NATO’s influence has caused greater alignment between Chinese and Russian perceptions of the regional security environment.

Chinese scholars and policymakers have noticed. Chinese analysts have written that Russia is using Vietnam to balance against China’s rise, which it sees as inimical to its interests.²⁰ Others have argued that Russia is engaged in a “search for expansion” in the region.²¹ Still another has claimed that Russia would not object to China being pushed out of the region by the US and its allies.²² While these views are not openly reflected in Chinese government statements or policies, the closed nature of China’s system makes it unlikely that analysts could publish such claims without at least tacit approval from the Chinese government.

Russia’s interests in and approach to the East China Sea and the Korean Peninsula more closely align with China’s. While it has



Review of troops, held after Vostok 2018 military manoeuvres. (kremlin.ru)

sometimes courted Japanese investment in the region, Russia has historically seen Japan as the biggest threat to the Russian Far East, which is rich in resources, ethnically diverse, and far from Moscow.²³ Given this view, from Russia's perspective, it makes sense to support China in its showdown with Japan in the East China Sea. Russia's position on the Korean Peninsula has historically been pragmatic and aligned with China's, seeking to avoid war, push for denuclearization, and prevent the US from "monopolizing" the peninsula.²⁴ But this may be changing due to the exigencies of the war in Ukraine. North Korea has provided Russia with short-range ballistic missiles, millions of artillery shells, and over 10,000 troops for the war. Pyongyang will certainly get something in return. South Korea claims Russia has provided air defense missiles and worries that it may also provide sensitive technology to improve North Korea's nuclear and missile

programs.²⁵ Given Beijing's sensitivity to its role on the Korean Peninsula and its concern about the potential for events there to threaten its own stability, it cannot be excited about the prospect of closer ties between Russia and the regime in Pyongyang.

Finally, the war in Ukraine has also affected Russia's stance on Taiwan, but in ways that are much more favorable to China. Although Taiwan has historically been a source of friction between Beijing and Moscow, the latter has become more accommodating in the wake of the war in Ukraine. In March 2023, at his summit with Xi Jinping in Moscow, Russian President Putin issued a public statement of support for China's position.²⁶ Russia also added Taiwan to its list of "unfriendly countries" due to Taipei's strong condemnation of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Chinese and Russian Influence in the Indo-Pacific

If interests convey what a state wants, influence informs how a state gets it. Most states would prefer to use soft power, or the power of attraction and persuasion to achieve their goals since this is less costly and often more lasting than using coercion. In the Indo-Pacific, as elsewhere, the BRI is the main economic instrument in China's effort to build its influence. Beijing has also set up Confucius Institutes throughout the region as another soft power tool focused on teaching the Chinese language and exposing regional publics to Chinese culture. However, Beijing's aggressive pursuit of its territorial claims in the region combined with its demographic weight and growing military and economic power serve to build skepticism or even fear of China and undermine its efforts to build its influence.

China's coercion of its neighbors has done damage to its influence with many members of ASEAN but has also damaged its influence with other regional states. After the Philippines submitted its South China Sea claim to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in 2014, and the court ruled in Manila's favor in 2016, China declared the ruling "null and void" and stepped up its coercion.²⁷ Unsurprisingly, this stance has eroded China's influence and raised suspicion about its motives among regional states. In a 2024 survey, a median of 72% of respondents across ten Indo-Pacific countries said they were concerned about China's territorial disputes with its neighbors. People in countries that are parties to those disputes, such as the Philippines (91%), Japan (86%), and Malaysia (74%) were among the most

concerned. But even in countries that have no direct stake in the disputes, such as South Korea, Australia, India, and Singapore, large majorities expressed concern about China's actions.²⁸

China's attempts to use economic tools to build influence—and possibly offset the damage done to its reputation by its approach to territorial disputes—have been moderately successful.

China's attempts to use economic tools to build influence—and possibly offset the damage done to its reputation by its approach to territorial disputes—have been moderately successful. A 2023 survey of scholars from eight Southeast Asian countries found that, in five, the assessment of the Belt and Road Initiative was very positive (Cambodia and Laos) or positive (Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia); Vietnam and Myanmar assessed its impact as neutral, while only the Philippines assessed it as having a negative impact.²⁹ Publics in the region tend to agree that China's role in the region is not necessarily negative. A 2024 public opinion survey found that majorities in all six Southeast Asian countries surveyed said that China contributes to global peace and security. Even in the Philippines, where skepticism of China runs high, 57% of respondents agreed.³⁰

However, outside of Southeast Asia, Indo-Pacific countries have more negative views of China. This is especially true in countries with close ties to the US. A 2023 survey

found that publics in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan rated China's power and influence a greater threat than that of Russia or the US.³¹ And even within ASEAN, which includes most countries of Southeast Asia and is more positively disposed toward China than the rest of the region, Beijing's influence pales when compared directly to that of the US. In a 2023 survey of ASEAN publics, when asked whether they would side with the US or China if forced to choose, 61.1% said the US and 38.9% said China.³² Another 2023 poll of ASEAN publics showed that 46.5% of the respondents felt that the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy is likely to have a positive overall impact and effectiveness, with 11.7% assessing it negatively, and 41.8% saying they are uncertain.³³

Russia, a relative latecomer as an Indo-Pacific power and without China's economic and demographic weight in the region, would seem to be positioned to gain influence where skepticism of China is highest.

Russia, a relative latecomer as an Indo-Pacific power and without China's economic and demographic weight in the region, would seem to be positioned to gain influence where skepticism of China is highest. But it has not, for two reasons. First, the countries most skeptical of China tend to be US partners or allies like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Australia, and their ties to the US also predispose them to see Russia in a negative light. Also, Russia's invasion of

Ukraine has deeply damaged its reputation and influence in the Indo-Pacific, at least outside of China and India.

Before its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow had been engaged in a charm offensive in the region, which had paid dividends even among countries like Japan, a US ally that has territorial disputes with Russia. Japanese concern about China's rise led many in Japan to see Russia as a useful "balancing instrument in its relations with Beijing."³⁴ With Tokyo focused on the threat from China, Japanese national security documents generally did not present Russia as a threat, even after the 2014 seizure of Crimea.³⁵ In fact, by 2017 the relationship between the two appeared stable and robust enough that a Russian scholar characterized it as "increasingly manifesting itself as an independent factor in international politics."³⁶

Elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific Russia "had quietly boosted its military ties and diplomatic engagement" in a bid to gain influence in the region.³⁷ Although it was absent from much of the region for several decades after the Vietnam War era, Russia had more recently gained a reputation as a source of cheap and reliable military equipment. Between 2010 and 2019, it became the largest arms supplier to Southeast Asian countries, making up some 30% of arms imports there.³⁸ Moscow also launched a diplomatic charm offensive in the region, boosting ties with countries such as Indonesia and Thailand. These and other regional countries "long caught in a squeeze between the United States and China, were looking to other outside powers to diversify their strategic partnerships," and Russia seemed an attractive choice in this regard.³⁹

However, the combined impacts of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its failure to deliver on many of its military and diplomatic promises have significantly undermined its regional influence. The brief rapprochement with Japan came crashing down in the wake of the invasion, which

“deeply shocked Japan.” Tokyo responded by being “among the first countries to condemn Russia’s actions and impose sanctions.”⁴⁰ The war has damaged Russia’s influence elsewhere in the region, as well, including in South Korea and ASEAN states. A February 2023 poll of ASEAN publics showed a large majority (82.9%) expressing concern over the invasion. Respondents named increased energy and food prices (58.3%) followed by erosion of trust in a rules-based order and violation of national sovereignty (25.9%) as its chief negative impacts.⁴¹ Regional countries also expressed frustration with the poor quality of Russian arms and the corruption involved in buying them. Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines have all canceled planned purchases, citing concerns over corruption.⁴²

Conclusion

While Chinese and Russian interests in the Indo-Pacific are not perfectly aligned, there are no obvious dealbreakers between them. Their interests align over the issues of Taiwan and the East China Sea, although not always for the same reasons. Russia’s courting of North Korean assistance for its war in Ukraine and suspicions about what the regime in Pyongyang may demand in return threaten to upset the tenuous balance on the Korean Peninsula. This cannot be reassuring to Beijing and may portend a divergence of interests there. In some of these cases, Russia’s support for China’s position has increased as its relationship with the US has eroded, implying that there is an instrumentalism in Moscow’s stance. In the South China Sea, Russia supports China’s position rhetorically but cooperates militarily and economically with Vietnam in ways that undermine it. But to this point, China and Russia have been able to compartmentalize their differences on this issue.

Both China and Russia have suffered a decline in their regional influence as their regional presence and activity have grown. China’s biggest problems in maintaining its influence have been its aggressive pursuit of expansive territorial claims in the region and its economic and demographic weight, which instill a fear in some countries of being “swallowed” by China. Russia does not suffer from these disadvantages but has created some of its own. Moscow’s biggest goal in the region was its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, an act of aggression that fomented civil war in eastern Ukraine and shocked even countries that had been willing to overlook its 2014 seizure of Crimea. The economic impact of the war on the region and Russia’s flouting of international law have also cost its reputation, even in countries where it had been fairly popular.

Two major factors are driving a convergence between China and Russia, one global and one regional. The global factor is their shared conviction that the US threatens their internal stability and external freedom of action. The regional factor is the accelerating bifurcation of the Indo-Pacific into opposing and mutually exclusive security blocs, one centered on China and the other on the US. These two factors combine to make it less likely that Russia would sit out any confrontation between the US and China. This is especially true when the war in Ukraine is considered. To this point, China has been careful not to provide direct military assistance to Russia or do anything else that would trigger sanctions against it, since it needs access to Western technology and markets to sustain its economic growth. But, in the context of a looming—and potentially existential—showdown with the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific, Beijing would have to set these concerns aside. In this case, a true alliance between China and Russia directed against the US becomes more likely. 🦋

- 1 Maggie Nelson, "Russian, Chinese vessels spotted in Bering Sea, showing 'increased interest in the Arctic,'" Alaska Public Media, October 3, 2024, <https://alaska-public.org/2024/10/03/russian-chinese-vessels-spotted-in-bering-sea-showing-increased-interest-in-the-arctic/#:~:text=Roughly%20two%20years%20ago%2C%20crews,found%20operating%20in%20the%20region>
- 2 Brad Lendon, "Why Russian and Chinese warships teaming up to circle Japan is a big deal," CNN, October 25, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/25/asia/china-russia-naval-flotilla-circles-japan-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>
- 3 Simone McCarthy, "China and Russia are ramping up joint military drills. What's their end goal?" CNN, September 17, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/17/china/china-russia-military-drills-analysis-intl-hnk/index.html>
- 4 Paul J. Bolt and Sharyl L. Cross, *China, Russia and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 6.
- 5 Artyom Lukin in Thomasingar, ed., *Uneasy Partnerships: China's Engagement with Japan, the Koreans and Russia in the Era of Reform* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 191.
- 6 Ibid., 191.
- 7 Ibid., 193.
- 8 Ibid., 193. In retrospect, it appears this US conclusion may have been inaccurate. Recent scholarship has concluded that the Soviet Union wanted the US to believe it was planning such strikes, but it was not actually considering them seriously.
- 9 Evan S. Medeiros, "Major Power Rivalry in East Asia," Discussion Paper Series on Managing Global Disorder no. 3 (Council on Foreign Relations, April 2021), 10, <https://www.cfr.org/report/major-power-rivalry-east-asia>
- 10 Ibid., 12.
- 11 Ibid., 19.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid., 17.
- 14 Ibid., 16.
- 15 "India and China to 'calibrate' relations, pursue business ties after border stand-off: minister," South China Morning Post, December 3, 2024, India and China to 'calibrate' relations, pursue business ties after border stand-off: minister | South China Morning Post
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Mercy A. Kuo, "Russia's Asia-Pacific Interests: Insights from Elizabeth Wishnick," *The Diplomat*, May 30, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/russias-asia-pacific-interests/>
- 18 Li Youlong and Zuo Fengrong, "Russia's South China Sea Policy and Its Impact on China," *Asia-Pacific Security and Maritime Affairs*, no. 4 (2018): 46–57.
- 19 Francisco Guarascio, "Cluster of Chinese vessels spotted near Russian rig off Vietnam - ship monitors," Reuters, May 11, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/cluster-chinese-vessels-spotted-near-russian-rig-off-vietnam-ship-monitors-2023-05-10/>
- 20 Liu Yan and Zhu Lumin, "An Analysis of Vietnam's policy of strengthening cooperation with Russia," *Journal of Strategy and Decision-Making*, no. 3 (2020): 50–84, 106.
- 21 Wang Chuanjian and Wang Xinlong, "A rational view of Russia's South China Sea policy," *Southeast Asian Studies*, no. 2 (2019): 86–106, <https://www.cqvip.com/qk/83248x/201902/68788989504849574850484853.html>
- 22 Zhao Weihua, "Vietnam's South China Sea Policy Adjustment: Evolution and Substance," SoHu, April 4, 2019, https://www.sohu.com/a/306864953_619333
- 23 Li Yonghui, "Russia-Japan Relations: Strategic and Security Considerations Based on Russia's Policy towards Japan in the Thirty Years since Russia's Independence," *Journal of Northeast Asia Studies*, no. 1 (2022): 15–29, 145–146.
- 24 Li Lianqi (李连祺) and Jiang Zhenjun (姜振军), "Changes and Development of Russia's Policy towards Korean Peninsula (当前俄罗斯朝鲜半岛政策的 转变及发展走向)," *Russian, East European & Central Asian Studies*, no. 3 (2020): 53–65, 156.
- 25 Hyung Jin-Kim and Kim Tong Hyung, "Russia supplied air defense missiles to North Korea in return for its troops, South Korea says," Associated Press, November 22, 2024.
- 26 "Xi wins Putin's backing on Taiwan, plays peacemaker on Ukraine," *Nikkei Asia*, March 23, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Xi-wins-Putin-s-backing-on-Taiwan-plays-peacemaker-on-Ukraine2>
- 27 "South China Sea Arbitration Ruling: What Happened and What's Next?" U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, July 12, 2016, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Issue%20Brief_South%20China%20Sea%20Arbitration%20Ruling%20What%20Happened%20and%20What%27s%20Next071216.pdf
- 28 Laura Silver, Christine Huang, Laura Clancy, and Andrew Prozorovsky, "Most People in 35 Countries Say China Has a Large Impact on Their National Economy," Pew Research Center, July 9, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/07/09/most-people-in-35-countries-say-china-has-a-large-impact-on-their-national-economy/>
- 29 Pongphisoot (Paul) Busbarat, Alvin Camba, Fadhila Inas Pratiwi, Sovinda Po, Hoàng Đỗ, Bouadam Sengkhambhouthavong, Tham Siew Yean, and Moe Thuzar, "How Has China's Belt and Road Initiative Impacted Southeast Asian Countries?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 5, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/12/how-has-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-impacted-southeast-asian-countries?lang=en>
- 30 Silver, et al., "35 Countries."

31 Laura Silver, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, "In East Asia, many people see China's power and influence as a major threat," Pew Research Center, December 5, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/12/05/in-east-asia-many-people-see-chinas-power-and-influence-as-a-major-threat/>

32 Premesha Saha, "Understanding ASEAN's Non-Linear Approach to the Russia-Ukraine War," Observer Research Foundation, August 17, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/understanding-asean-s-non-linear-approach-to-the-russia-ukraine-war>

33 Gregory B. Poling, Andreyka Natalegawa, and Simon Tran Hudes, "The Unlikely, Indispensable U.S.-Vietnam Partnership," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 6, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/unlikely-indispensable-us-vietnam-partnership>

34 Marina Martynova, Galina Nikogorets-Takigawa, and Olga Lobazova, "Russia—China—Japan Triangle in the Context of the Eastern Vector of the Russian Foreign Policy," 25th International Scientific Conference on Economic and Social Development - XVII International Social Congress (Moscow, October 30–31, 2017), 580.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 579.

37 Joshua Kurlantzick, "Russia's Influence in Southeast Asia Is Fading," Council on Foreign Relations, September 25, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/article/russias-influence-southeast-asia-fading>

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 "Japan's new military policies: Origins and implications," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), February 2, 2023, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2023/japans-new-military-policies-origins-and-implications>

41 Sharon Seah, Joanne Lin, Melinda Martinus, Sithanoxay Suvannaphakdy, Pham Thi, and Phuong Thao, "The State of Southeast Asia 2023," ASEAN Studies Centre at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, February 9, 2023, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-State-of-SEA-2023-Final-Digital-V4-09-Feb-2023.pdf>

42 Kurlantzick, "Russia's Influence in Southeast Asia Is Fading."



The Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) is a nonpartisan Philadelphia-based think tank dedicated to strengthening US national security and improving American foreign policy.

Established in 1955 by the noted 20th century geopolitical strategist, Ambassador Robert Strausz-Hupé, FPRI was founded on the premise that an informed and educated citizenry is essential for the United States to understand complex international issues and formulate foreign policy. FPRI remains committed to this principle and strives to inform both policymakers and the general public through FPRI research and educational programs.

FPRI is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and takes no institutional positions on issues and conducts no advocacy. The organization has six main research programs, covering US National Security, the Middle East, Eurasia, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Each program produces reports, articles, public events, and private briefings for policymakers, FPRI members, and the general public.

© 2024 by the Foreign Policy Research Institute

Join the Conversation

123 S Broad St, Suite 1920,
Philadelphia, PA 19109
215.732.3774 | fpri.org | [f](#) [v](#) [in](#) [X](#)@FPRI

FPRI Editorial Team

Eurasia Program Director

Maia Otarashvili

Eurasia Head of Research

Robert E. Hamilton

Editing

Ashley Greenman

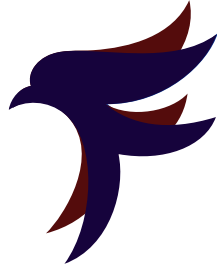
Layout and Design

Natalia Kopytnik

Cover

Natalia Kopytnik

Image Credits: Ichiro Ohara / Reuters;
Adobe Stock; Kremlin.ru; U.S. Navy
photo by Mass Communication
Specialist 1st Class John Bellino



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE