

# RUSSIA'S USE OF THE INSTRUMENTS OF STATECRAFT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

## Systemic Balancing and Regional Hedging

ALEXANDER KOROLEV





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.

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May 22, 2025



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## **Systemic Balancing and Regional Hedging**

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# Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>The Diplomatic Instrument</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>The Military Instrument</b>
<b>14</b>	<b>The Economic Instrument</b>
<b>20</b>	<b>The View from Beijing</b>
<b>22</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>

# Introduction

This report analyzes Russia's use of diplomatic, military, and economic instruments of statecraft to advance its interests in the Indo-Pacific region and examines how China perceives it. As with all reports in this series, this one defines the Indo-Pacific region as the Area of Responsibility (AOR) of the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM). Within the AOR, it examines Russia's activity in the subregions most significant for Russia's strategic interests: China, the Southeast Asia and South China Sea (SCS) region, India, and the Korean Peninsula.

Russia has utilized instruments of statecraft to maintain a two-level engagement pattern in the region—systemic balancing and regional hedging. At the level of systemic balancing, Russia unequivocally embraces China as an economic, military, and political ally to balance the United States or the West more broadly. However, at the level of regional hedging, Russia diversifies its economic, political, and security bets by engaging with China's actual or potential adversaries and avoids explicitly taking one side at the obvious expense of another in regional disputes: Moscow hedges its bets between different states, including China, to maximize cooperation opportunities. This two-level engagement pattern does not undermine Russia's systemic alignment with China, but it reduces Moscow's dependence on Beijing and makes the regional aspects of China-Russia relations more complex.

The intensification of US-China rivalry and the deterioration of China's relations with India, Vietnam, and other Southeast Asian states are conducive to Russia maintaining this two-level pattern. The worsening US-China relations incentivize Beijing to consolidate its alignment with Russia. Simultaneously, Beijing's growing capabilities and aggressive pursuit of its territorial claims in the region make regional powers proactively seek closer ties with Moscow, recognizing that unequivocal alignment with the US will irreversibly antagonize China, which is not in their interests.

China, while concerned about Russia's strategic partnerships in the region, needs Moscow for its confrontation with the US and quietly accepts these developments, worrying that if Russia withdraws from its partnerships with countries like India and Vietnam, the US will fill the void, which is more detrimental to Beijing. These criss-crossing geopolitical pressures give Russia an extra hedge in its relations with China without undermining China-Russia strategic alignment. As a result, Russia can develop strategic alignment with China (balancing) while enhancing strategic cooperation with whomever is available (hedging). The new Trump administration's foreign policy toward the US's traditional allies has increased geopolitical uncertainty and undermined the Indo-Pacific states' trust in the US as a regional security guarantor, forcing them to diversify their external relations, which provides Russia with more regional hedging possibilities.

# The Diplomatic Instrument

Moscow has not developed a coherent Indo-Pacific doctrine or vision. However, it has consistently sought to advance the narrative of “ASEAN centrality” (ASEAN’s central role in regional architecture), which aligns with its view of “multipolarity” but is at odds with the US version of the “Indo-Pacific.”<sup>1</sup> Russia faced isolation from Western countries following its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which has led Moscow to strengthen ties with non-Western nations in an attempt to find alternative cooperation opportunities. Russia’s diplomatic activity in the Indo-Pacific follows the goal of balancing against the West while diversifying the portfolio of its non-Western contacts.

partnership” in 2001 to “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination” in 2012 and a “comprehensive strategic partnership of equality, mutual trust, mutual support, common prosperity and long-lasting friendship” in 2019.<sup>2</sup> On June 5, 2019, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin upgraded China-Russia relations to “a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era,” highlighting both sides’ willingness to deal with the challenges of the future.<sup>3</sup> On February 4, 2022, twenty days before Russia invaded Ukraine, China and Russia declared a “no limits partnership” that “surpasses an alliance.”<sup>4</sup>

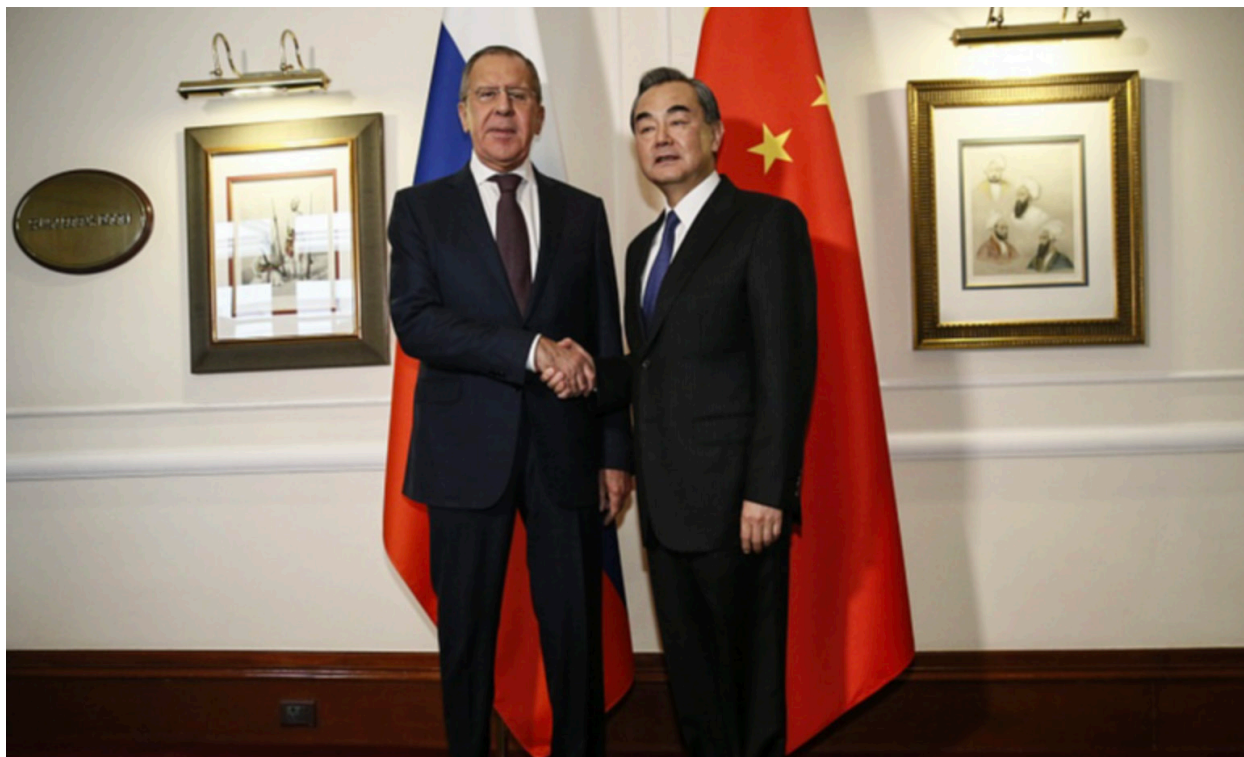
**China and Russia regularly hold specialized meetings that they do not have with other states.**

## China

As a systemic balancer, Russia pursues alignment with China. The structural imperatives of systemic balancing suppress domestic-level barriers to China-Russia alignment. China reciprocates because it is locked in a structural confrontation with the US. Therefore, the current high level of China-Russia cooperation is not ad hoc.

Moscow has consistently advanced cooperation with China. The relationship has progressed from “good neighborliness” in the early 1990s to “constructive cooperation” in the late 1990s to “comprehensive strategic

Russia’s contacts with China have developed into a comprehensive mechanism of regular consultations at all levels, including almost all major government agencies and organizations—from top decision-makers and their administrative units to Defense Ministries and their subdivisions to regional military districts, border garrisons, and military educational institutions. China and Russia regularly hold specialized meetings that they do not have with other states, including China-Russia Consultations on National Security Issues and China-Russia Northeast Asia Security Dialogue. According to some assessments, all diplomatic mechanisms



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's during talks with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of the Russia-India-China (RIC) foreign ministers' meeting in New Delhi, December 11, 2017. (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

combined generate a frequency of 20 to 30 high-level bilateral consultations yearly, excluding regional cooperation formats between provinces and cities, facilitating the convergence of Russia's and China's positions on major global and regional security issues.<sup>5</sup>

Russia has cultivated a reliable alignment with China that can survive exogenous shocks. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent crisis in Russia's relations with the West did not undermine this alignment. Xi has confirmed in direct conversations with Putin that "since the beginning of this [2022] year, bilateral relations have maintained a sound development momentum in the face of global turbulence and transformations" and that "the Chinese side stands ready to work with the Russian side to push for steady

and long-term development of practical bilateral cooperation," while pushing for "a proper settlement of the Ukraine crisis in a responsible manner."<sup>6</sup> China-Russia alignment is believed to have the potential to become an alliance.<sup>7</sup>

## Southeast Asia/South China Sea Region

Russia's use of diplomatic instruments in the region is more subtle than just backing China's geopolitical ambitions. Moscow understands that unequivocally siding with China in the Indo-Pacific, while logical from the systemic balancing standpoint, would

antagonize many Southeast Asian states and jeopardize Russia's participation in the regional multilateral structures, which Moscow cannot afford.

Indicative in this regard is Russia's position on the SCS dispute. Moscow never openly criticized China or publicly questioned China's nine-dash line. It also opposed the internationalization (i.e., greater involvement of the US) of the SCS dispute. However, Moscow does not unequivocally support anyone's, including China's, territorial claims.

### **Russia has strengthened its strategic cooperation with some Southeast Asian states despite its alignment with China.**

Putin's carefully crafted comments on the 2016 Hague Tribunal's ruling on the SCS indicated that Moscow supported China's decision not to recognize the ruling (because China did not participate and did not express its position in the Court) but not China's historical rights in the SCS.<sup>8</sup> This is also a form of support for China but only insofar as it does not spread to China's tensions with other disputants.

This hedging approach pays off. Russia has strengthened its strategic cooperation with some Southeast Asian states despite its alignment with China. Vietnam has been consistently helping Russia establish connections with ASEAN and played a

notable role in supporting Russia's presence in the major regional economic and security institutions, including the ASEAN Regional Forum, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the East Asia Summit, and the Asia-Europe Meeting.

When the US-China rivalry intensified during the COVID-19 global pandemic, Putin hosted a state visit by Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan Phuc on November 30, 2021 to consolidate the bilateral comprehensive strategic partnership. Both sides pledged to deepen cooperation in defense and security by broadening bilateral contacts and strengthening cooperation in military personnel training.<sup>9</sup> For Russia, developing regional ties, like with Vietnam (an economic heavyweight within ASEAN), helps diversify its economic and military export portfolio.

On June 20, 2024, in the third year of Russia's war effort in Ukraine, Vietnamese President To Lam welcomed Putin in Hanoi and announced that Putin has "contributed to peace, stability, and development in the Asia-Pacific region and the world" and that the two countries intended "to push up" defense and security cooperation.<sup>10</sup> The two leaders signed over a dozen bilateral cooperation agreements and discussed creating "a reliable security architecture in the Asia-Pacific," expressing "identical or very close" positions on key international issues.<sup>11</sup> The strengthening of bilateral ties with Indo-Pacific states indicates the availability of hedging room for Russia in the Indo-Pacific.



## India

The Russia-India strategic partnership, built on historical ties and mutual trust, was elevated to a “Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership” in December 2010.<sup>12</sup> Russia has consistently supported India’s bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) during various high-level meetings and summits, including the 77th UN General Assembly in 2022, the 13th meeting of the India-Russia Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism Cooperation in 2024, and various other high-level meetings.<sup>13</sup>

Russia also supports India within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS, G20, International Energy Agency, and other organizations, coordinating its positions with New Delhi, further reinforcing the bilateral strategic partnership. Moscow actively facilitated India’s membership in the SCO, which India achieved in 2017. Within BRICS, Russia supported India’s initiatives to enhance economic cooperation, including using national currencies in bilateral trade and introducing alternative payment platforms bypassing SWIFT.<sup>14</sup> During the 22nd India-Russia Annual Summit in July 2024, Moscow and New Delhi announced the deepening of their partnership after Putin conferred Russia’s highest civilian honor—Order of Saint Andrew the Apostle—on Prime Minister Modi for his contributions to the relationship.<sup>15</sup>

India has maintained a neutral stance on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, abstaining from voting on several UN resolutions condemning Russia’s actions. India supported Moscow

by effectively thwarting the Western energy embargo against Russia: it increased imports of Russian oil, implemented alternative payment mechanisms, continued trade relations and strategic energy projects, and played a key role in processing Russian crude, which is then exported to other countries, including those in the West.<sup>16</sup>

**India supported Moscow by effectively thwarting the Western energy embargo against Russia.**

In 2024, Prime Minister Modi visited Russia twice (in July and October), reaffirming the importance of the bilateral relationship. During his visits, Modi appreciated his “dear friend” Putin’s commitment to the Russia-India relationship, which “has been tested multiple times and has emerged very strong each time.”<sup>17</sup> Some experts and officials suggested that one of Modi’s priorities during the visits was to secure Russian investments and move some defense production to India.<sup>18</sup>

India will remain Russia’s reliable partner in the Indo-Pacific. While New Delhi’s concerns about China incentivize alignment with the US, India is not interested in antagonizing China beyond the point of no return, which stymies alliance with Washington. Unlike an alliance with the US, a closer partnership with Russia creates new channels for engaging China and helps mitigate potential risks of escalation between China and India. Moscow

benefits from these multilayered geopolitical pressures on India because they enhance Russia's autonomy vis-à-vis China.

## Korean Peninsula

The importance of the Korean Peninsula for Russia increased in the context of Moscow's "reorientation to Asia" in the 2010s. Before Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, South Korea was one of the largest markets for Russian hydrocarbons and a leading trade partner for Russia's Far Eastern Federal District. Russia also occupied an important place in South Korea's regional initiatives, such as the "Eurasian initiative," which sought to increase connectivity across Eurasia to resolve South Korea's major geopolitical obstacle—isolationist North Korea.<sup>19</sup> However, Russia-South Korea cooperation has deteriorated since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Seoul joined the international community in imposing sanctions against Russia, to which Russia retaliated with steps to reduce Moscow's economic and diplomatic engagement with South Korea.

In contrast, Russia's relations with North Korea developed significantly. Russia-North Korea relations showed noticeable improvement in 2015 when multiple agreements to expand economic ties were signed. The Kim-Putin summit in April 2019 marked a new phase in the relationship, highlighting Russia's interest in becoming more involved in Korean Peninsula Affairs. Putin emphasized the importance of international security guarantees for North Korea, providing Pyongyang with an alternative diplomatic

partner and reducing its isolation.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russia-North Korea relations have expanded dramatically. On June 18, 2024, the two countries signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, which underscores their commitment to mutual support in the face of international sanctions and includes a mutual assistance clause (Article 4 of the treaty), indicating that if either country falls into a state of war by an armed invasion, the other will provide military and other assistance with all means at its disposal without delay.<sup>20</sup> The China-Russia strategic partnership treaty does not have a similar mutual assistance clause. Growing economic and diplomatic interactions between Russia and North Korea have allegedly led to some economic recovery in North Korea.<sup>21</sup>

Russia also facilitated the unprecedented participation of North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui in a BRICS event in Saint Petersburg in September 2024, which has been viewed as Moscow's commitment to an alliance with North Korea and a notable shift in North Korea's foreign policy from isolationism to greater engagement with multilateral institutions.<sup>22</sup> It allegedly indicated North Korea's intention to join BRICS in the future.<sup>23</sup> These developments indicate that Russia has leveraged its diplomatic instruments to strengthen its relationship with North Korea, which resulted in a deepening strategic alignment between the two countries.

# The Military Instrument

Russia has achieved security gains through its systemic balancing and regional hedging. The relationship with China has reached a near-alliance condition in terms of military-technical cooperation (MTC) and interoperability of forces. However, Russia has not abandoned—and even advanced—its military-strategic cooperation with India, Vietnam, North Korea, and other countries, mitigating its dependence on China. According to some assessments, before Russia invaded Ukraine, the Indo-Pacific accounted for over 60% of Russia's total arms sales.<sup>24</sup> Indo-Pacific states purchased weapons from Russia to enhance their defense capabilities against China.

## China

China-Russia military cooperation has grown steadily stronger since the end of the Cold War. In the 1990s, China-Russia military-technical exchanges helped China to leapfrog over many early stages of military-technological modernization and alleviated the impact of the Western arms embargo. Projects like the “Su-27 project” in the 1990s, when China's Shenyang Aircraft Corporation procured a license to assemble 200 Russian supermaneuverable Su-27 jet fighters, helped China obtain critical military technologies and expertise, which were subsequently exploited for the development of Chinese weapons systems.<sup>25</sup>

By 2005, technology transfers and joint ventures amounted to 30% of the overall transfers of Russian military equipment to China, making China Russia's “privileged partner” in MTC. In the 2010s, China-Russia MTC included four major categories: (1) aerospace engines—an area where China remains dependent on Russia; (2) export to China and maintenance of Russia's S-400 “Triumf” (Triumph) anti-aircraft weapon systems; (3) China's purchase of Russian Su-35 supermaneuverable fighter jets for patrolling South China Sea; and (4) China importing Mi-171 medium-lift helicopters necessary for PLA ground forces' air mobility.<sup>26</sup>

**Before Russia invaded Ukraine, the Indo-Pacific accounted for over 60% of Russia's total arms sales.**

After 2014, Russia started to consider China as not only a market but also a provider of critical items for Russian arms, increasing bilateral interdependence. Moscow's caution about relying on China in this area largely disappeared. Russian officials stated: “The level of our relations [in MTC] demonstrates that we do not have unsolvable problems.”<sup>27</sup> In 2019, Putin announced that Russia had been helping China create a missile attack early warning radar system that would enhance China's defense capability and facilitate the formation of a China-Russia common defense policy.<sup>28</sup> As Russia's (and China's) relations with the West deteriorated, the political



The US Coast Guard located four vessels from the Russian Border Guard and Chinese Coast Guard conducting a joint patrol in the Bering Sea. The vessels were transiting in formation in a northeast direction, remaining approximately five miles inside the Russian Exclusive Economic Zone. This marked the northernmost location where Chinese Coast Guard vessels have been observed by the US Coast Guard, October 1, 2024. (US Coast Guard)

factors that used to constrain Russia's MTC with China have largely disappeared.

Russia and China have also developed a system of regular military exercises, including "Peace Mission" (since 2005), "Joint Sea" (since 2012), "Aerospace Security" (since 2016), and various other exercises, with the total number of joint military drills exceeding five annually. Experts agree that compatibility and interoperability between Chinese and Russian forces have been growing as multiple exercises in different parts of the world involved joint command centers, tactical groups under a single command, or air groups implementing attacks jointly, laying the foundation for potential simultaneous joint naval activity in multiple operation theaters.<sup>29</sup> China-Russia military cooperation further

consolidated after the war in Ukraine and China's increased military activity in the Indo-Pacific. In July 2024, Russian and Chinese bombers were intercepted near Alaska, marking the first time the two countries' bombers had flown together in the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone.<sup>30</sup> On October 2, 2024, China and Russia carried out joint Coast Guard patrols in the Arctic Ocean, marking the first time that a Chinese Coast Guard ship entered the Arctic Ocean and, according to the US Coast Guard, the "northernmost location where the US Coast Guard has observed Chinese Coast Guard vessels."<sup>31</sup> These advancements in China-Russia cooperation demonstrate that Russia is willing to enhance military cooperation with China while China is not turning its back on Moscow.

## Southeast Asia/South China Sea Region

While Russia aligns with China to balance against the US, from the standpoint of regional hedging, Russia needs a more diverse portfolio of partners. Thus, expanding cooperation with Southeast Asian states is one of Moscow's strategic priorities. The Southeast Asian states view Russia as a valuable counterbalance to China's and the US's influence and approach Moscow with strategic pragmatism. Russia has engaged in various defense cooperation initiatives with Southeast Asian states to demonstrate its military capabilities and strengthen ties. While the war in Ukraine has complicated Russia's relations with the region, Moscow's military presence and activities remained significant and even increased in some instances.

Russia has been a significant arms supplier to Southeast Asia. From 2004 to 2023, Southeast Asian countries spent over \$42 billion on weapons, with Russia as the largest supplier covering 25% of the Southeast Asian arms market.<sup>32</sup> Vietnam and Myanmar have been the region's most important customers for Russian arms, acquiring various military equipment, including aircraft, naval vessels, and missile systems. Indonesia, Malaysia, Laos, and Thailand also purchased various weapons from Russia.<sup>33</sup> The introduction of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) by the US in 2017 and the war in Ukraine have impacted Russia's arms sales in the region, straining supply chains and increasing maintenance

costs. However, Russia continues to engage in defense cooperation and arms sales effectively.

**Vietnam and Myanmar have been the region's most important customers for Russian arms, acquiring various military equipment, including aircraft, naval vessels, and missile systems.**

Russia's naval activities in Southeast Asia also expanded over the last two decades. Between 2010 and 2020, Russia conducted multiple joint military exercises with ASEAN member states. It made 47 port calls to nine countries, including Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, demonstrating its capacity to project military presence in the region.<sup>34</sup> The first-ever Russia-ASEAN Naval Exercise (ARNEX) occurred in December 2021 in the Java Sea. The inaugural exercise involved ships from Russia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, and Myanmar. The activities included joint maneuvering, communication drills, search and rescue operations, and training boarding intruder ships—all aimed to enhance maritime security cooperation and interoperability among the participating navies.<sup>35</sup>





Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and his Vietnamese counterpart Pham Minh Chinh attend an official welcoming ceremony in Hanoi, Vietnam January 14, 2025. Sputnik/Dmitry Astakhov/Pool via REUTERS

Vietnam stands out as Russia's primary security partner in Southeast Asia. In July 2012, Russia and Vietnam signed the Joint Statement on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Intensification, which elevated their bilateral relations to a "comprehensive strategic partnership." To protect Russia-Vietnam energy projects in the SCS, Russia regained access to the naval base in Cam Ranh Bay and has been helping Vietnam build a submarine base and repair dockyards there. Russia can station at Cam Ranh Bay the IL-78 tanker aircraft used for refueling TU-95 nuclear strategic bombers.<sup>36</sup>

Vietnam is also one of the major customers of Russian weapons, primarily planes and submarines. Over the years, Vietnam's purchases from Russia included advanced

Kilo-class submarines, new Sukhoi Su-30MK2 multirole fighter aircraft, Gepard-3 frigates, and K-300 Bastion-P or SS-C-5 Stooze coastal defense anti-ship cruise missiles that are intended to be deployed to protect Vietnamese interests in the South China Sea. According to some reports, security issues and arms trade were the primary reason for Putin's visit to Hanoi in 2024, even though the media focused mainly on economic cooperation.<sup>37</sup>

Russia has also been working to strengthen its military ties with Indonesia. Recent reports suggest that Russia is interested in establishing an air base in Indonesia's Papua province as part of Russia's broader strategy to expand its defense presence in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>38</sup> While Indonesia has denied any

formal agreement to host Russian aircraft, the two countries have consistently deepened their military cooperation. This includes the first-ever bilateral naval exercise in the Java Sea near Surabaya in November 2024 and a discussion of defense technology and arms sales.<sup>39</sup> Strengthening military ties with Indonesia allows Russia to enhance its presence and influence in the area, counterbalancing other regional alliances such as AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).

## India

Russia has consistently been the primary source of military technologies and weapons platforms for India, such as nuclear submarines, aircraft carriers, tanks, guns, fighter jets, and missiles, accounting for more than 65% of Indian arms imports for more than two decades, which makes Russia India's largest arms supplier which dwarfed even imports from India's alleged ally—the US.<sup>40</sup> Some assessments say reducing India's reliance on the Russian arms industry would take decades.<sup>41</sup>

Russia has been India's long-standing partner (since the 1960s) in developing advanced weapon technologies. Examples include India's collaboration with Russia's Rubin Central Design Bureau for Marine Engineering on the development of India's first nuclear ballistic missile submarine, INS Arihant, and the coproduction by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited of Russian MiG-21, MiG-23/27, MiG-29, and Su-30 fighter jets. India also relies on Russia for spare parts and upgrades for

a disproportionate segment of its armory.<sup>42</sup> Indian purchases of Russian systems like the S-400 long-range surface-to-air missile system and leases of Russian nuclear submarines contributed to the “rough stasis” in the US-India MTC.<sup>43</sup> Washington had been warning India about possible sanctions under CAATSA due to India's acquisition of Russia's S-400.

**India has more tri-service and air force exercises with Russia than it does with the US, which shows that Russia has used its military instruments effectively to slow down India-US strategic alignment.**

Russia has also engaged extensively with India through regular joint military exercises. Between 2012 and 2020, the two countries conducted 16 large-scale joint military exercises in India, Russia, the Arabian Sea, the Sea of Japan, the Bay of Bengal, and the Andaman Sea. Major exercises included regular INDRA, Avia Indra, and various smaller-scale exercises. India has more tri-service and air force exercises with Russia than it does with the US, which shows that Russia has used its military instruments effectively to slow down India-US strategic alignment.

Geopolitical circumstances have been conducive to that. Russia has been utilizing India's reluctance to become China's

enemy and declining confidence in US global leadership, which hinders the US-India alliance. An Indian Naval Chief stated regarding military cooperation with the US: “What do you think a military dimension will achieve? India is the only country in the Quad with a land border with China. In case of conflict, nobody will come and hold your hand.”<sup>44</sup>

Russia-India MTC has continued despite Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The work on the joint BrahMos hypersonic missile project continued, with India successfully testing an updated version from a Sukhoi fighter jet in May 2022.<sup>45</sup> MTC with Russia and Russia-manufactured spare parts is necessary to maintain Indian military readiness in the context of intensifying China-India rivalry. Simultaneously, Moscow's strong relations with both China and India put Russia in an advantageous geopolitical position, making it strategically valuable for India beyond military cooperation.

## Korean Peninsula

Before the war in Ukraine, Russia's military policies toward the Korean Peninsula were characterized by cautious engagement. Constrained by international sanctions and diplomatic considerations, Russia maintained limited direct military cooperation with North Korea, primarily focusing on conventional weapons rather than advanced military technology. Russia aimed to balance its relations with North and South Korea, maintaining strategic distance to avoid

antagonizing other regional players and the international community. This approach served Russia's broader geopolitical strategy in East Asia, aimed at diversifying its regional cooperation portfolio.

**The relationship between the two countries has grown closer, with Russia providing military technology and support and North Korea supplying munitions to Russia for its war effort in Ukraine.**

After the war in Ukraine, Russia significantly deepened its military cooperation with North Korea to the level of a military alliance. Moscow has supplied North Korea with advanced military equipment, including air defense systems and missile technology, which enhance North Korea's defense capabilities.<sup>46</sup> Russia has also been involved in providing military training and support to North Korean forces through joint exercises and training programs aimed at improving the operational capabilities of North Korean military personnel. The relationship between the two countries has grown closer, with Russia providing military technology and support and North Korea supplying munitions to Russia for its war effort in Ukraine. Russia provided diplomatic support on the international stage, advocating for North Korea in international forums and opposing additional sanctions.





Russian President Vladimir Putin's top security adviser Sergei Shoigu disembarks a plane as he arrives in North Korea, in this photo released by North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency March 21, 2025. (KCNA via REUTERS)

North Korea has allegedly become a crucial supplier of munitions to Russia. Over 18 months, North Korea reportedly sent more than 15,000 containers of munitions to Russia, including millions of artillery rounds.<sup>47</sup> Reportedly, North Korean troops have also been deployed to assist Russian forces. Some reports indicate that thousands of North Korean soldiers have fought alongside Russian troops, particularly in the Kursk region.<sup>48</sup> North Korea has expressed unconditional support for Russia's actions in Ukraine. These deployments have provided Russia with additional manpower to bolster its defensive and offensive capabilities.

There are significant concerns about Russia potentially sharing nuclear technologies with North Korea as part of their deepening alliance. North Korea has reportedly sought

advanced military technologies from Russia, including nuclear submarine technologies and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) advancements.<sup>49</sup> Some reports suggest that Russia might provide technical assistance to North Korea's missile and nuclear weapons program, which could include sharing advanced designs for warheads, enhancing missile delivery systems, developing submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and ICBMs that could significantly enhance North Korea's second-strike capability and overall deterrence potential.<sup>50</sup> This collaboration can transform the power balance in the broader Indo-Pacific and beyond, increasing tensions with countries like South Korea, Japan, and the US while making the Russia-North Korea alliance an important factor in regional and global security dynamics.

# The Economic Instrument

Russia has employed various economic strategies to enhance its influence in the Indo-Pacific. It has leveraged its vast energy resources, particularly oil and natural gas, to build economic ties with the countries in the region. Moscow increased energy exports to China and India and showed interest in participating in infrastructure projects in countries like Vietnam and Indonesia. It has also sought to deepen trade, investments, and technological cooperation through bilateral agreements and participation in regional organizations like the ASEAN-Russia Summit. After the start of the 2022 war in Ukraine, this economic cooperation served the primary goal of circumventing Western sanctions and offsetting the loss of European markets.

## China

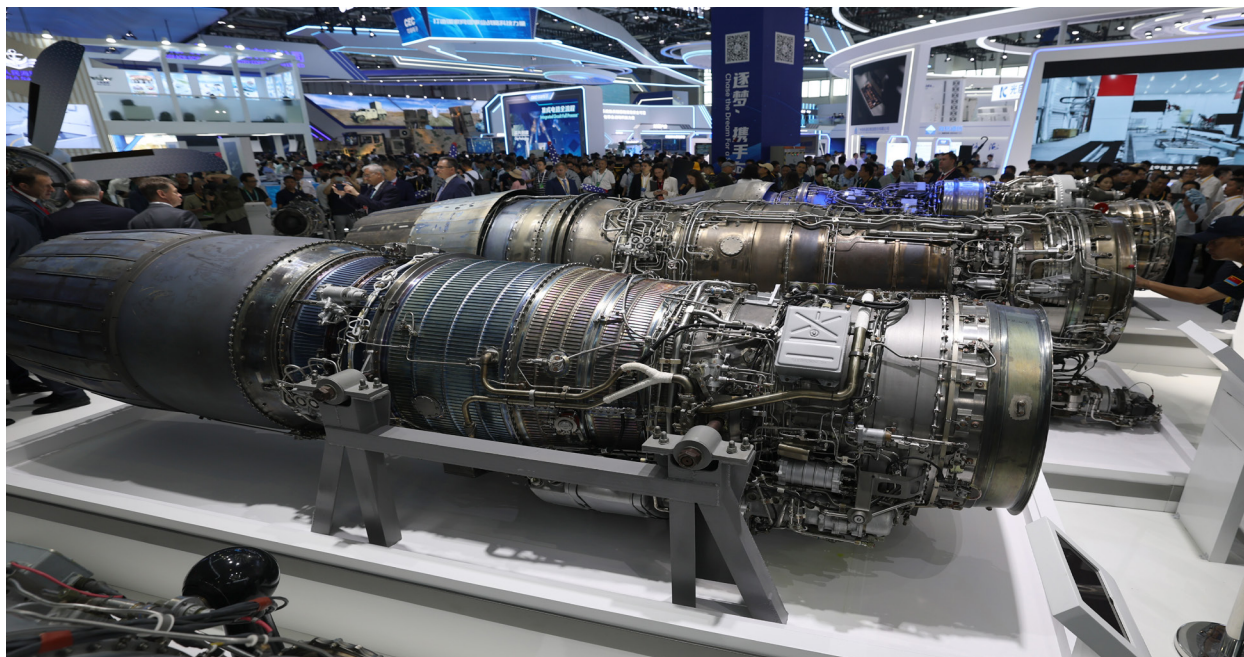
China is Russia's most important economic partner, particularly after the war in Ukraine began. Russia has used its economic instruments to strengthen its relations with China in several ways. Moscow has significantly increased its energy exports to China, particularly in oil and gas, which has been crucial for Russia after facing Western sanctions. Russia has also collaborated with China to develop transportation corridors, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The two countries have signed numerous trade agreements covering various sectors (e.g., agriculture, technology, and finance) to

expand economic cooperation. Russia has also turned to Chinese financial institutions for investment and banking services, which include using the Chinese yuan for trade settlements. The two countries have also established joint ventures in various industries, including energy, technology, and manufacturing.

**Russia's imports of Chinese technology and electronics have surged, particularly in areas like smartphones, laptops, and integrated circuits, which are crucial for Russia's military and technological sectors.**

The logic of comparative advantages—the difference between the two countries' economic models, with Russia being one of the major providers, whereas China is the major consumer of natural resources—suggests a propitious complementarity of economies conducive to closer alignment. Their bilateral trade has surged, reaching \$190 billion in 2022 (29% increase from 2021) and \$218.2 billion in 2023, achieving the goal set by the two countries for 2024.<sup>51</sup> Russia's imports of Chinese technology and electronics have surged, particularly in areas like smartphones, laptops, and integrated circuits, which are crucial for Russia's military and technological sectors. These included high-priority items such as field programmable gate arrays (FPGAs), microcontrollers, and AI





Russia's RD-93MA engine (bottom) and AL-31FN engine (top) are on display on day 2 of the 15th China International Aviation and Aerospace Exhibition, or Airshow China 2024, on November 13, 2024 in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province of China. (Fu Tian/China News Service/VCG)

modules essential for Russia's production of advanced weapon systems, including drones and missiles.<sup>52</sup> Many of these systems are reportedly produced by Western companies and are often reexported by Chinese companies to Russia, bypassing Western trade restrictions.<sup>53</sup> Chinese automotive exports to Russia, including cars, trucks, and automotive parts, have grown substantially, with Chinese brands capturing a significant share of the Russian market.

Simultaneously, China and Russia have tried to diversify the structure of their economic cooperation beyond natural resources, which Russia has always wanted. Russia persuaded China to pay attention to its economic interests in the context of longer-term strategic alignment. The new joint projects included nuclear energy, high-speed rail,

aviation, and technology. In 2014, Moscow and Beijing signed multiple non-energy contracts and projects, including the joint design and production of a wide-body civilian aircraft, a foreign-exchange swap of 150 billion RMB between the Chinese and Russian central banks, cooperation in manufacturing jet engines using Russian technologies, new joint R&D in the development of satellite navigation system, and other projects in agriculture, space exploration, education, and medical care.<sup>54</sup>

On September 2, 2016, in his press conference at G20 Summit in Hanzhou, China, Putin emphasized that "the structure of our bilateral trade is improving due to the growing export of Russian machinery and other advanced products to the Chinese market and due to growing number of joint high-tech

projects” which is, according to Putin, “much more important than the absolute figures of trade turnover.”<sup>55</sup> Donald Trump’s tariff wars against China will likely make Beijing more responsive to Russia’s economic concerns.

## Southeast Asia/South China Sea Region

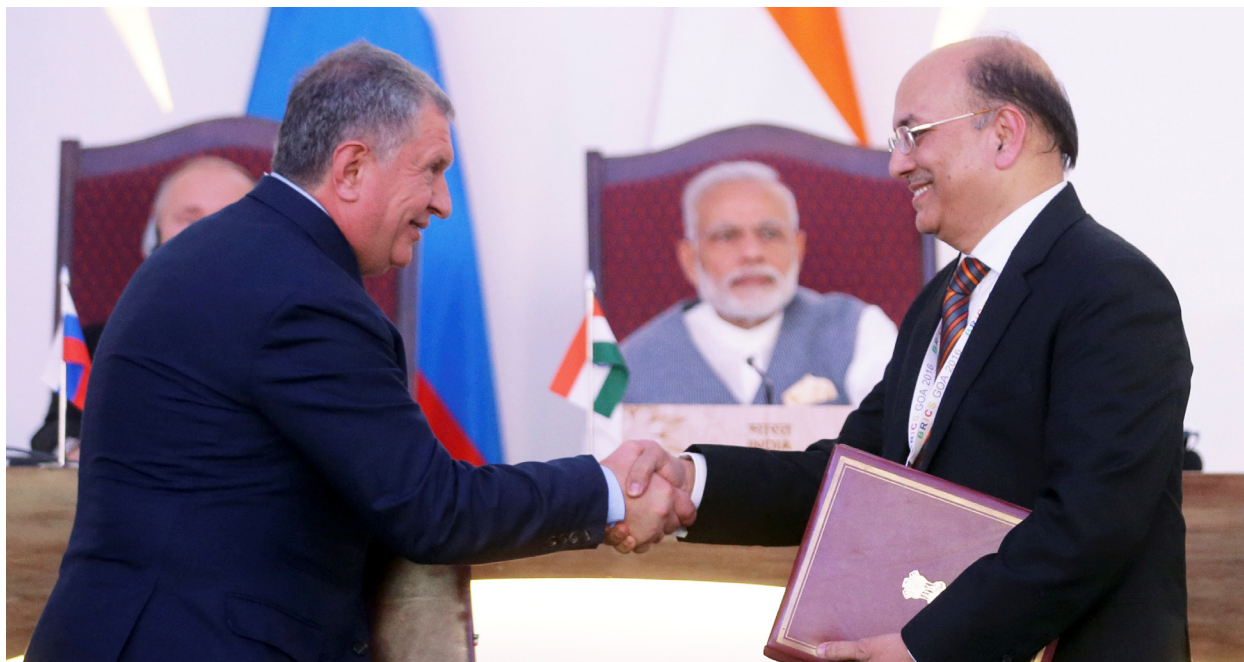
Russia has utilized several economic instruments to strengthen its relationship with Southeast Asian states, focusing on key areas such as energy, trade, and technology. Vietnam is Russia’s largest trade partner in Southeast Asia. Before Russia invaded Ukraine, Moscow’s trade with Hanoi grew consistently by approximately 20% annually since 2010. In 2015, when, due to Western sanctions, Russia’s trade with almost all countries dropped significantly, Russia-Vietnam trade increased by 31%.<sup>56</sup>

Russia has recently signed agreements with Vietnam to enhance cooperation in nuclear power generation, which include a recent deal between Rosatom, Russia’s state-owned nuclear energy company, and EVN, Vietnam’s state-owned power utility, to restart Vietnam’s civilian nuclear program.<sup>57</sup> This partnership aims to help Vietnam meet its growing energy needs, enhance its energy security, and facilitate Vietnam’s plans for the development of the national electrical power industry. Russia and Vietnam have also signed agreements to cooperate in the digital economy and wireless communications.

In 2012, Russia’s Gazprom signed a deal with the state-owned PetroVietnam to develop two large-scale gas projects on Vietnam’s continental shelf in the parts of the SCS that fall under the nine-dash line. Subsequently, Moscow and Hanoi agreed to extend this energy partnership through 2030.<sup>58</sup> Vietnam was the first Southeast Asian state to sign a free-trade agreement with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in July 2016. When hosting Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan Phuc in Moscow on November 30, 2021, Putin announced that despite the COVID-19 pandemic, trade between Russia and Vietnam increased by more than 15% in 2020 and more than 16% in the first nine months of 2021.<sup>59</sup> In 2024, Russia expressed its willingness to supply liquefied natural gas (LNG) and oil to Vietnam, which is critical for Vietnam’s long-term energy planning.<sup>60</sup>

**In 2015, when, due to Western sanctions, Russia’s trade with almost all countries dropped significantly, Russia-Vietnam trade increased by 31%.**

Russia’s broader interests in cooperation with ASEAN member states are evidenced by the Russian Railway’s involvement in constructing the 240 km-long West Kutai Balikpapan coal railway system and other investments in Indonesia’s East Kalimantan. Although progress has been mixed, these projects highlight Russia’s intentions to invest in Indonesia’s infrastructure. Russian investors are also considering investments in



Igor Sechin (L), chief executive of Russia's top oil producer Rosneft, and Narendra Verma, managing director of ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL), attend an exchange of agreements event after the India-Russia Annual Summit in Bhaulim, in the western state of Goa, India, October 15, 2016. Sputnik/Kremlin/Mikhail Metzel via REUTERS

Indonesia's Danantara sovereign wealth fund, focusing on the mining and energy sector, including potential projects in small modular reactors and renewable energy. Russia's other investment proposals include a \$13.8 billion agreement between Pertamina and Rosneft for the Tuban oil refinery and a \$2.8 billion power plant project by Russian firm Inter RAO.<sup>61</sup>

Since the onset of the war in Ukraine in 2022, Russia's economic relations with Southeast Asian states have faced several challenges. Western sanctions have significantly impacted Russia's trade and investment, particularly the execution of large-scale projects, forcing Moscow's partners to seek alternative partnerships. Some planned or ongoing projects involving Russian companies have faced delays or reassessments. However, the Southeast Asian states have largely

maintained a neutral position regarding the conflict, emphasizing flexibility and continuing to seek investment opportunities with Russia.

## India

Strategic partnership with India helps Russia diversify its economic and security stakes in the Indo-Pacific. Russia has strategically used its economic instruments to strengthen its relationship with India, focusing on key areas such as energy trade, defense cooperation, investment and infrastructure, fertilizer and agricultural trade, and technological cooperation.<sup>62</sup> The acquisition of India's Essar Oil Ltd for almost \$13 billion by a consortium led by Rosneft in August 2017 was the largest outbound investment from Russia and the most significant foreign direct investment



in India.<sup>63</sup> Also, Russia's Rosatom has been involved (since 2007) in building multiple units of a civilian nuclear power plant in Kudankulam. In 2015, Vladimir Putin and Narendra Modi agreed to expand Russian investment in India's nuclear energy sector, intending to double the number of civilian nuclear plants that Russia had previously agreed to build in India.<sup>64</sup> In 2022, Modi and Putin further agreed to expand India-Russia scientific ties, especially in fields related to energy and environment, despite Ukraine.<sup>65</sup>

### **Indian purchases of Russian crude have largely made up for the decrease in demand from Europe.**

India continued cooperating with Russia through platforms like the India-Russia Investment and Trade Forum, the India-Russia Chamber of Commerce, the India-Russia Inter-Governmental Joint Economic Commission, and the Russia-India-Business Council to enhance trade and investment. On March 23, 2022, the President of the Federation of India Export Organisations, A. Sakthivel, announced a rupee-ruble trade arrangement with Russia to allow the bilateral trade to continue despite the Western sanctions.<sup>66</sup> On July 11, 2022, the Reserve Bank of India announced measures to settle trade in rupees, allowing invoicing, payment, and settlement of exports/imports. Thus, authorized banks in India can open rupee Vostro accounts on behalf of a foreign bank from a partner trading country.<sup>67</sup> According to some assessments, this measure

has alleviated the disruption caused by Russia's financial isolation.<sup>68</sup>

Simultaneously, the share of Russian oil in India's imports soared in 2023, reaching 40% of Indian oil imports and consolidating Moscow's position as the top supplier.<sup>69</sup> India's state-run Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC) has participated in extracting oil and gas off Sakhalin in the Pacific and invested in a planned LNG facility near Saint Petersburg and in natural gas fields in Eastern Siberia and the Arctic.<sup>70</sup> Indian purchases of Russian crude have largely made up for the decrease in demand from Europe, as have Indian exports of diesel and other refined oil products to European buyers who, while being wary of purchasing oil directly from Russia, appeared willing to buy it after it has been refined in India.<sup>71</sup> Based on existing trade data, in the financial year of 2022–23, Russia became India's seventh-largest trading partner, up from the 25th position in the previous year (2021–2022), reaching a record high of US\$18.23 billion.<sup>72</sup>

Russia's exports of fertilizers to India have grown substantially, increasing from around \$600 million to \$3 billion in 2022–2023, helping India meet its agricultural needs and stabilize its food production. Both countries have also agreed to cooperate in various technological fields, including digital economy and wireless communication.

In April 2025, during the eighth Russia-India Working Group session in New Delhi, Russia and India agreed on six new strategic projects to boost bilateral investment cooperation, highlighting both sides' commitment to

deepen economic ties across various sectors. These six key areas of focus include: (1) energy collaboration, including oils and gas exploration, renewable energy, and nuclear power; (2) technological innovation, particularly in the fields of digital economy, cybersecurity, and advanced manufacturing; (3) infrastructure development; (4) trade and commerce; (5) agricultural cooperation; and (6) cultural and educational exchanges.<sup>73</sup>

India has contributed significantly to Russia's attempts to shift toward non-Western markets to compensate for the loss of European markets while helping Russia diversify its economic and security bets in the Indo-Pacific region.

## Korean Peninsula

After Moscow announced the “reorientation to Asia” strategy in the early 2010s, Russia has been involved in energy projects to connect the Korean Peninsula and Russia's Far East. Discussions occurred about potential gas pipelines and electricity grids, which could provide North and South Korea with energy resources.<sup>74</sup> Russia maintained trade relations with both Koreas, although the nature of these relationships differed: with North Korea, Russia provided essential goods and services, helping to alleviate the impact of international sanctions, whereas with South Korea, Russia engaged in more diversified trade, including technology and industrial goods.

**North Korea has become an ally of Russia, providing munitions and military support in exchange for hard currency and advanced weaponry.**

The war in Ukraine has significantly altered Russia's economic influence on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea has become an ally of Russia, providing munitions and military support in exchange for hard currency and advanced weaponry. This situation has generated substantial economic benefits for North Korea, estimated at over \$20 billion.<sup>75</sup> South Korea, in turn, joined the international sanctions regime against Russia, which has affected its business operations in Russia. South Korean companies, particularly in the shipbuilding sector, have faced significant losses due to canceled contracts.<sup>76</sup> The sanctions have also disrupted traditional trade routes and economic partnerships, forcing Russia to seek new markets and partners, while South Korea has had to navigate the economic fallout from its sanctions on Russia.<sup>77</sup>

The strategic partnership agreement that Russia and North Korea signed in 2024 strengthens the two countries' military and economic ties. The Ukraine war has led to a deepening of trade relations between the two countries, with North Korea supplying artillery shells and other military equipment to Russia and Moscow compensating primarily through in-kind and technical assistance rather than direct cash payments.<sup>78</sup>



Though Russia cannot compete with China in trade relations with North Korea, it enhances its geopolitical influence in East Asia by strengthening its ties with North Korea. Judging by North Korea's behavior, Russia has secured a strategic ally on the Korean Peninsula that contributes to its war efforts in Ukraine, helps circumvent international isolation, and facilitates regional hedging.

## The View from Beijing

The analysis so far invites the question of whether Russia's hedging behaviour involving India, Vietnam, North Korea, and other states comes at the cost of Moscow's alignment with China and how a major power (Russia) can continue developing strategic alignment with another major power (China) while simultaneously enhancing strategic cooperation with that power's regional rivals.

China is undoubtedly concerned about Russia's behavior. While Beijing did not officially comment on Russia's recent inroads into the Indo-Pacific, Chinese experts have expressed concerns about Russia's behavior. Specifically, strengthening Russia-Vietnam ties, particularly military cooperation, has been seen as a potential challenge to China's influence in the region because it can affect the regional balance of power and Beijing's broader strategic calculations.<sup>79</sup> The same applies to Russia's "privileged partnership" with India.

However, Russia has not faced and is unlikely to face pressure from China regarding its

hedging policies. Beijing understands that a termination or decline of Russia's engagement would lead these countries to shift from their own hedging policy (i.e., diversifying security and military relations) to a stronger tilt toward the US, which is not in Beijing's interests. To put it bluntly, Beijing prefers Russia to the US.

**Beijing's quiet acceptance of Russia's strategic engagement with its rivals is explained by growing recognition that China and the US are on a long-term collision course.**

More broadly, Beijing's quiet acceptance of Russia's strategic engagement with its rivals is explained by growing recognition that China and the US are on a long-term collision course. Facing China as a long-term strategic adversary, the US attempts to maintain its still-existing power advantage by containing the challenger. China, strong but still weaker than the US, is incentivized to respond by enhancing its military capabilities and cooperation with other powers (Russia particularly) to deal with the US containment more effectively. The return of Trump to power in Washington and the subsequent tariff war with China only exacerbate these tendencies, creating a situation in which China will need Russia the same way Russia needed China throughout the Ukraine war—as the only great power ally in the context of intensifying confrontation with the US.

These structural circumstances are amplified by the US policies toward China, which explicitly identify China as a major adversary, and Beijing's reaction to those policies. This action-reaction process contributes to a situation in which Beijing views the US as the greatest national security threat and the primary focus of China's defense policy. Moreover, after Russia invaded Ukraine, the US appears to have ramped up its backing of Taiwan, which included high-profile arms sales and visits by US officials to Taipei that flew in the face of Washington's earlier attempts to persuade Beijing to put pressure on Russia to stop the war.

**A factor that looms large in the background is Western hypocrisy around India—not making any noises about India's stance toward Russia while mounting significant political pressure on China.**

Another factor that looms large in the background is Western hypocrisy around India—not making any noises about India's stance toward Russia while mounting significant political pressure on China. India never condemned Russia for the invasion of Ukraine and de facto supported Russia even more openly than China. However, New Delhi has not been officially criticized. Quite the opposite, the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and the US) has tolerated India's position on Ukraine by highlighting that “each country

has a bilateral relationship,” which is why “no one has ever accused India of supporting what is going on in Ukraine.”<sup>80</sup> From China's perspective, the US's criticism of Beijing's stance toward Russia and the war in Ukraine is not about whether China supports Russia. It is about containing China. This situation generates a perception in Beijing that, without a strong Russia standing with China, the US and its allies taking on China is only a matter of time.

As to Russia-North Korea relations, it is most likely that the recent progress has been greenlighted, if not facilitated, by Beijing. While there is no clear evidence that China explicitly approves the deepening of Russia-North Korea relations, analysts suggest that any major strategic moves by North Korea, including deepening relations with Russia, would likely require at least tacit approval from Beijing.<sup>81</sup> Also, such a significant geopolitical move by Moscow would have to be discussed with Beijing at some level. While Russia and China do not always align their objectives, they often coordinate on major international issues to ensure their actions do not undermine each other's strategic interests.

# Conclusion

The two-level hedging-balancing model clarifies some ambivalent aspects of Russia's foreign policy toward the Indo-Pacific region. At the level of system-level balancing, China is Russia's primary strategic ally. Russia sides with China on various issues that aid Russia's pursuit of multipolarity. Because China also balances against the US, it reciprocates Russia's cooperative initiatives. However, Russia tries to hedge its regional economic and security bets by expanding cooperation with as many Asian countries as possible. It seeks to export energy, arms, agricultural products, machinery, and technologies to different Asian markets, even if doing so does not always work for China's relations with those specific countries.

**Russia's protracted war in Ukraine and the intensifying US-China rivalry increase the systemic balancing component of Russia's behavior in the Indo-Pacific**

An important aspect of this two-level model is that the amount of balancing and hedging in it is a variable rather than a constant. The further US-Russia and US-China relations deteriorate and, hence, great power rivalry intensifies, the more prominent the balancing dynamic will be, limiting the space available

for hedging. Russia's protracted war in Ukraine and the intensifying US-China rivalry increase the systemic balancing component of Russia's behavior in the Indo-Pacific.

However, as the above analysis of Russia's relations with other Indo-Pacific states demonstrates, significant room remains for hedging at the regional level. The implications of Russia's two-level strategy for the Indo-Pacific are ambivalent. While its balancing component is likely to exacerbate the great power rivalry and present a starker binary environment (China-Russia alignment against the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy), its hedging side is likely to mitigate the formation of such a bipolar configuration. Hedging is premised on and fosters structural uncertainty, delaying the transition from great power rivalry to open hostility.

Because it is easier to hedge between friendly states, Russia is not interested in an all-out confrontation between China and India or China and Vietnam and will attempt to persuade all sides to have a constructive approach toward each other. Balancing in the form of an unequivocal alliance with China at both global and regional levels is likely to do the opposite: it will accelerate the disappearance of regional uncertainty about incipient power blocks and, thus, reduce regional power diffusion, deepening a "we-them" polarization and making the regional environment more divisive. 🔥

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