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The Nuclear Dimension in Russia-China Strategic Partnership: Traditional Cooperation, Divergence in Policies and Hidden Tensions

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Introduction

The dynamics of demonstratively close and profoundly complex relations between Russia and China has been driven in the last 12 years by the transformation of the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which has since February 2022 escalated into a high-intensity conventional war, still on-going at the moment of this writing. A major upgrade in this strategic partnership was achieved during President Vladimir Putin's state visit to China on May 20-21, 2014, three months after Russia's forceful annexation of Crimea and in the midst of its military intervention in Donbas (Pei, 2014). Another major upgrade was supposed to be achieved in 2025, as President Xi Jinping attended the Victory Day parade in Moscow on May 9, and Putin reciprocated by attending the even grander parade in Beijing on September 3 (Gabuev, 2025). Demonstrations of cordial personal ties between the two leaders are used to camouflage many deep-rooted disagreements, and it is the policies pertaining to development and deployment of nuclear weapons and their use for political purposes where divergence is particularly pronounced.

During the four years long war, Russia has resorted many times to nuclear brinksmanship of various kinds, from overt threat to tests of new weapon systems, and China has been monitoring these activities with much concern, never explicitly expressing disapproval, but clearly indicating its preference for reducing the risk of escalation. The open-source information on one case when Russia came close to using nuclear weapons for rescuing its grouping of forces besieged in the Kherson region on the far side of River Dnipro in November 2022, remains scarce (Lewis, 2024). Many informed opinions concur, nevertheless, that signaling from Beijing amplified the messaging from Washington D.C. for discharging that crisis (Seddon et al., 2023). China stated clearly that it didn't want to see Russia defeated, but this position doesn't signify support for Putin's desire for a comprehensive victory, which according to some Russian experts, cannot be achieved without using nuclear weapons (Caruso & Rühlig, 2025; Freedman, 2023). Granting Russia support necessary for preventing its defeat, China is effectively distancing itself from the maximalist demands of its strategic partner, and this balanced stance inevitably sets limits to cooperation in the crucially important nuclear domain.

Strict limits to cooperation in nuclear deterrence

The solid foundation for cooperation in nuclear weapons policies is laid by the traditional Russia-China cooperation in the area of civilian nuclear power production as the Rosatom corporation was a key partner at the start of the Chinese nuclear program in the mid-1990s and contributed significantly to its fast acceleration in the second half of 2000s according to the eleventh five-year plan. Of particular importance is Rosatom's involvement in the construction and operation of the CFR-600 fast-neutron (or "breeder") reactor used for production of super-grade plutonium for nuclear weapons (Albright et al., 2025). This pattern of Russia-led cooperation isn't extended, however, to joint projects on developing nuclear warheads or delivery systems. Russian experts are monitoring China's accelerating efforts at expanding its nuclear arsenal, particularly the land-based ballistic missiles of different ranges, but their research shows no original insight and rely primarily on data harvested from various Western sources (Kashin, 2025a; Stepanov, 2025).

The area designated by Putin in 2019 for cooperation is Russia's support to China in developing its strategic early warning system, but apart from limited joint missile defense exercises (the third one happened in December 2025), no material manifestation of advanced cooperation is observed. China is constructing a set of large phased-array radars, but they have no resemblance to Russian *Voronezh* M/DM/VP radars; Beijing has not shown interest in purchasing Russia's most advanced S-500 surface-to-air missile, after the acquisition of a small number of S-400 missiles in 2014 (Mezey, 2024). The main emphasis in Chinese efforts at enhancing its strategic defense system is on building its space elements, and it has gained a big advantage over Russia in its space program, so that in 2025, China had 91 space missile launches, and Russia only 17, resulting in the operation of some 1,300 Chinese satellites in various orbits, against Russian 300 (Goble, 2026). The apparent inability of Russian air/missile defense system to protect against Ukrainian long-distance drone and missile strikes (which registered hits on several strategic radar facilities) cannot bode well for cooperative endeavors.

One feature of Russia-China strategic cooperation that invariably attracts international attention is the joint patrols by two pairs of strategic bombers, which are sometimes deliberately provocative, including the latest one in December 2025 (Altman, 2025). For Moscow, this exercise has become a means to prove that the Long-Range Aviation remains capable of performing both combat and demonstrative tasks, despite the serious losses suffered from the

Ukrainian *Spiderweb* operation on June 1, 2025. For Beijing, the joint patrols are important for showing the satisfactory performance of the modernized H-6 bombers (designed on the basis of Soviet Tu-16 airframe), so that more modern Russian Tu-160 bombers never partake in this exercise. This show of unity doesn't translate into any meaningful cooperation in strengthening the air components of the respective strategic "triads", and China is developing the next-generation H-20 bomber with some delays but entirely by own efforts (Spray, 2025). Russia struggles to organize the serial production of Tu-160 bombers at the Kazan plant, and the plans for introducing the next generation PAK DA stealth bomber are postponed into indefinite future (Buckby, 2025).

Moscow and Beijing can easily find common ground in opposing the US *Golden Dome* missile defense program, but both strategic partners clearly prefer to rely exclusively on their respective defense-industrial bases and technologies in modernizing the deterrence capabilities. China has few difficulties in evaluating Russian strength and weaknesses, but Moscow experts are struggling to figure out how Xi Jinping's ambitions are translated into doctrinal guidelines and drive purges in the high command (Kashin, 2025b).

Discord and divergence in nuclear diplomacy

The failure to achieve a meaningful victory in the high-intensity conventional war against Ukraine has driven the Russian leadership to experimenting with the use of its nuclear arsenal for political purposes, while China finds it convenient to position itself as a force for promotion of restraint and caution in the nuclear domain. One clear manifestation of this discrepancy is the apparent discord between the revision of Russian nuclear doctrine and the attempted advancement of Chinese initiative on "no first use" of nuclear weapons. The rigidly orchestrated debates in Moscow on the desirability of formal readiness to execute a preemptive nuclear strike led to only moderate changes in the nuclear doctrine officially approved in December 2024 (Minic, 2025). Putin's decision for more careful wording was quite probably influenced by Xi Jinping's discourse on unacceptability of threats to use nuclear weapons. Russia has no doubts that Chinese draft documents on delegitimizing any first nuclear strike are self-serving and intend as a camouflage for the build-up of the Chinese nuclear arsenal, but a direct contradiction is seen as politically undesirable (Alberque, 2025).

Another discrepancy in Russia's and China's nuclear diplomacy pertains to the area of arms control, where Moscow is keen to re-engage Washington D.C. in talks on strategic stability, while Beijing remains firm set on rejecting any commitments to limit its nuclear programs. Russian officials tried to put maximum spin on the offer to President Trump to continue observing the numerical ceilings for the strategic "triad" established by the New START Treaty, which is due to expire in early February 2026 (Antonov, 2025). It was no secret for China that the real intention behind this proposition was to widen the gap between the USA and the European allies, and no surprise that Trump indifferently refused to consider the offer, because his main focus is on finding a way to engage China in arms control deliberations, much to Moscow's chagrin (Xiaobing, 2026).

A particular twist to this intrigue was added by the unexpected resonance from the back-to-back tests in Russia of the nuclear propelled *Burevestnik* cruise missile and the nuclear-propelled *Poseidon* underwater vehicle in October 2025 (Gwadera, 2025). Putin sought to attract Trump's attention to Russia's nuclear might, but the response in the form of an order to prepare for resumption of nuclear testing was, as far as opinions of Moscow experts can be an indication, entirely unexpected (Arbatov, 2025). China was quite alarmed with Russia's expressed readiness to resume nuclear explosions at the Novaya Zemlya test site and loudly denied any intention to withdraw from the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (Kimball, 2025). What underpins Beijing's reaction is the concern about possible decisions of some of its neighbors, including Japan and South Korea, to develop own nuclear capabilities, which would heavily alter the balance of forces in the Asia-Pacific region and increase the risks of nuclear escalation.

Russia's possible support to the North Korean nuclear program is the most acute of these Chinese concerns (Pawlus, 2025). It could have been a coincidence that North Korea successfully launched the *Malligyong-1* reconnaissance satellite in November 2023, after several failures, two months after Putin's meeting with Kim Jong Un at the *Vostochny* cosmodrome. It is clear, nevertheless, that Beijing is irked by further upgrades in this alliance, driven by the deployment of North Korean troops into the battleground in the Kursk region, and seeks to reaffirm its control over nuclear developments in the Korean peninsula conflict zone (Lee, 2025).

Conclusions

The stream of assessments of the allegedly ever-deepening cooperation between Russia and China in the hugely important nuclear domain keeps proliferating (Balazs, 2025). The degree of alarmism in such opinions can vary, but generally they exploit the easy connection between the assertive discourse in Beijing and Moscow and the growing concerns in the Western policy-planning and policymaking community. It is possible that the real scope of this corporation is greater than the open-source data confirms, particularly as both China and Russia are extremely secretive about their nuclear programs, and in the latter case, the amount of official information has shrunk in the course of the Ukraine War, while the censorship over the expert debates has tightened. Critical research of the available data indicates, nevertheless, that the scope of Sino-Russian nuclear cooperation has not increased since the start of 2025 and, quite possibly, has decreased (Sørensen 2025).

For the Russian security elite, the expansion of economic and technological dependency on China is deeply disturbing, and the entirely domestic-based modernization of the nuclear forces is the only sphere where Russia still has clear advantages and can position itself as a peer-competitor to the USA, while China remains a distant third. For the Chinese leadership, Russia consumed and degraded by the unwinnable war, cannot be a reliable partner in long-duration nuclear programs, even in the areas where it still has advanced technology, like the designs for and operation of nuclear submarines. Mutual mistrust isn't diminishing in the course of sustained partnership; it may actually even grow.

In the turbulent transformation of global affairs, Russia is experiencing a steep decline of many key components of state power, so its claim for a status position in the presumed "multi-polar world" is supported only by the nuclear weapons. China, to the contrary, registers gains in many sources of power and influence – and enjoys the role of an upholder of stability in the international system. Russia, therefore, needs to bring the nuclear instruments of its policy in the center of global interactions, while China is interested in minimizing the potentially disruptive risks of nuclear brinksmanship. This divergence determines the tightening of limits in the bilateral cooperation in the nuclear domain.

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