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Sino-Russian Relations in China's Territorial Disputes with India and Vietnam

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Abstract

Despite Beijing's longstanding discontent with Moscow's close ties with New Delhi and Hanoi that at times conflict with China's territorial interests, against the current backdrop of intensifying US-China strategic competition, Beijing has to a large extent put up with Russia's involvement in these territorial conflicts, especially the Sino-Indian dispute, as a useful instrument to prevent New Delhi and Hanoi from leaning further toward Washington. With US ties to both India and Vietnam improving in the context of competition with China, understanding when and where Russian relations with New Delhi and Hanoi conflict with Chinese interests is vital for navigating a complex geopolitical environment.

Policy Implications and Key takeaways

- The purportedly "no-limits" Sino-Russian alignment does have limits and divergent interests when it comes to China's territorial disputes with India and Vietnam. This divergence of interests could be traced to the early days of the Cold War and was a factor contributing to the Sino-Soviet split. US policymakers are cautioned against taking today's Sino-Russia "no-limits" vow at face value or treating their alignment as an "autocratic axis," because confrontation and consistent pressure could be counterproductive by driving Beijing and Moscow even closer.

- Beijing's actions toward Moscow are not solely determined by factors within the Sino-Russian bilateral relationship but also shaped by the dynamics and interactions involving multiple third-party actors and in multiple directions. As such, the growing power asymmetry between China and Russia does not necessarily translate into a corresponding increase in Beijing's leverage with Moscow in pressuring for stronger Russian support in China's territorial disputes with India and Vietnam.

- Chinese experts often express explicit frustration and criticism regarding Russia's role in China's territorial disputes with India and Vietnam. The United States should invest more resources in collecting, translating, publishing, and analyzing such Chinese writings to shape a more

nuanced understanding of Sino-Russian relations and expose important but underappreciated discrepancies between Beijing and Moscow. The United States should also facilitate dialogue and exchanges with Chinese experts specializing in Sino-Russian relations, who have traditionally not been systematically involved in US-China dialogue, to foster a better understanding and assessment of how these experts view China's relations with Russia and the United States. This would complement the prevailing perspective typically gained from exchanges with Chinese experts specializing in US-China relations.

- Concerning India and Vietnam, the United States should exercise great caution when considering whether to apply the 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) to the two countries for their continued defense and energy transactions with Russia since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Washington must approach this issue with a clear recognition that compelling India and Vietnam to sever their ties with Russia may unintentionally eliminate a longstanding source of discord between Beijing and Moscow.

- The United States faces political and strategic costs for not applying CAATSA to India and Vietnam. To mitigate these costs, Washington should call out the two countries' transactions and engagement with Russia and encourage US allies to do the same. Washington should also urge India, which maintains an official policy of non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states, and Vietnam, which is a non-nuclear weapon state, to leverage their relationships with Moscow to oppose the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine, as a quid pro quo for not imposing CAATSA and a measure of damage control.

Introduction

China has a multitude of outstanding territorial disputes with its neighboring countries. Its land territory dispute with India and maritime disputes with Vietnam are particularly tense, given historical military conflicts and recent clashes that have claimed lives from all sides.[1] Yet, China's increasingly close partner, Russia, enjoys close relations with both New Delhi and Hanoi.

Since the Cold War era, both India and Vietnam have been close partners of the Soviet Union/Russia, which has a longstanding history of indirect involvement in these territorial disputes. For example, the Soviet Union/Russia has served as the primary supplier of weapons systems for both Vietnam and India. The Soviet Union/Russia's oil companies have engaged in collaborative ventures with Vietnamese counterparts in the exploration and production (E&P) of hydrocarbon resources in areas embroiled in the South China Sea disputes.

Meanwhile, the Sino-Russian relationship has become both closer and increasingly asymmetric since the end of the Cold War. China's robust economy and growing global influence have juxtaposed Russia's economic stagnation and waning power. This asymmetry has been exacerbated by the imposition of international economic sanctions on Russia following since the 2014 Crimea crisis and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Some observers predict that Russia will become a "junior partner" to China, allowing Beijing to push for greater Russian support of China's claims in its territorial disputes with India and Vietnam.[2]

How has China perceived and dealt with the Soviet/Russia's complicating role in its territorial disputes with India and Vietnam? Does the power asymmetry in Sino-Russian relations, increasingly favorable to China, furnish China with greater leverage to press for stronger Russian support in these disputes?

This study examines Sino-Soviet/Russian relations in the context of China's territorial disputes with Vietnam and India, and based on this analysis, addresses the question of whether and to what extent China can leverage its favorable power position to compel stronger Russian support. Drawing upon archival documents, Chinese scholarly writings, memoirs, and interviews with Chinese experts, I trace Beijing's longstanding discontent with Moscow's close ties with New Delhi and Hanoi since the Cold War that contributed to

the Sino-Soviet split. I also show that during the post-Cold War era, Beijing has adopted an approach toward Russia's involvement in these disputes fundamentally different from the Cold War era. China has tolerated Russia's involvement in these territorial conflicts, especially the Sino-Indian dispute, viewing Moscow as a useful instrument to prevent New Delhi and Hanoi from leaning further toward Washington. This study underscores the caveat that the growing Sino-Russian power asymmetry may not necessarily translate into a corresponding asymmetry of leverage that Beijing will or can use to extract greater Russian support in these territorial disputes. Additionally, this study shows that China's approach toward Russia is driven by a strategic dynamic that more often than not transcends bilateral factors.

Unpacking China's approach to Russia's relationships with its other partners, especially India and Vietnam, is crucial for US policy considerations. It sheds light on at least two key aspects of US strategy toward the Indo-Pacific. First, it provides a nuanced understanding of Sino-Russian relations by highlighting a longstanding but often overlooked discrepancy between Beijing and Moscow, offering insights into how US policies could exploit this discrepancy. Second, the study addresses the challenge of how the United States and its allies should navigate their relationships with India and Vietnam. Both countries are vital US partners in the Indo-Pacific but continue to maintain strong ties with Moscow despite the war in Ukraine and in defiance of Western sanctions.

This study proceeds in three parts. The first section traces the history of Sino-Soviet relations in China's territorial disputes with India and Vietnam during the Cold War. The second part examines Sino-Russian relations in the context of these disputes in the post-Cold War era, explaining why China does not deem stronger Russian support as imperative or unequivocally advantageous. This article concludes by assessing implications for US policies.

During the Cold War

Sino-Indian Land Border Dispute During the Cold War

Both preceding and during the 1962 Sino-Indian border war, Beijing sought unequivocal political and moral support from the Soviet Union, but Moscow declared neutrality, a position resented by Beijing as favoring India.[3] The initial signs of Sino-Soviet divergence emerged in 1959

following an armed clash between India and China in Longju on August 25. Moscow, while supporting Beijing's suppression of the Tibet uprising in March 1959, refrained from adopting a similar stance on the border issue, aiming to preserve amicable ties with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Concerns also arose in Moscow regarding the potential impression that China, by emphasizing the Soviet's leading role in the Socialist bloc, confronted India with Soviet backing.[4]

Attempts by Beijing between September 6–9 to dissuade Moscow from officially declaring neutrality in the dispute proved unsuccessful. On September 9, TASS, the Soviet state news agency, released a statement expressing Moscow's "regret" about the Longju clash and urging China and India to peacefully resolve their difference, but refrained from taking sides. Beijing viewed the statement as "a slap in our face" that laid bare the divergent attitudes of China and the Soviet Union to the world.[5] A cable sent from the Chinese embassy in Moscow the next day interpreted the statement as intended to deescalate tensions on the eve of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's visit to the United States.[6]

Beijing's dissatisfaction with Moscow's declared neutrality intensified during Khrushchev's visit to Beijing in October. During their meeting on October 2, Mao Zedong and Khrushchev got into a heated argument over the Sino-Indian border clash as well as Beijing's decision to bombard Quemoy and Matsu in 1958 without consulting Moscow.[7] Khrushchev defended the TASS statement, emphasizing its necessity to dispel the perception that socialist countries were colluding against Nehru. Khrushchev also insisted that China find a way to resolve the conflict with India peacefully in order to win Nehru to the socialist side in the world struggle.[8] This meeting is regarded by Chinese Cold War historians such as Shen Zhihua and Niu Jun as a key turning point in Sino-Soviet relations leading to the two countries' eventual open split.[9]

On October 20, another Sino-Indian clash occurred at Kongka Pass. In January 1960, Moscow informed Beijing that it would observe "strict neutrality" on the Sino-Indian border conflict. During a meeting on January 26 with Stepan Chervonenko, the Soviet Ambassador to China, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai complained that it was "inconceivable and unprecedented" for Moscow to observe strict neutrality between "socialist China" and "capitalist India" and that even merely an expression of neutrality would be "no good."[10]

As tensions along the Sino-Indian border escalated prior to the 1962 war, Beijing made several additional attempts to alter Moscow's position. On October 8, 1962, Zhou Enlai informed Chervonenko about India's readiness for a massive attack on the eastern section of the Sino-Indian border. The issue of Soviet arms transfers to India was a focal point of the discussion. Zhou told Chervonenko that Indian troops were using Soviet-made aircraft for transporting military supplies and undertaking provocative acts in the border areas. On October 14, Khrushchev told Liu Xiao, China's ambassador in Moscow, that he would consider suspending the sale of 12 MiG-21 fighter jets to India, a deal concluded between the Soviet Union and India in May 1962. Meanwhile, Khrushchev cautioned that Beijing and Moscow should not jointly oppose India, fearing it would drive India toward the United States.[11]

The onset of the Cuban missile crisis precipitated an abrupt shift in Moscow's position in the favor of China, with the expectation that Beijing would reciprocate with active support for Moscow. On October 16, after the Kennedy administration confirmed the Soviet placement of missiles and atomic weapons in Cuba, Secretary of Justice Robert Kennedy met with Soviet ambassador to the US Anatoly Dobrynin regarding the revelation.[12]

On October 22, two days after China launched an offensive along its disputed border with India, President John F. Kennedy announced the implementation of a naval blockade of Cuba. On the same day, Moscow sent a memorandum to Beijing, affirming the Soviet understanding of China's position that rejected the McMahon Line as an established boundary between China and India. The memorandum endorsed Beijing's proposal made in September for both the Chinese and Indian forces to withdraw 20 kilometers beyond the 1959 border and engage in talks—an overture rejected by New Delhi. Addressing Beijing's complaint about Soviet arms transfers to India, the memorandum claimed that the transfers, which included eight AH-12 transport aircraft and twenty MU-4 helicopters, would have "no military significance" and thus would not impact the power balance between China and India.[13] Concurrently, Moscow notified New Delhi of its postponement of the MiG-21 aircraft delivery.[14] On 25 October, *Pravda*, the Soviet Communist Party's mouthpiece, published an editorial rejecting Moscow's hitherto maintained neutral stance and echoing the claims articulated in the memorandum that the McMahon Line was imposed by the

British and legally invalid.[15] China's reciprocation, however, was more subdued than the Soviet Union had hoped for. Beijing issued a declaration on October 25 expressing "complete support" for Moscow. The *People's Daily* published two articles endorsing Soviet actions, and no massive rallies were organized in China to show support for the Soviets.[16]

The denouement of the Cuban missile crisis prompted another reversal in the Soviet attitude toward the Sino-Indian border conflict. Khrushchev's decision on October 28 to withdraw missiles from Cuba sparked fierce criticism from Beijing, characterizing it as a manifestation of Moscow's apprehension of "imperial aggression" and a compromise with "the freedom and independence" of the Cuban people.[17]

On November 5, *Pravda* issued another editorial that made no reference to the McMahon Line, suggesting, in China's perception, a return to the Soviet's previous position on the border issue. According to Wu Lengxi, then head of Xinhua news agency and editor-in-chief of the *People's Daily*, the two shifts in the Soviet's attitude were seen by Beijing as evidence of Khrushchev's double-dealing—temporary support for China on the border dispute when it needed Beijing's backing in the Cuban missile crisis, followed by a withdrawal of support once the crisis was over.[18]

For Beijing, the issue of Soviet military ties with India starting from 1960–1961 presented another contentious matter indicative of Moscow's actual support for India. A 1963 top-secret report from the Chinese foreign ministry noted that the Soviet Union initiated military aid to India following the incident at Kongka Pass. Specifically, Beijing complained that while the Soviets sold MiG-21s to China, they refused to transfer all equipment and instruments for manufacturing the fighter jets. In contrast, the Soviets not only sold MiG-21s to India but granted India a license for indigenous production and provided training for Indian air force personnel. On February 23, 1963, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko told Pan Zili, China's ambassador in Moscow, that the agreement to sell aircraft to India was signed before the outbreak of the 1962 war. Pan rebuked Gromyko's explanation, stating that border clashes between China and India started in 1959. For this reason, Beijing concluded that the Soviet's actual position was to support India, constituting a "serious breach" of the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance.[19]

Following the Sino-Soviet split and the 1969 Sino-Soviet border clash, Moscow and New Delhi forged even closer ties, driven by a shared perception of the security threat from China, particularly in light of US President Richard Nixon's visit to China and the emerging China-Pakistan-US alignment in the early 1970s. This converging threat perception culminated in the signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in 1971.

In the post-Mao era, Beijing and New Delhi made three attempts at reconciliation, with the first two thwarted by Moscow.[20] The first endeavor occurred in the late 1970s when Morarji Desai's Janata Party came to power, roughly coincident with Deng Xiaoping's return to power and overture to India as part of Beijing's efforts to counter geopolitical pressure from Moscow. Despite Desai's willingness to reopen border talks with Beijing, Moscow, disturbed by the potential Sino-Indian reconciliation, covertly destabilized the Desai government to sabotage the progress toward a Sino-Indian rapprochement. The second attempt came under Indira Gandhi's second term in the 1980s amidst the Soviet's invasion of Afghanistan. Despite initial progress in Sino-Indian relations and reopening of border talks in 1981,[21] Moscow impeded the reconciliation by leveraging its arms transfers and economic aids to India, all while spreading fake information accusing Chinese troops of violating India's border.[22]

The third Sino-Indian reconciliation attempt occurred in the 1980s after Rajiv Gandhi became India's prime minister, in tandem with the Sino-Soviet rapprochement under Mikhail Gorbachev. In 1985, Beijing agreed to discuss the border settlement on a sector-by-sector basis, a method that India had preferred over China's preference for a "package deal." The progress was disrupted when the two countries' forces clashed in the Sumdorong Chu Valley between 1986 and 1987.[23] Unlike previous instances, Moscow refrained from taking a stance, reinterpreting its 1971 treaty with India by emphasizing that it was not directed at any third country. During his visit to India in November 1986, Gorbachev, although reassuring New Delhi that the improvement in Sino-Soviet relations would not come at the expense of Indo-Soviet relations, refused to back India against China. This altered dynamic likely prompted India to reassess the prospect of securing Soviet support in a potential conflict with China. The confrontation eventually deescalated, leading to Sino-Indian reconciliation highlighted by Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Beijing in 1988. Moscow

has since maintained an official position of equal-distance on the Sino-Indian border dispute.

Sino-Vietnamese Maritime Disputes During the Cold War

After World War II, the Republic of China's (ROC) Nationalist government (KMT) controlled the northern part of the Paracels whereas the southern part was under French colonial administration on behalf of Vietnam. At the San Francisco Peace conference in 1951, Vietnam asserted sovereignty over both the Paracels and Spratlys.[24] This position conflicted with that of the Soviet Union's, which refused to sign the treaty due to its disagreement with Japan on the sovereignty of the Northern Territories. Moscow also backed Beijing's claims in the South China Sea, condemning the treaty for "grossly violat[ing] the indisputable rights of China to the return of integral parts of Chinese territory: Taiwan, the Pescadores, the Paracels, and other islands severed from it by the Japanese militarists."[25]

In the 1950s and 1960s, Beijing managed to secure certain forms of acceptance of its claims by Hanoi on several occasions, the most prominent of which was Pham Van Dong's note on September 14, 1958.[26] After their open split in the 1960s, China and the Soviet Union competed for influence over Hanoi through substantial military and economic aid. When China gained the control of the whole of the Paracels in 1974 after a naval skirmish with South Vietnam, neither Hanoi nor Moscow protested as they "could not take the side of South Vietnam." Moreover, Hanoi still needed Beijing's support to complete the war against the Saigon regime.[27]

Following the 1974 skirmish, the South Vietnamese government occupied six land features in the Spratlys, which were transferred to Hanoi in April 1975 after the demise of the Saigon regime. The unification of Vietnam altered Hanoi's priorities, making its conflicting claims with China in the South China Sea a more salient issue. The end of the war also reduced Vietnam's dependence on China, putting Hanoi in a stronger position vis-à-vis Beijing to make demands at odds with China's interests.[28] Meanwhile, economic constraints stemming from the Cultural Revolution further weakened China's ability to aid Vietnam's reconstruction.[29] In September 1975, then General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party (CPV) Le Duan visited Beijing. During his meeting with then China's Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping,

Duan raised Vietnam's Spratly claims with the PRC leadership. Deng rejected Vietnam's claims but attempted to preserve diplomatic leeway by telling Duan that this issue "could be discussed in the future."[30] Upon Deng's purge by the Gang of Four in April 1976, one of the attacks mounted against him was that he had supported negotiations with Vietnam over the Spratlys.[31]

However, when Deng returned to power in 1977, he was confronted with a drastically different situation. A softened Chinese position on the Spratlys became politically untenable. By 1977, Vietnam permitted the Soviet Union to use the US-constructed port facilities at Danang and Cam Ranh Bay, leading Deng to perceive a geopolitical encirclement threat from the Soviet Union and its allies, India and Vietnam, on China's southern flank.[32] The formal alliance between Hanoi and Moscow in November 1978 against the backdrop of deteriorating Sino-Vietnamese relations and a looming Vietnamese invasion of China-backed Cambodia, sent a clear signal of warning to Beijing.[33] In December shortly before the outbreak of Sino-Vietnamese armed conflict, Hanoi began to openly assert its claim to the Spratlys.[34]

Meanwhile, from the 1970s, coastal states in the South China Sea began displaying a heightened interest in tapping maritime resources in the area, particularly hydrocarbons. South Vietnam initiated surveys and exploration activities in 1971.[35] Near the end of the Vietnam War, Mobil discovered oil off the coast of South Vietnam and identified prospects in the Blue Dragon and Big Bear fields. The company also held exploration acreage in the White Tiger field.[36] Shell also discovered commercially valuable reserves south of Vung Tau.[37] After the war, US trade embargoes, coupled with unsatisfactory test drilling results, led western oil companies to reduce or discontinue their operations in Vietnam. This created an opportunity for the Soviet Union to fill the void.[38]

In 1980, the Soviet Union and Vietnam signed a framework agreement for jointly developing oil and gas in the southern part of Vietnam's claimed continental shelf.[39] A joint venture, Vietsovpetro, was established in 1981 between Vietnam's state-owned Petrovietnam and the Soviet's state-controlled Zarubezhneft to implement the agreement, drawing vehement opposition from Beijing to the deal.[40] The Soviet-Vietnam collaboration also raised concerns for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, as it could lead to a permanent Soviet naval base in Vietnam and military support for Vietnam's territorial claims.[41]

In 1986, Vietsovpetro acquired Mobil's assets, including the Big Bear oil field at Vanguard Bank.[42] Production from these offshore fields started in 1986, transforming Vietnam into a net crude oil exporter in Southeast Asia by 1987.[43] Despite Vietnam's reliance on the Soviet Union for hydrocarbon exploration in the South China Sea during the 1980s, the Soviet offshore drilling technology lagged behind that of western firms, particularly in deepwater drilling.[44] Also, the stagnating Soviet economy severely constrained Moscow's financial capabilities. Consequently, in 1988, Vietnam reopened its offshore blocks to western oil companies—except for American firms because of the US embargo.[45] Despite Vietnam's efforts to diversify its international partnerships, the decade-long Soviet-Vietnamese collaboration laid the groundwork for Russia to remain a key partner for Hanoi in hydrocarbon E&P in the South China Sea during the post-Cold War era.[46]

In the defense dimension, Soviet military aid to Vietnam during the last decade of the Cold War was substantial, but it was primarily used by Vietnamese troops in Cambodia and to support the Soviet military presence at Cam Ranh Bay.[47] Hence, unlike in Sino-Indian border clashes, Soviet arms transfers was not a major point of contention in Sino-Vietnamese maritime clashes during the Cold War.

The 1988 Sino-Vietnamese naval clash at the Spratlys put Moscow in a difficult situation where it needed to strike a balance between maintaining close ties with Hanoi and advancing the rapprochement with Beijing. As such, Moscow rebuffed Hanoi's multiple requests for Soviet support in jointly condemning China's actions.[48] To the extent that the 1978 Soviet-Vietnamese treaty did not obligate the Soviet Union to defend Vietnam if attacked, Moscow claimed that it would not support either side in the event of a conflict and that its military vessels deployed to the Cam Ranh Bay would stay out of such conflict.[49] A senior Soviet diplomat in Manila, while acknowledging the Soviet alliance with Hanoi, told the press: "I don't see any realistic grounds for our participation in the resolution of this problem."[50] In private, Vietnamese officials were reportedly upset by the Soviet's neutrality.[51] Moscow's approach of not taking sides in the Sino-Vietnamese maritime disputes remained Russia's official position after the end of the Cold War.

After the Cold War

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia lost its global power status, while China emerged as the more powerful party in the Sino-Russian dyad by the end of the 20th century. In this geopolitical landscape, Russia is keen on securing the permanence of its contemporary border with China, settled at the turn of this century. The persistent Chinese characterization of the current Sino-Russian border as a consequence of the 19th century "unequal treaties" is disconcerting for Russians.[52] With the shared unease regarding potential Chinese historical irridentism and territorial assertiveness, India and Vietnam stand out as natural partners for Moscow.

Sino-Indian Land Border Disputes

Despite a brief drift in Moscow's ties with New Delhi immediately after the Cold War, the Indo-Russian relationship reinvigorated in the 21st century. While officially maintaining a neutrality in the Sino-Indian border dispute, Russia's close ties with India afford Moscow additional leverage to delicately balance China's growing power when necessary, according to Dmitri Trenin, a former Russian military intelligence officer and former director of the Carnegie Moscow Center.[53]

Chinese strategists remain concerned about the potential implications of the Indo-Russian partnership for China's strategic interests. A PLA scholar cautioned in a 2001 study that, despite Putin's claim that Indo-Russian cooperation would not target third parties, strengthening partnership between the two countries would be "very unfavorable to China" because their strategic incentives to counterbalance China remained unchanged during the post-Cold War era.[54] A researcher at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) warned in a 2002 analysis that in the face of a favorable shift in China's power relative to Russia's and a perceived threat from China, Moscow might align itself with New Delhi to check China.[55]

A major divergence between China and Russia regarding India soon surfaced following India's nuclear tests in 1998. While Beijing actively campaigned for international sanctions in response, Moscow refrained from voicing substantial criticism of India. In a letter addressed to US President Bill Clinton, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee blamed China for

India's seeking of nuclear weapons: "We have an overt nuclear weapon state on our borders, a state which committed armed aggression against India in 1962. Although our relations with that country have improved in the last decade or so, an atmosphere of distrust persists mainly due to the unresolved border problem." To add to the distrust, the letter continued, "the country has materially helped another neighbor of ours to become a covert nuclear weapons state"—a clear reference to China's assistance to Pakistan's nuclear weapons program.[56]

China initially reacted cautiously to India's nuclear tests, but its stance notably hardened following the publication of Vajpayee's letter. Beijing launched a coordinated diplomatic effort to mobilize international sanctions against India.[57] Contrary to China's expectations, Russia, prioritizing its commercial ties especially defense cooperation with India, not only refrained from sternly criticizing New Delhi but also refused to join the international sanction regime.[58] Privately, Chinese diplomats expressed concerns about Russia's perceived leniency and lobbied for a more stringent posture from Moscow.[59] Adding to China's displeasure, Russia entered into a ten-year military and technological cooperation agreement with India in December of the same year.

Although both China and India have been the leading buyers of Russian weaponry, Chinese strategists noted a discernible discrepancy in the quantity and quality of arms, especially advanced weapon systems, sold to the two countries. According to a PLA scholar, Russia has been inclined to sell larger quantities and a greater variety of weapons to India. For a given weapon system exported to both China and India, the version supplied to India is often more advanced and provided earlier than the one sold to China.[60] Such differentiation is exemplified by the Su-30 fighter jets, where the Su-30MKI model for India boasts more advanced configurations compared to the Su-30MKK variant exported to China.[61] Additionally, Russia's willingness to engage in joint production and licensed production of various weapons systems in India, as noted by PLA scholars, has significantly boosted India's indigenous defense industry.[62]

In a stark contrast, Russia has been reluctant to engage in similar collaborative undertakings with China. Russia's reservations about expanding defense cooperation with China are twofold. Security-wise, Moscow harbors the concern that weapons sold to China might at some point be used against

Russia. On the economic front, Russia is worried that China may reverse-engineer Russian equipment—as exemplified by the case of J-11, a derivative of the Su-27 fighter jet—and then compete with Russia on the international market. Consequently, Russia has restricted the types of weapon systems that can be sold to China, and technology transfers are subject to stringent regulations. By contrast, Moscow has few if any reservations regarding its defense ties with India.[63]

Nonetheless, the 2014 Crimea crisis and the ensuing confrontation between Russia and the West led Moscow to reassess the strategic value of Sino-Russian relations. Russia began to ease its longstanding restrictions and permitted sales of advanced weapon systems to China. In 2014, the Kremlin agreed to sell four to six regimental sets of the S-400 surface-to-air missile (SAM) system to China.[64] But after delivering two regiments between 2018 and 2019, Russia suspended the delivery of the remaining units to China.[65] Meanwhile, in October 2018 India finalized a deal with Russia to acquire five regiments of the S-400 system.[66] Between December 2021 and March 2023, Russia delivered the first three systems to India, while the suspension of delivery to China seemingly continues.[67] This disparity is viewed by Chinese experts as another vexing illustration that Moscow's quiet preference for India and distrust of China. Chinese experts are particularly concerned about strategic implications of the S-400, as India has deployed these advanced systems to the contested Sino-Indian border area.[68]

Sino-Vietnamese Maritime Disputes

With its enduring Soviet-era legacy, Vietnam continues to represent a premier economic and strategic partner for Russia in Southeast Asia in the post-Cold War era, especially in the realms of offshore energy development and arms sales.

Russia inherited the Soviet share in Vietsovpetro, with its ownership structure remaining unchanged.[69] By 2001, Vietsovpetro had contributed to nearly 20 percent of Vietnam's hard currency earnings. Russian President Vladimir Putin commended this joint venture as the "pivot of economic cooperation" between Russia and Vietnam, establishing a "firm foundation" for advancing mutual interests in the Asia-Pacific region.[70] Gazprom entered

Vietnam's energy sector in 2000. A joint venture, Vietgazprom, was established in 2002 to implement the contract.[71]

As the Sino-Vietnamese maritime disputes intensified in the late 2000s, China quietly pressured a number of international oil companies (IOCs) to withdraw from their E&P projects with Vietnam in the South China Sea.[72] Notably, no information indicates that Russian companies were subjected to such pressures, likely because the offshore blocks they were involved in at the time were predominantly located outside the disputed areas.

As western energy firms ceased their projects in the contested waters under China's pressure, the Russian energy companies embarked on joint ventures with Vietnam in offshore blocks that either partially overlapped with or completely fell within China's claimed areas in the South China Sea. In 2008, Gazprom and Petrovietnam signed a 30-year E&P contract in four blocks within the contentious ten-dash line.[73] In April 2012, Gazprom made an announcement to partner with PetroVietnam for the development of two blocks located within the nine-dash line.[74]

Rosneft, the third Russian energy company to enter Vietnam's offshore energy industry in the South China Sea, gained stakes in 2013 in two blocks at resource-rich Vanguard Bank. The blocks are proximate to the Wan'an Bei-21 (WAB-21) block, where China had previously signed a contract with the US-based company Crestone in 1992 to explore but halted after triggering a militarized standoff with Vietnam in 1994.[75] In 2015, Rosneft signed an agreement with Japan Drilling Co, Ltd (JDC) to lease Hakuryu-5, an offshore drilling rig, to drill exploration wells in both blocks.[76]

Unease between China and Russia grew quietly after Rosneft started drilling in Block 06-1 and China pressured Spain's oil company Repsol to terminate operations in a disputed area in 2018. Russian diplomats privately expressed concerns that China might one day compel Moscow to suspend its energy projects in the South China Sea.[77] Beijing's displeasure with Russia's involvement in the South China Sea became conspicuous in 2019 when it deployed coastguard vessels, fishing ships, and a marine survey ship to intimidate Hakuryu-5 and Vietnamese vessels servicing the drilling rig, creating a tense standoff. During the standoff, China's foreign minister Wang Yi requested that Russia terminate Rosneft's exploration activities in Vietnam. Wang's Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov rebuffed the request.[78]

Russia's defense cooperation with Vietnam, while of a smaller scale than that with India, remains another thorny issue in Sino-Russian ties. A pivotal development occurred in 2009 when Vietnam signed a contract with Russia to purchase six Kilo-class diesel-powered attack submarines. This contract also included provisions for crew training and the construction of an onshore maintenance facility.[79] Chinese observers warn that Russia's transfer of defense technology to Vietnam has enabled Hanoi to make a licensed copy of the Russian Kh-35 medium-range anti-ship missiles (with a range of 260 km) as of 2016, boosting Vietnam's indigenous defense industrial capabilities vis-à-vis China.[80]

Parallel to the Indo-Russian partnership, Chinese analysts have openly criticized Russia's collaboration with Vietnam for coming at the expense of China's interests in the South China Sea. In a 2014 study, scholars from the China University of Geosciences categorically labeled Russian energy companies as "accomplices in Vietnam's stealing of China's oil and gas resources in the South China Sea."[81] Two scholars at the CCP's Central Party School contended in a 2018 study that Russia's energy development activities in the South China Sea have generated substantial revenues for Vietnan, allowing Hanoi to allocate more financial resources to procure weapons systems from Russia that can be used to confront China in the South China Sea.[82]

Chinese analysts also question Russia's long-term intentions in the South China Sea and the broader Asia-Pacific region. In a 2016 study, an analyst from the South China Sea Center of Nanjing University cautioned that China should not overlook Russia's interest in restoring its military presence in the South China Sea, as evidenced in Russia's expression of a strong interest in 2010 in signing a new lease for Cam Ranh Bay. Consequently, the study warned against a "too naïve" approach toward Russia and argued that China should not assume Russia would relinquish its strategic interests in the region.[83]

China's Rationale for Tolerating Russia

Despite its thinly veiled dissatisfaction with Moscow, Beijing has been relatively cautious in pressuring Russia to align its position with China's interests in its territorial disputes with India and Vietnam likely due to three considerations.

First, in the context of the escalating US-China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific, China perceives that a significant weakening of Russia's ties with India would be more detrimental than beneficial by potentially pushing India closer to the United States. A 2021 study by researchers at CICIR articulated such anxiety that a divergence between Russia and India would lead the latter to lean more closely toward the US and its allies.[84]

The imperative to keep India on the fence sometimes requires Beijing to acquiesce to Russia's pursuit of self-interests with India even if it comes at the expense of China's own secondary national interests, a logic Chinese foreign policy experts frame as "choosing the lesser of two evils." An illustrative instance occurred in 2017 when Moscow persuaded Beijing to accept India's entry into the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) despite Moscow's clear intention to use India as a counterbalance to China's influence within the multilateral organization. A Chinese scholar plainly described Beijing's decision as a "resigned choice."[85] China's tolerance of Russia's ongoing arms trade with India is similarly construed by Chinese experts as a strategic necessity.[86]

This rationale, albeit unpleasant for Beijing, is likely to persist insofar as the US-China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific remains the top geopolitical concern for China. In contemplating the future trajectory of the China-Russia-India triangle, a Chinese scholar at the China Foreign Affairs University, which is under the auspice of China's foreign ministry, emphasized in a 2021 study, "The Indo-Russia relationship will be better than the Sino-Indian relationship, and Russia's inclination to use India to hedge against China will be a long-term trend…[But] it is in China's interest to adopt an open attitude toward Russia's hedging behavior."[87]

However, unlike the conspicuous absence of Chinese pressure on Russia regarding the Sino-Indian border disputes, Beijing has selectively exerted pressure on Russia over the South China Sea issue, exemplified by the Rosneft episode. This disparity is likely driven by the perceived capabilities difference between Vietnam and India and the resulting geostrategic weights that each of them carries. In the Chinese calculation, India falls under the category of great power relations and carries strategic importance, thus necessitating a cautious Chinese approach in pressuring Russia on its defense cooperation with India. By contrast, Vietnam "is not a major power but a subregional

rival," suggesting a less circumspect Chinese approach in pressuring Russia on its joint energy venture in the South China Sea.[88]

The second rationale behind China's refraining from pressuring Russia probably lies in Beijing's growing skepticism of Moscow's capacity to shape New Delhi and Hanoi's foreign policy choices. In the aftermath of the 2020 Sino-Indian border clash, Russia attempted to leverage its ties with both China and India to facilitate engagements between the two countries' defense and foreign ministers at multilateral platforms such as SCO and BRICS. While some Russia observers argue that Moscow played a crucial role in deescalating the deadliest Sino-Indian clash since the 1960s,[89] some Chinese experts expressed doubt about the actual influence Russia actually exerts on India. In the 2021 study, the CICIR researchers projected limited potential for the Indo-Russian relationship to expand beyond traditional defense and energy realms.[90] Even in the arms sales dimension, Russia's influence has eroded, with a decline of over 40 percent in Russian arms sales to India from 2010 to 2022. This contrasts with the threefold increase in India's arms purchases from the United States and a 33-times surge from France.[91]

Similar skepticism is evident in China's evaluation of Russia's influence on Vietnam in the South China Sea disputes. Chinese scholars contend that Russia's traditional preoccupation with Europe, coupled with geopolitical pressures on its European front since 2014, impedes Moscow's ability to maintain significant influence in the Asia-Pacific. Consequently, the South China Sea may become a secondary strategic consideration for Russia where it is unlikely to diverge significantly from China's position due to a lack of will and capabilities for intervention.[92]

Third, as Beijing transformed its relationship with Moscow into a strategic partnership in the post-Cold War era, China seems to have adopted a more pragmatic approach regarding how much support to expect from Russia in China's territorial disputes. Strategic partnerships, unlike alliances, tend to "be informal in nature and entail low commitment costs, rather than being explicitly formalized in a specific alliance treaty that binds the participants to a rigid course of action."[93] In the context of China's territorial dispute with India, despite a closer Sino-Russian alignment, Beijing seems to harbor a pragmatically limited expectation of Russia's support. China is well aware that the importance of India for Russia is also on the rise.

Indeed, Russia's 2021 National Security Strategy lists China and India under the same section, expressing Moscow's aspirations to forge a "comprehensive partnership and strategic engagement" with China and a "particularly privileged strategic partnership" with India. This objective is reiterated in the Russian foreign ministry's 2023 document outlining Moscow's foreign policy vision.[94] A 2022 study by analysts at CICIR noted that the latest framing of Russia's relations with China and India stands in contrast to the 2015 version of National Security Strategy, which placed India in a separate section after the one on China. This change, in the Chinese perception, suggests that the importance of India in Russia's foreign relations hierarchy has been elevated to a level equivalent to that of China's.[95]

In the South China Sea, some Chinese scholars also noted that Beijing maintains pragmatic expectations as to how far China can push for Russian support, as Moscow has its own interests in this region and Beijing "cannot possibly require Russia to behave in a way perfectly aligned with China's position."[96]

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study, by putting Russia's role in China's territorial disputes with India and Vietnam in a historical context, traces an important but often understudied aspect in Sino-Soviet/Russian relations and shows that the purportedly "no-limit" Sino-Russian alignment does have limits and divergent interests when it comes to China's territorial interests. Despite Beijing's efforts to play down its displeasure in official narratives, Chinese experts are often explicit in their expressions of frustration and criticism of Russia's role in these disputes. Beyond these specific disputes and at the strategic level, leading Russia experts in China have cautioned against overestimating the irreversibility of Russia's confrontation with the West and suggested that Beijing should manage ties with Moscow on the basis of a "more realistic assessment of China's national interests."[97]

This study has several major implications for America's Indo-Pacific policies. First, US policymakers are cautioned against taking the Sino-Russia "no-limits" vow at face value. Treating the alignment as an "autocratic alliance" or an "autocratic axis," as some analysts in Washington have portrayed,[98] may be counterproductive because confrontation and consistent toughness could

drive Beijing and Moscow even closer, while ignoring the prospect that the Sino-Russian relationship may contain the seeds of its own weakening if not ultimate unraveling. Indeed, existing scholarship has shown that selective accommodation, aimed at alluring away one party, is often more effective and less risky than confrontation to pry a coalition apart.[99]

Aside from adjusting the way it evaluates and approaches the Sino-Russian alignment, the United States should invest more resources in collecting, translating, publishing, and analyzing Chinese-language primary sources to shape a more nuanced understanding of the alignment and expose important discrepancies between Beijing and Moscow. The United States should also facilitate dialogue and exchanges with Chinese experts specializing in Sino-Russian relations, who have traditionally not been systematically involved in US-China dialogue, to foster a better understanding and assessment of how these experts approach China's relations with Russia and the United States. This could complement the prevailing perspective gained from exchanges with Chinese experts specializing in US-China relations.

Second, this study reveals that the growing power asymmetry favorable to China does not necessarily translates into a corresponding increase in Beijing's leverage with Moscow in pressuring for stronger Russian support in China's territorial disputes. Beijing's actions toward Moscow are not solely determined by factors within the Sino-Russian bilateral relationship but also shaped by the dynamics and interactions involving multiple actors and directions. Understanding these complexities is crucial in analyzing what drives China's approach toward Russia.

Third, concerning India and Vietnam, the United States should adopt a cautious approach when considering whether to apply the 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) to the two countries' continued defense and energy transactions with Russia. India has emerged as one of Russia's top buyers of oil since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, whereas Vietnam is making clandestine arrangements to continue its defense cooperation with Russia in contravention of US sanctions.[100] Washington must approach these issues with a clear recognition that compelling India and Vietnam to sever their ties with Russia may unintentionally eliminate a longstanding source of discord between Beijing and Moscow.

To be sure, there are costs associated with not applying CAATSA to India and Vietnam. Allowing the two countries to continue their defense and energy purchases from Russia would undermine the US-led international effort to contain Russia's aggression against Ukraine. But these costs are justifiable given the greater strategic implications of removing an important source of discord in the Sino-Russian relationship. Moreover, there are ways that Washington could mitigate these costs.

First, Washington could call out the transactions and engagement of India and Vietnam with Russia and encourage US allies to do the same. This would signal that all countries, irrespective of their relationships with the West, would face political consequences for supporting Russia's war machine. Although the United States strongly criticized Vietnam's recent reception of Putin to Hanoi,[101] its response to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's hug of Putin during his latest visit to Moscow was more muted, only expressing "concerns" and calling the Indo-Russian relationship a "bad bet" for India.[102] A more consistent and even-handed approach from Washington is necessary in this regard.

Additionally, as a quid pro quo and a measure of damage control for not imposing CAATSA, Washington could urge India, which maintains a nuclear policy of "no first use" and no use against non-nuclear armed states,[103] and Vietnam, which is a non-nuclear weapon state, to leverage their special relationships with Moscow to more vigorously oppose the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons. The Biden administration reportedly secured help from non-US allies, including India and China, to help dissuade Russia from nuclear attacks in late 2022.[104] But as Putin continues to threaten to use tactical nuclear weapons against the West,[105] persistent diplomatic pressure from two of Russia's most important partners may carry unique weight in dissuading Moscow.

The views expressed are the author's alone, and do not represent the views of the US Government, Carnegie Corporation of New York, or the Wilson Center.

Notes

1. The most recent clash between China and India occurred in Galwan Valley in 2020, which killed four Chinese soldiers and 20 Indian soldiers. The most recent clash between China and Vietnam occurred in the Paracels in 2014. The clash triggered anti-China riots in Vietnam, during which at least four Chinese civilians were killed.
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