



## Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

### A NEW EMERGING RUSSIA-CHINA PARTNERSHIP?

*Dr. Temjenmeren Ao  
Research Associate, CAPS*

The ongoing joint Russia and China naval exercise is significant for two main reasons; firstly, it is their second Joint Sea series for the year 2015, the first one taking place in May 2015. Second, and more importantly, it showcases the importance of the growing bilateral military and strategic relations between the two nations. This could be stated as a new realignment for a new strategic engagement, or more precisely, a re-engagement of two Cold War foes coming together to position themselves in the ever changing global geo-strategic scenario, where the present need calls for new engagements in order to overcome any kind of multilateral isolationist policy imposed on them by the West.

A recent book by Marcin Kaczmarski titled, "Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order", highlights the emergence or the rekindling of this relationship. According to the author; the post-Cold War period has created an environment which has enabled the two nations to forge closer ties, which has resulted into a new rebalancing in international geopolitics. Defense relations, and as a matter of fact all kinds of mutual and diplomatic ties between the former Soviet Union and China, went cold during the 1970s. However, in the post-Cold War period, trade in arms between Russia and China began to flourish and became a main pillar of the post-Cold War security and defense cooperation, supplemented by a dense



## Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

net of institutional contacts. It encompassed regular meetings of the ministries of defense and chiefs of general staff as well as a joint commission on military-technical cooperation, which served as the major forum for discussing arms sales. Russia, for most part of the 1990's, remained as China's major arms supplier; deliveries that included fighter jets, fighter bombers, transport planes, destroyers, submarines and helicopters that enabled the PLA to embark upon modernisation. Issues did come up between the two nations due to China's reverse engineering of Russian technologies (such as the Su-27 fighter which was reproduced by China under a different designation J-11B) which caused some strain in the relations in the early 2000's, with Moscow refusing to sell its most advanced technologies to China. However, both the nations, feeling the ongoing global isolation for their erratic behaviours, felt the need to overcome their differences and continued to cooperate in the security and defense sphere which served as a litmus test for any major relations<sup>1</sup>.

Major obstacles that constrained the relations were overcome with the two nations signing an agreement in 2008 on the protection of intellectual property. The first sign of the revival was the 2009 contract for the sale of 32 Mi-171 transport helicopters. In April 2015, Russia helped push its relations with China further by resuming its high-tech arms exports by agreeing to sell the S-400 air defense system (for about \$ 3 billion) that would enable China to have greater dominance of the air over Taiwan and the Senkaku islands. This was done despite Moscow's concerns of China reproducing them. Furthermore, Russia in November 2014, reported that it is also prepared to sell its latest Sukhoi-35S combat aircraft to China again despite strong reservations in Moscow. These undertakings by Russia enable the readers to



## Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

understand the urgency on the part of Moscow to build a close relationship with China which ensured that China remains on Moscow's side, especially in the midst of the West decision to punish and isolate Russia in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis<sup>2</sup>.

The current scenario is this; today we are faced with a similar kind of a situation like that of the Cold War, where we have the West on one side and Russia and China on the other. But there also lies a major difference; China has become a more globally engaging nation with strong spheres of influence. Therefore, the scenario is the same, however the content is vastly different and so would be the ripple effect. A piece published in *The Economist* in May 2015 states that despite the emerging closeness between the two nations there also lies unease, as both nations seek this relationship to increase their sphere of influence. China seeks to enter Central Asia through its Silk Road Economic Belt and ensure that it is not countered by the Russian plan to establish a Eurasia Economic Union that tends to keep China away<sup>3</sup>. Russia, on the other hand, is using this as a means to stay relevant in the current global scenario where it faces multilateral isolationism from the West. What could be a matter of concern for India is that unlike the period of the Cold War, its relations with China are at a more complicated trajectory, whilst India still has issues of territorial and boundary dispute with China. Furthermore, today we find India's old strategic partner, Russia, beginning to tilt a bit more towards China in the realms of security and defense cooperation, which has caused a bit of unease in New Delhi. This has been witnessed in the more recent event at the United Nations where Russia followed the same line as China that opposed negotiations to reform the United Nations Security Council, which could hamper India's chances.



## Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

Therefore, the question that emerges is whether this new partnership is based on the current (geo-political) necessities or the various (economic) compulsions that have put two Cold War adversaries into a common platform, and whether India would face a major setback because of this new global positioning.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

---

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Marcin Kaczmarski, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*, (New York: Routledge, 2015), <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=5wGUBwAAQBAJ&pg=PT84&lp=PT84&dq=Russia-China+defence+trade&source=bl&ots=rrJ-I4OoyO&sig=e0YNhi7erc7AC9es8unHrtuT00k&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CFEQ6AEwCGoVChMIwauvvr00xwIVSKeUCh23hgzh#v=onepage&q=Russia-China%20defence%20trade&f=false>, accessed on August 19, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> "Russia's Move to Sell S-400 Missiles to China may Rile India", *Business Standard*, August 29, 2014, [http://http://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/russia-s-move-to-sell-s-400-missiles-to-china-may-rile-india-114082900508\\_1.html](http://http://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/russia-s-move-to-sell-s-400-missiles-to-china-may-rile-india-114082900508_1.html), accessed on August 21, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> "An Uneasy Friendship", *The Economist*, May 9, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21650566-crisis-ukraine-drawing-russia-closer-china-relationship-far-equal>, accessed on August 21, 2015.

---