

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Alignment as a process: Explaining the trajectory of the Sino–Russian relationship

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Abstract

What factors make aligned relationships possible, and how can we account for transformation of alignments? Alignment patterns and the durability of some aligned relationships above others have often raised questions about factors that influence cooperative arrangements. This article makes a twofold contribution by proposing a tentative process-centred alignment typology as an analytical tool and by empirically applying this tool to examine Sino–Russian alignment (1991–2024). Our conceptual typology differentiates among six primary alignment types: thin strategic partnerships, coalitions, thick strategic partnerships, alliances, non-allied security communities, and allied security communities. We propose that these types become possible due to varying compatibility between prospective or existing alignment partners in their assessment of threats, interpretations of identities, and status expectations. Our empirical analysis focuses on specific upgrades in the Sino–Russian relationship as presented by both states in 1996, 2001, 2011, and 2021 while also discussing more recent developments after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Keywords: alignment; alliance; identity; Sino–Russian; status; strategic partnership; threat assessment

Introduction

Amidst upheavals of the past decade, including Russia's war on Ukraine, the northern enlargement of NATO and the intensification of US–China rivalry, various states have begun choosing sides, bringing alliances back to the focal point of contemporary politics. Yet, others have emphasised their refusal to take sides and pursued other – often less formal and more flexible – forms of alignment. The post–Cold War trajectory of Sino–Russian alignment is particularly interesting. Bitter rivals for part of the Cold War, China and Russia have settled their bilateral disputes, engaged in economic cooperation, and pursued an ever-closer alignment since the late 1990s onwards.¹ The strengthening of their relationship has led to a major debate on whether the two states have already formed or will form an alliance,² with the debate intensifying in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and China's relatively cautious position regarding it.

¹Bobo Lo, *Turning Point? Putin, Xi, and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine* (The Lowy Institute, 2022), available at: https://www.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/LO_%20Bobo_%20Xi_%20Putin%20and%20Invasion%20of%20Ukraine_%20Analysis_%20PDF%20Full%20v5.pdf, accessed 11 December 2023; Alexander Lukin, 'Have we passed the peak of Sino–Russian rapprochement?', *The Washington Quarterly*, 44:3 (2021), pp. 155–73.

²Huiyun Feng and Kai He, 'Why will China and Russia not form an alliance? The balance of beliefs in peacetime', *International Affairs*, 100:5 (2024), pp. 2089–112; Maria M. Papageorgiou and Alena Vieira, 'Mapping the literature on China and Russia in IR and area studies: A bibliometric analysis (1990–2019)', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 27:1 (2022), pp. 1–27.

So far, Moscow and Beijing have refrained from presenting their relationship as an alliance. Instead, they described it first as a 'strategic partnership', then as a 'comprehensive strategic partnership', and more recently as a 'partnership of no limits'. Yet, how can we categorise their alignment analytically beyond this self-categorisation? What factors have made the upgrades in their relationship possible? What factors can make their even closer cooperation possible, and what factors can limit this possibility? In other words, how likely are they to establish a viable alliance, and how likely is their relationship to transform into other alignment types?

This article makes a twofold contribution by proposing a tentative process-centred alignment typology as an analytical tool and by empirically applying this tool to examine Sino-Russian alignment. The case study provides us with a starting point to rethink the concept of alignment and gain a deeper understanding of factors that limit, open, and recast alignment pathways. Conceptually, our typology underscores continuous readjustment of alignment partners' expectations of mutual support and continuous renegotiation of their willingness to coordinate their policies and responses to threats. As typologies are often used 'to introduce conceptual and theoretical innovations, sometimes drawing together multiple lines of investigation or traditions of analysis',³ our framework expands and theorises Wilkins's⁴ empirical taxonomy of alignment by extending his original four alignment types to six and by proposing a set of necessary conditions for the emergence and transformation of alignment types. We achieve this by drawing on realist studies of alliances with their focus on threats⁵ and constructivist studies of alliances and security communities with their focus on identities,⁶ while also engaging with the literature on status-seeking.⁷

Our typology differentiates among six primary alignment types – thin strategic partnerships, coalitions, thick strategic partnerships, alliances, non-allied security communities, and allied security communities. We propose that these types become possible due to varying compatibility between prospective or existing partners in their assessment of threats, their interpretations of each other's identities, and their status expectations (which we treat as necessary, albeit not sufficient conditions). We further propose that a change in compatibility along these dimensions opens possibilities for transformation of the relationship – in terms of either greater/lesser confidence in mutual support within the same type, or evolving into another type or abandoning alignment. As we explain later in the article, the relationship between these necessary conditions and alignment types is constitutive rather than causal in the positivist sense. Empirically, the article offers a first-cut approximation of the proposed typology to the post-Cold War trajectory of Sino-Russian alignment, pushing beyond their self-categorisation to locate their alignment type as an analytical category and to examine its transformation. While we expect that our typology is generalisable to other bilateral alignments, we leave the aim of examining its applicability to future studies, as well as investigating its relevance for multilateral alignments.

Our case study focuses on changes in the compatibility of Russia's and China's threat assessment, interpretations of their identities, and their status expectations by undertaking narrative analysis of their strategic narratives in official documents and public statements between 1991 and 2024. An important element of policy-making, strategic narratives are simultaneously communication tools that policymakers employ to engage with their audiences, and frameworks of meaning that

³David Collier, Jody LaPorte, and Jason Seawright, 'Putting typologies to work: Concept formation, measurement, and analytic rigor', *Political Research Quarterly*, 65:1 (2012), p. 224.

⁴Thomas S. Wilkins, 'Alignment', not 'Alliance', *Review of International Studies*, 38:1 (2012), pp. 53–76.

⁵Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, 'Progressive research on degenerate alliances', *American Political Science Review*, 91:4 (1997), pp. 919–22; Alexander Korolev, *China–Russia Strategic Alignment in International Politics* (Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

⁶Colleen Chidley, 'Towards a framework of alignment in international relations', *Politikon*, 41:1 (2014), pp. 141–57.

⁷Deborah Welch Larson, T. V. Paul, and William C. Wohlforth, 'Status and World Order', in T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson and William C. Wohlforth (eds), *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 3–30.

allow them to make sense of the world.⁸ Our analysis includes two types of narratives as outlined by Miskimmon et al.:⁹ identity narratives that interpret distinctness of international actors (thus allowing us to examine compatibility of Russia's and China's interpretations of identity and status expectations) and system narratives that interpret the international environment (thus, allowing us to examine compatibility of their threat assessment). As narrative construction can reinforce or undermine aligned relationships,¹⁰ narratives are a crucial tool for examining alignment trajectories. We investigate specific alignment upgrades as presented by both states in 1996, 2001, 2011, and 2021, while also discussing more recent developments. In 1996 Russia and China established a 'partnership of strategic coordination based on equality and mutual benefit and oriented toward the 21st century'; in 2001 they signed the 'Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation'; in 2011 they announced an upgrade to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination'; and in 2021 they renewed the 'Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation'.

By focusing on these upgrades, we show how the process of Russia's and China's aligning between these upgrades (i.e., their continuous readjustment of expectations of mutual support and renegotiation of willingness to coordinate their policies and responses to threats) reconstitutes their relationship, opening or closing possibilities for further upgrades. The article begins by briefly discussing the existing literature to justify our conceptualisation of alignment as a process that has a constitutive effect on actors' threat assessment, identities, and status expectations. The second section presents our definition of alignment and our typology. We then illustrate our approach with the analysis of Sino-Russian alignment. Our conclusion suggests avenues for future research and discusses implications for policy debates.

Debates on Sino-Russian alignment: When, how, and why

While the IR literature has become increasingly detailed in discussing specific alignment types, there has been surprisingly little focus on situating cooperative arrangements in relation to each other. There has also been a noticeable disagreement on what constitutes alignment to begin with. Some have treated 'alignment' as synonymous with 'alliance'.¹¹ Others have differentiated between them by emphasising 'the greater length of commitment present in an alliance'.¹² Yet others have drawn a line between alignments and strategic partnerships, with the former focusing on external threats and the latter on common interests.¹³ However, we agree with Wilkins¹⁴ that it is more appropriate to treat diverse formats of security cooperation as falling under the wider umbrella of alignment – an 'upgrading of bilateral relations (...) from regular channels to an elevated or intensified condition'. Wilkins's¹⁵ alignment taxonomy includes four types: coalitions, alliances, strategic partnerships, and security communities. While making a convincing case for treating these as distinct types of alignment empirically, Wilkins stops short of explaining their differences – either among these four types or within them¹⁶ – or from theorising alignment transformation. Yet, how

⁸ Andreas Antoniadis, Alister Miskimmon, and Ben O'Loughlin, *Great Power Politics and Strategic Narratives* (Centre for Global Political Economy, University of Sussex, 2010).

⁹ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (Routledge, 2014).

¹⁰ Trine Flockhart, 'Towards a strong NATO narrative: From a "practice of talking" to a "practice of doing"', *International Politics*, 49:1 (2012), pp. 78–97.

¹¹ Stephen M. Walt, 'Alliances in a unipolar world', *World Politics*, 61:1 (2009), pp. 86–120.

¹² J. D. Morrow, 'Alliances and asymmetry: An alternative to the capability aggregation model of alliances', *American Journal of Political Science*, 35:4 (1991), pp. 904–33, available at: [<https://doi.org/10.2307/2111499>].

¹³ Nien-Chung Chang-Liao, 'The limits of strategic partnerships: Implications for China's role in the Russia–Ukraine war', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 44:2 (2023), pp. 226–47.

¹⁴ Thomas S. Wilkins, 'Japan–Australia security relations: Building a real strategic partnership?', in William T. Tow and Rikki Kersten (eds), *Bilateral Perspectives on Regional Security* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 114.

¹⁵ Wilkins, 'Alignment', not 'Alliance', pp. 53–76.

¹⁶ Bang, Jiun, 'Why so many layers? China's "state-speak" and its classification of partnerships', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 13:2 (2017), pp. 380–97.

can we account for emergence and maintenance of specific alignment types in particular relationships? And how can we explain a change in alignment types of the same partners? To address these questions, we begin by discussing key arguments related to alliances, security communities, and strategic partnerships. Developed largely in parallel, these debates offer useful insights that are applicable to other alignment types and the overall conceptualisation of alignment.

Alliance studies, traditionally dominated by realists, often focus on threats while diverging in their interpretation:¹⁷ balance-of-power studies link threats to the uneven distribution of capabilities,¹⁸ while balance-of-threats approaches incorporate decision-makers' perceptions of others' intentions.¹⁹ Often focusing on common threats, alliance scholars also note that 'alliances can advance diverse, but compatible, interest'.²⁰ For example, states facing a volatile domestic environment may join alliances to address domestic threats.²¹ In Walt's²² definition, an alliance is 'a formal (or informal) commitment for security cooperation between two or more states, intended to augment each member's power, security, and/or influence'. This literature notes an important role of partners' capabilities by differentiating between symmetrical and asymmetrical alliances: the autonomy–security trade-offs make asymmetrical alliances easier to establish, with stronger partner(s) benefiting from increased autonomy and the lesser benefiting from increased security. Symmetrical alliances, on the other hand, are more demanding as they 'require greater agreement on the interests that the alliance advances'.²³

Realists' focus on threats has often downplayed the significance of how partners interpret each other, anticipate changes in their capabilities, and assess the feasibility of an alliance. Such factors have been centre-stage in constructivist studies of security communities. Drawing on earlier work by Deutsch,²⁴ this literature emphasises shared identities as enabling cooperation and demonstrates how groups of states can develop into a security community – a 'transnational region comprised of sovereign states whose people maintain dependable expectations of peaceful change'.²⁵ Adler and Greve²⁶ further conceptualise a security community as a mechanism of security governance: underpinned by mutual trust among members, it 'quells the internal and external security dilemma for states within a security community'. While their argument about the internal security dilemma is convincing, the point about the external security dilemma is less developed and raises important questions about a security community's responses to external threats.²⁷ It also raises questions about differences between allied and non-allied communities, and about the role of identities and trust in other alignment types.

Finally, the strategic partnerships literature explores diverse alignments that have proliferated in recent decades, differentiating among issue-specific and broader partnerships, those that 'have considerable meaning' and those 'vague in purpose and structure'.²⁸ Despite a variety of practices, strategic partnerships are more informal compared to alliances; they enable multiple dimensions

¹⁷ Jesse C. Johnson, 'External threat and alliance formation', *International Studies Quarterly*, 61:3 (2017), pp. 736–45.

¹⁸ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (McGraw-Hill, 1979).

¹⁹ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Cornell University Press, 1987).

²⁰ James D. Morrow, 'Alliances and asymmetry: An alternative to the capability aggregation model of alliances', *American Journal of Political Science*, 35:4 (1991), p. 905.

²¹ John M. Owen, 'When do ideologies produce alliances? The Holy Roman Empire, 1517–1555', *International Studies Quarterly*, 49:1 (2005), pp. 73–100.

²² Walt, 'Alliances in a unipolar world', p. 86.

²³ Morrow, 'Alliances and asymmetry', p. 930.

²⁴ Karl W. Deutsch, *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience* (Princeton University Press, 1957).

²⁵ Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, 'Security communities in theoretical perspective', *Cambridge Studies in International Relations*, 62 (1998), p. 30.

²⁶ Emanuel Adler and Patricia Greve, 'When security community meets balance of power: Overlapping regional mechanisms of security governance', *Review of International Studies*, 35:S1 (2009), p. 71.

²⁷ Magnus Ekengren, 'A return to geopolitics? The future of the security community in the Baltic Sea Region', *Global Affairs*, 4:4–5 (2018), pp. 503–19.

²⁸ Sean Kay, 'What is a strategic partnership?', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 47:3 (2000), p. 16; Jonathan Holslag, 'The elusive axis: Assessing the EU–China strategic partnership', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 49:2 (2011), pp. 293–313.

of cooperation; and they bring together states that may disagree on their values or threats.²⁹ To quote Tyushka and Czechowska,³⁰ strategic partnerships ‘provide an incentivised form of engagement and cooperation-while-at-competition’. Another key feature is their emphasis on equality of partners. While some scholars accept these claims of equality – as they are articulated by partners – as reflective of their practices,³¹ others underscore ‘the fiction of equality’, which is ‘easier to sell at home’ and can be useful ‘in protecting the country’s image abroad.’³² This literature, however, struggles to account for differences among strategic partnerships in their intensity and scope, and to explain whether/how strategic partnerships transform into other alignment types.

Although our brief discussion does not do justice to these debates, it highlights insufficient attention to identities and status expectations in the realist debate and similarly insufficient attention to material asymmetries in studies of security communities and strategic partnerships, particularly in terms of how changing capabilities are linked to partners’ status expectations. Furthermore, although empirical studies are often attentive to change, they downplay change in their conceptualisation of alignment. Balance-of-power and balance-of-threats approaches, for example, focus on changing capabilities or threats, while studies of strategic partnerships examine changing intensity of cooperation. The focus on change is also evident in studies of how security communities emerge, mature, or decay. Most studies also acknowledge the significance of changing domestic politics. Yet, the explicit focus on change is largely absent in most conceptualisations of alignment – alignment is conceptualised as something that is, rather than a relationship that is always developing through the process of aligning – which, as a result, poses challenges for explaining and comparing alignment trajectories.

The empirical literature on Sino–Russian alignment faces similar challenges.³³ Some argue that their relationship has already become an ‘alliance dominated by Beijing’,³⁴ a ‘tacit alliance’,³⁵ or a ‘quasi- alliance’.³⁶ Others suggest that their cooperation has progressed to the level where they ‘appear ready for a tighter defense pact should the two countries decide to commit to it’.³⁷ Yet, others interpret it as an ‘interests-based relationship between strategically autonomous actors’,³⁸ or a strategic partnership.³⁹ Existing studies link Sino–Russian rapprochement to their ideological similarity and imperatives of regime survival,⁴⁰ economic complementarity,⁴¹ leaders’ beliefs and personal relationship,⁴² and opposition to Washington.⁴³ Yet, this literature has been less concerned

²⁹ H. D. P. Envall and Ian Hall, ‘Asian strategic partnerships: New practices and regional security governance’, *Asian Politics & Policy*, 8:1 (2016), pp. 87–105; Chang-Liao, ‘The limits of strategic partnerships’.

³⁰ Andriy Tyushka and Lucyna Czechowska, ‘Strategic partnerships, international’, in Lucyna Czechowska, Andriy Tyushka, Agata Domachowska, Karolina Gawron-Tabor and Joanna Piechowiak-Lamparska (eds), *States, International Organizations and Strategic Partnerships* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), p. 14.

³¹ Chang-Liao, ‘The limits of strategic partnerships’.

³² Vidya Nadkarni, *Strategic Partnerships in Asia: Balancing without Alliances* (Routledge, 2010), p. 201.

³³ Papageorgiou and Vieira, ‘Mapping the literature on China and Russia’.

³⁴ Stephen Blank, ‘Liberalism’s puzzle: The Russo–Chinese alliance in the light of Russian aggression against Ukraine’, *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 34:4 (2022), pp. 555–577 (p. 556).

³⁵ Vasily Kashin, ‘Tacit alliance: Russia and China take military partnership to new level’, *Carnegie Moscow Center* (2019).

³⁶ A. Lukin, ‘The Russia–US–China strategic triangle in the Asia-Pacific’, in T. Akaha, J. Yuan and W. Liang (eds), *Trump’s America and International Relations in the Indo-Pacific: Theoretical Analysis of Changes & Continuities* (Springer International Publishing, 2021), pp. 99–120, available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-75925-4_5.

³⁷ Korolev, *China–Russia Strategic Alignment in International Politics*, p. 25.

³⁸ Lo, *Turning Point?*, p. 4.

³⁹ Chang-Liao, ‘The limits of strategic partnerships’.

⁴⁰ M. Kaczmarek, ‘Domestic politics: A forgotten factor in the Russian–Chinese relationship’, in S. Kirchberger, S. Sinjen and N. Wörmer (eds), *Russia–China Relations: Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?* (Springer International Publishing, 2022), pp. 59–71, available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97012-3_4.

⁴¹ Alexander Gabuev, ‘Russia’s reliance on China will persist even after Vladimir Putin is gone’, *The Economist* (18 March 2023), available at: <https://www.economist.com/russias-reliance-on-china-will-persist-even-after-vladimir-putin-is-gone-says-alexander-gabuev>.

⁴² Feng and He, ‘Why will China and Russia not form an alliance?’

⁴³ J. M. Owen, ‘China and Russia contra liberal hegemony’, in B. K. Yoder (ed.), *The United States and Contemporary China–Russia Relations: Theoretical Insights and Implications* (Springer International Publishing, 2022), pp. 131–53,

with establishing why some factors may be more important or how they interact. For example, Korolev's⁴⁴ analysis of different stages in Sino–Russian alignment discusses advances in their military, logistical, and operational compatibility while bracketing changes in their expectations of mutual support or explaining those changes. It is not surprising that recent studies have been criticised for providing 'overdetermined "kitchen sink" explanations'.⁴⁵ Responding to this critique, we push beyond a focus on causes as existing outside of this relationship by looking inside – at the changing compatibility of China's and Russia's interpretations of identities, status expectations, and threats.

Process-centred alignment typology

We define alignment as a process of cooperative engagement between two or more international actors that involves continuous readjustment of their expectations of mutual support and continuous renegotiation of their willingness to coordinate their policies and responses to threats. By focusing on readjustment and renegotiation, we can more convincingly explain how alignments emerge, sustain, transform, or decay. Furthermore, this focus allows us to develop a more rigorous and conceptually grounded differentiation among alignment types that arise from variations in partners' expectations of mutual support and their willingness to coordinate policies. While our conceptual typology builds on Wilkins's⁴⁶ empirical taxonomy, it goes significantly further by differentiating among six rather than four primary types: in addition to coalitions, alliances, strategic partnerships, and security communities, we disaggregate strategic partnerships and security communities into four more nuanced types to account for different intensity of cooperation in strategic partnerships (thin and thick strategic partnerships) and different salience of security cooperation in security communities (allied and non-allied security communities). We argue that thin and thick strategic partnerships expose different levels of commitment and functionality – from minimal levels of consultation in thin strategic partnerships to strategic coordination of policies in thick strategic partnerships (while still falling short of significantly closer cooperation in non-allied strategic communities). Our differentiation between non-allied and allied strategic communities draws on Adler and Barnett's⁴⁷ distinction between loosely and tightly coupled communities. Non-allied communities, while pursuing close economic and diplomatic cooperation and while 'maintain[ing] dependable expectations of peaceful change'⁴⁸ among themselves, do not develop mechanisms of collective security. Allied security communities, on the other hand, not only 'maintain dependable expectations of peaceful change' among themselves but also form closely integrated alliances and, thus, can be particularly effective in coordinating their responses to external threats (significantly more effective compared to coalitions or alliances).

Furthermore, our typology introduces specific necessary (albeit not sufficient) conditions that make these alignment types possible. These necessary conditions are (i) compatibility of partners' threat assessment; (ii) compatibility of their identities, particularly their understandings of the Other (alignment partner) as linked to understandings of Self; and (iii) compatibility of their status expectations – as all of these are articulated in official strategic narratives of alignment partners. We treat these conditions as 'necessary' because they constitute minimal conditions that are in place when particular types of alignment emerge, sustain, or transform – they constitute the alignment as a relationship, and they reconstitute it in the process of aligning. Yet, they are not 'sufficient' in the sense that they do not cause or determine a particular alignment type but rather make it

available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93982-3_6; B. K. Yoder, 'International relations theory and the puzzle of China–Russia alignment', in B. K. Yoder (ed.), *The United States and Contemporary China–Russia Relations: Theoretical Insights and Implications* (Springer International Publishing, 2022), pp. 1–26, available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93982-3_1.

⁴⁴Korolev, *China–Russia Strategic Alignment in International Politics*.

⁴⁵Yoder, 'International relations theory and the puzzle of China–Russia alignment', p. 8.

⁴⁶Thomas S. Wilkins, "'Alignment", not "alliance"."

⁴⁷Adler and Barnett, 'Security communities in theoretical perspective', p. 30.

⁴⁸Ibid.

possible, while other context-specific factors may be needed to trigger the formal establishment or transformation of alignment.

Thus, our understanding of alignment as a process and of the way in which these necessary conditions constitute and reconstitute specific alignment types is in line with a constructivist assumption about the co-constitution of agents and structures, which leads us to focus on the process of constitution rather than causality, with the latter more typical in the positivist research. To quote Wendt,⁴⁹ the aim of constitutive explanations is 'to show how the properties of a system are constituted'. Importantly, Wendt acknowledges that 'all systems (...) are always in process, continually being reproduced through time even if they do not change' – an assumption that is consistent with our conceptualisation of alignment as a process of cooperative engagement that continuously reproduces or transforms aligned relationships. Yet, to continue with Wendt's elaboration, 'constitutive theories often abstract away from these processes and take "snapshots" instead, in an effort to explain how systems are constituted'. Drawing on these insights, our constitutive explanation of alignment trajectories focuses on a series of snapshots by exploring the extent of compatibility between alignment partners along the three dimensions that we have identified at particular points in time, while at the same time examining how partners' interactions between these points in time have allowed them to reinterpret their understandings of identities, threats, and status expectations and, thus, to reconstitute their relationship.

Let us examine these necessary conditions. Security scholars agree that threats are central to the formation of coalitions and alliances,⁵⁰ while less important for strategic partnerships.⁵¹ The role of threats in security communities is less straightforward: although some emerge through security cooperation, others downplay the significance of security.⁵² Moreover, while realists predominantly focus on threats to physical survival, constructivists also examine threats to ontological security.⁵³ Others have shown the significance of domestic threats.⁵⁴ To account for a range of possible threats, we focus not on their commonality, but rather on compatibility of threat assessment – the compatibility of partners' understandings of severe and urgent threats – and differentiate between low and high compatibility.⁵⁵ The compatibility of threat assessment is high when prospective or existing partners agree on the sources of threat, its magnitude, and its urgency, that is, they identify the same threat (for example, another international actor) and interpret this threat both as more severe compared to other threats facing their state and as urgent (i.e., requiring an imminent response). The compatibility is low when partners either identify different severe threats, or when they identify the same threat but disagree on interpreting its magnitude or urgency – for example, one partner interprets this threat as more important or more urgent than the other, thus leading to different strategies of addressing it and different preferences regarding a joint response. To emphasise, since we define compatibility of threat assessment as the compatibility of partners' understandings of severe and urgent threats (as opposed to any other threats), we treat the compatibility of threat assessment as

⁴⁹Alexander Wendt, 'On constitution and causation in international relations', *Review of International Studies*, 24:5 (1998), p.105.

⁵⁰Blank, 'Liberalism's puzzle'; Walt, 'Alliances in a unipolar world'.

⁵¹Chang-Liao, 'The limits of strategic partnerships'; M. Papageorgiou and M. Eslami, 'Strategic partnerships and the promotion of bilateralism: The case of Sino-Russian relationship', in Y. Li, F. J. B. S. Leandro, J. Tavares da Silva and C. Rodrigues (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook on China–Europe–Africa Relations* (Springer Nature Singapore, 2025), pp. 139–58, available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-5640-7_6.

⁵²Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'From fratricide to security community: Re-theorising difference in the constitution of Nordic peace', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 16:4 (2013), pp. 483–513.

⁵³E. Wishnick, 'The paradox of Sino-Russian partnership: Global normative alignment and regional ontological insecurity', in B. K. Yoder (ed.), *The United States and Contemporary China–Russia Relations: Theoretical Insights and Implications* (Springer International Publishing, 2022), pp. 155–80, available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93982-3_7.

⁵⁴Owen, 'When do ideologies produce alliances?'; Mark L. Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789–1989* (Cornell University Press, 2005).

⁵⁵See Patricia A. Weitsman, 'Intimate enemies: The politics of peacetime alliances', *Security Studies*, 7:1 (1997), pp. 156–93, and Aaron Rapport, 'Threat perceptions and hidden profiles in alliances: Revisiting Suez', *Security Studies*, 29:2 (2020), pp. 199–23, on differences in threat assessment in alliances.

low when partners identify the same threat, but both see it as non-urgent or less severe compared to other threats facing their states. We propose that high compatibility is a necessary condition for coalitions, alliances, and allied security communities (as they may need to address urgent military threats, thus requiring military support from alignment partners), whereas thin and thick strategic partnerships and non-allied security communities can emerge and sustain in conditions of low compatibility (as their cooperation is limited to diplomatic or rhetorical support in the absence of compatible urgent threats).

Our second necessary condition (compatibility of partners' identities) relates to expectations of mutual support. Studies of cooperative behaviour often interpret such expectations as linked to trust: '[g]iven the significant uncertainty regarding the ally's level of commitment and the potentially disastrous consequences of being abandoned, states have an incentive to pay careful attention to whether a potential ally can be trusted.'⁵⁶ Yet, trust varies in not only its extent but also its nature. Uslaner's⁵⁷ differentiation between strategic and moralistic trust is particularly relevant. 'Strategic' trust (often linked to the notion of partner's credibility) relates to a calculated probability of cooperative behaviour based on available knowledge,⁵⁸ and it may be present in relationships where partners disagree on their identities or values. A significantly deeper 'moralistic' trust emerges when actors share their identities and values – when they interpret themselves as 'we'.⁵⁹ While strategic trust opens the possibility for limited cooperation on specific issues (with lower expectations of mutual support), moralistic trust opens the possibility for deeper, multi-faceted, longer-term cooperation (with higher expectations of mutual support).

To account for these differences, our second condition captures the extent to which partners share, contest, or reject each other's identities. Constructivists generally agree that actors construct their identities through 'othering' that ranges from interpreting another actor as a radical Other ('we are not them') to a non-radical Other (they are different from us, but less so than a radical Other) to a member of our in-group constituting 'we'.⁶⁰ When partners interpret each other as radical Others, only limited strategic trust is possible (with lower expectations of mutual support), making closer longer-term cooperation unlikely. Non-radical Otherness opens possibility of greater strategic trust and corresponding expectations of mutual support. Shared identities ('we') encourage deeper moralistic trust and allow for higher expectations of mutual support. Thus, we differentiate among (i) incompatibility/low compatibility (radical Others), (ii) medium compatibility (non-Radical Others), and (iii) high compatibility ('we'). Coalitions and thin strategic partnerships can emerge and sustain in conditions of incompatible identities as their issue-specific time-limited cooperation is predicated on limited strategic trust, with lower expectations of mutual support. Alliances and thick strategic partnerships, on the other hand, require at least medium compatibility of partners' identities, as their cooperation is more intense and is predicated on greater strategic trust, with higher expectations of mutual support. Finally, allied and non-allied security communities emerge and sustain only in the conditions of highly compatible (shared) identities as their multi-faceted, long-term, and much deeper cooperation requires moralistic trust, with high expectations of mutual support.

Our third necessary condition – compatibility of status expectations – is linked to partners' willingness to coordinate their policies and provide support. International status generally relates to 'collective beliefs about a given state's ranking on valued attributes' in a status hierarchy.⁶¹ Because any alignment is constituted by particular alignment roles, with each partner holding either a dominant, an equal, or a subordinate position vis-à-vis other partner(s), their status expectations –

⁵⁶ Michaela Mattes, 'Reputation, symmetry, and alliance design', *International Organization*, 66:4 (2012), p. 684.

⁵⁷ Eric M. Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁵⁸ Andrew H. Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁵⁹ Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust*, p. 18.

⁶⁰ Stephen White and Valentina Feklyunina, *Identities and Foreign Policies in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (The Other Europes, 2014).

⁶¹ Deborah Larson Welch, Thazha Varkey Paul, and William C. Wohlforth, Status and World Order, in *Status in World Politics* (2014), p.7

the status that they believe they ‘deserve’ – delimit their willingness to take on alignment roles and their acceptance of symmetrical or asymmetrical alignments.⁶² For example, in a bilateral alignment status expectations are incompatible when both partners expect a dominant position, whereas they are compatible when partners either accept each other’s equality (symmetrical alignments), or when they both accept a dominant/subordinate relationship (asymmetrical alignments). Since alignment types vary in how closely their members coordinate their policies (and, crucially, how long-term this coordination is), we propose that alignments requiring closer and longer-term coordination and higher compatibility of status expectations. For instance, while thin strategic partnerships may be constituted by actors with incompatible status expectations, coalitions and thick strategic partnerships emerge and sustain when partners’ status expectations are at least minimally compatible. Alliances demand an even higher compatibility of status expectations, with the highest compatibility present in allied security communities (as actors are particularly sensitive to accepting limitations on their autonomy in matters of security compared to other areas).

Thus, bilateral relationships can transform into alliances or allied security communities (the most supportive and integrated alignment type) only when partners ‘work to minimize concerns about positional costs (costs associated with “issues of status, influence, and hierarchy in a given order or system”)’.⁶³ Sometimes states may develop symbiotic ‘status partnerships’ with other states – arguably the case of Russia and China.⁶⁴ Yet, while Sino–Russian alignment has facilitated their status-seeking vis-à-vis the ‘West’ as the key reference group for both Moscow’s and Beijing’s status-seeking, it has also highlighted tensions in their status expectations vis-à-vis each other.

Table 1 illustrates how the six alignment types map into these necessary conditions. Thin strategic partnerships are easiest to establish; they can emerge and persist between partners with incompatible identities, threat assessment, and status expectations. If partners’ identities, threat assessment, or status expectations become more compatible, thin strategic partnerships can evolve into other types – coalitions (if their threat assessment becomes compatible, and their status expectations become at least minimally compatible), thick strategic partnerships (if their identities achieve medium compatibility, with an increase in compatibility of status expectations), or alliances (if their threat assessment becomes compatible, and their identities achieve medium compatibility, with a further increase in compatibility of status expectations). To transform into an allied security community, partners need to not only be compatible in their threat assessment but also reinterpret their identities as ‘we’ (a shared identity where warfare between partners becomes unthinkable – unlike an alliance where partners still can envisage a war between themselves). If partners have already reinterpreted their identities as ‘we’ while still diverging in interpretations of threats (and thus, have transformed into a non-allied security community), a change in their threat assessment may very rapidly create necessary conditions for an allied security community – a recent example of Finland’s and Sweden’s accession to NATO. Similarly, those types that require medium (alliances and thick strategic partnerships) or high (allied and non-allied security communities) compatibility of identities may evolve into less intense forms of alignment or abandon alignment altogether if partners’ identities or status expectations begin to diverge.

Our final step links these necessary conditions to partners’ domestic context by focusing on how understandings of threats, identities, and status are articulated in strategic narratives of state leaders and key decision-makers. Although domestic contestation of identities, status, and threats is beyond the scope of this study, by focusing on partners’ official strategic narratives we are able to

⁶²Reinhard Wolf, ‘Taking interaction seriously: Asymmetrical roles and the behavioral foundations of status’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 25:4 (2019), pp. 1186–211.

⁶³Oriana Skylar Mastro, ‘Sino–Russian military alignment and its implications for global security’, *Security Studies*, 33:2 (2024), p. 261.

⁶⁴Andrej Krickovic and Igor Pellicciari, ‘From “Greater Europe” to “Greater Eurasia”: Status concerns and the evolution of Russia’s approach to alignment and regional integration’, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 12:1 (2021), pp. 86–99; D. W. Larson, ‘China’s and Russia’s new status relationship’, in B. K. Yoder (ed.), *The United States and Contemporary China–Russia Relations: Theoretical Insights and Implications* (Springer International Publishing, 2022), pp. 107–29, available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93982-3_5.

Table 1. Alignment typology.

	Compatibility of Identities		
	Low (Radical Others)	Medium (Non-Radical Others)	High (we')
High compatibility of threat assessment	Coalitions	Alliances	Allied security communities
Low compatibility of threat assessment	Thin partnerships	Thick partnerships	Non-allied security communities
Compatibility of status expectations			

capture changes in articulated understandings produced by changes in domestic politics, including changes of state leadership or domestic coalitions. While recognising the structural logic of identities and status, we focus on how key decision-makers draw upon and reinterpret culturally embedded understandings in their strategic efforts to achieve domestic or foreign policy goals.⁶⁵ By conceptualising alignment as a constitutive process, we treat it as a continuous feedback loop: the compatibility of partners’ understandings of threats, identities, and status is constantly changing in the process of alignment – reproducing or eroding necessary conditions for the existing alignment type or creating necessary conditions for a different type. Thus, alignment process is not simply about moving along different stages, but rather about continuous reproduction, reinforcement, or erosion of partners’ expectations of and willingness to provide support, and of their understandings of threats.

Three caveats are in order. First, occasionally actors pursue an alignment type when necessary conditions are not in place – for instance, by forming an alliance while only minimally compatible in their identities (for example, the Sino–Soviet alliance). In this case, the alignment type remains a rhetorical tool without consequential expectations of mutual support, and it can easily disintegrate. Thus, our typology uses alignment types as analytical categories instead of accepting actors’ rhetorical claims. Second, our typology includes alignment types that differ in their intentionality: while actors choose to establish coalitions or alliances, they do not necessarily choose (at least not in the sense of formally establishing) security communities. The latter emerge organically, even though state leaders may cultivate shared identities. Finally, while we treat the compatibility of threat assessment, identities, and status expectations as separate conditions, we recognise that status expectations and understandings of threats are linked to culturally embedded interpretations of Selves and Others.⁶⁶

Sino–Russian alignment

We examine the trajectory of Sino–Russian alignment by zooming into four snapshots: 1996, 2001, 2011, and 2021, with the following section focusing on developments since 2022. For each snapshot, we trace how state leaders or foreign ministers articulate understandings of the alignment partner (as the Other for understandings of their own identity), of their status expectations vis-à-vis the partner, and of threats facing their states. We treat these snapshots as windows into ongoing processes of readjusting expectations of support and renegotiating willingness to coordinate their policies, which allows us to assess how the necessary conditions constituting the alignment have changed since the previous snapshot. Thus, we are not making causal claims about a change in conditions causing a transformation of the alignment in the positivist sense but rather show whether/how Sino–Russian alignment is constituted differently at a given point in time. Each

⁶⁵Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, *Strategic Narratives*.
⁶⁶Anne L. Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia’s Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity, and Security Interests* (JHU Press, 2009).

snapshot is accompanied by a brief discussion of interactions between Moscow and Beijing, highlighting the process of aligning as it unfolded between these points in time based on their threat assessment, identity, and status compatibility.

Snapshot 1: 1996

Historically, understandings of China in Russia were shaped by European ideas of the Orient as a radically different Other.⁶⁷ This influence, coupled with the USSR's vision of the PRC as a junior partner, and later a rival in the socialist camp, fed into interpretations of China in the 1990s as culturally different and somewhat inferior.⁶⁸ By 1996 Russia and China had already made three attempts to establish alliances: the 1896 Li–Lobanov Treaty; the 1945 Sino–Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance; and the 1950 Sino–Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance. With all three attempts being short-lived, these experiences had produced little ground for compatible understandings of Russia's and China's identities and status expectations, despite rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing in the late 1980s–early 1990s. At the same time, the 1996 Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions (signed by China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan) created structural conditions for their closer cooperation.

As articulated in 1996, Moscow's and Beijing's strategic narratives displayed a low compatibility of their identities. Yet, instead of focusing on each other's radical difference, they prioritised other historical and social Others to delineate their Selves. In Russia's case, strategic narratives interpreted Russia's identity by comparing it to the 'West', with no clear vision of China. By 1996, Russian elites were increasingly disillusioned with what they saw as rejection of Russia's equality by the 'West', leading to efforts to rebalance Russia's foreign policy through cooperation with China and India. Yet, Yel'tsin's⁶⁹ interview to a Russian news agency noted the 'eastern direction' of Russian foreign policy only after the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the 'West'. Similarly, China's narratives did not rely on Russia for delineating China's identity: they focused on China's ancient civilisation and the century of humiliation inflicted by the 'West'.⁷⁰ Both states also articulated incompatible status expectations by ruling out subordinate roles. While acknowledging Moscow's diminished capabilities, Yel'tsin⁷¹ insisted that 'Russia was, is and will be a great world power'. Beijing's narratives were more cautious. While praising 'great successes in reforms', Jiang Zemin⁷² admitted that China had a long way to go since 'great powers of the West [were] moving forward in the field of economics, science and technology'. Yet, when comparing Russia and China, Jiang Zemin⁷³ praised China's superiority: while 'the Soviet Union collapsed, (...) [i]n China, socialism has not only been preserved but has also been developed'.

The compatibility of Russia's and China's threat assessment was also low. While both lamented the hegemonism of the West, neither interpreted it as a severe or urgent threat. Even though Moscow expressed a 'clearly negative attitude towards the idea of NATO's expansion into the space of the former and already collapsed Warsaw Pact',⁷⁴ it insisted that for the first time in Russia's history, there were 'no real military threats for Russia either in the European or Asian directions'.⁷⁵ Instead, Russia's narratives emphasised 'the danger of a split in society, the danger

⁶⁷ Alexander Lukin, *The Bear Watches the Dragon: Russia's Perceptions of China and the Evolution of Russian–Chinese Relations since the Eighteenth Century* (Routledge, 2016).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Boris Yel'tsin, 'Interv'yu Prezidenta RF B.N. Yel'tsina agestvu Interfaks' (30 June 1996), available at: <https://yeltsin.ru/archive/paperwork/10365/>.

⁷⁰ William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessimist Nation* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁷¹ Boris Yel'tsin, 'Obrashchenie B.N. Yel'tsina k lichnomu sostavu vooruzhennykh sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii' (23 May 1996), available at: <https://yeltsin.ru/archive/paperwork/10262/>.

⁷² Zemin Jiang, 'The main breaths on the propaganda-ideological front', in *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*, 1 (1996), p. 572.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 574.

⁷⁴ Yevgeny Primakov, *Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya nakanune XXI veka: problem, perspektivy*, in T. Skakleina (ed.), *Vneshnyaya politika i bezopasnost' sovremennoi Rossii 1991–2002*, 1 (Rosspen, 2002), p. 194.

⁷⁵ Boris Yel'tsin, 'Predvybornaya platforma B.N. El'tsina' (30 March 1996), available at: <https://yeltsin.ru/archive/paperwork/96833/>.

of new shocks.’⁷⁶ Beijing’s threat assessment was equally inward-looking by focusing on China’s under-development and interpreting cooperation with technologically advanced Western states as essential: ‘the solution to all China’s problems ultimately needs to be based on the development of the economy’⁷⁷

Thus, Russia’s and China’s narratives in 1996 exhibited low compatibility of their identities, incompatible status expectations, and incompatible threat assessment, pointing at low expectations of mutual support, low willingness to accept alignment roles that would limit their autonomy or subordinate them to the other partner, and a lack of urgent threats that they could address together. Applying our typology, we locate their emerging alignment in the category of a ‘thin strategic partnership’. At the same time, they refrained from interpreting each other as threats, opening a possibility for closer cooperation in limited areas of mutual interest.

Snapshot 2: 2001

By 2001, the process of aligning had enabled Moscow and Beijing to readjust their expectations of support to an extent that they not only concluded the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, but also established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Yet, they had mostly focused on resolving border disputes, with no expectations of diplomatic or security coordination and with their bilateral trade remaining low. Despite the change in Russia’s leadership, Russia’s narratives continued prioritising the ‘West’ as Russia’s Other while China remained less visible. This was particularly evident when President Putin⁷⁸ did not mention China in his 2001 Address to the Russian Parliament. When the topic of China did come up, Putin⁷⁹ underscored their ‘mutual interests’ in seeking multipolarity, while refraining from any references to shared values and instead emphasising their geographic proximity: ‘we are neighbours, centuries-old neighbours’. This non-identification with China was especially noticeable when compared to Putin’s⁸⁰ description of Russia as a ‘friendly European nation’ later that year. Moreover, after 9/11 Russia’s narratives aligned the interpretation of Russia’s identity more closely with the ‘West’ as they emphasised a divide between ‘civilised humanity’ and the barbarism of terrorists. To quote Putin’s⁸¹ official address the people of the United States on behalf of Russia, ‘we are with you, we entirely and fully share and experience your pain. We support you.’

In a similar vein, China’s narratives avoided any identification with Russia while focusing on ‘common interests in promoting world multipolarization’.⁸² This non-identification was coupled with China’s mostly negative interpretation of Moscow’s and Beijing’s historical interaction that emphasised their inability to trust each other in the past: ‘that kind of old-style alliance or mutual antagonism between China and Russia (...) is not conducive and can even be very damaging to the long-term, steady development of bilateral relations’.⁸³

As earlier, Russia and China articulated incompatible status expectations: both insisted on strategic independence associated with great powerness, albeit acknowledging their current weaknesses. When commenting on a possibility of a joint response to Washington’s withdrawal from the

⁷⁶Boris Yel’tsin, ‘Otvety Prezidenta RF B.N. Yel’tsina na voprosy gazeta “Trud” (8 April 1996), available at: <https://yeltsin.ru/archive/paperwork/10364>).

⁷⁷Zemin Jiang, ‘Delat’ upor na politiku’, in *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*, 1 (1996), p. 592.

⁷⁸Vladimir Putin, ‘Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation’ (3 April 2001), available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21216>).

⁷⁹Vladimir Putin, ‘Excerpts from an Interview for Central Chinese Television, Xinhua News Agency and the Newspaper Renmin Ribao’ (13 June 2001), available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/21261>).

⁸⁰Vladimir Putin, ‘Speech in the Bundestag of the Federal Republic of Germany’ (25 September 2001), available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21340>).

⁸¹Vladimir Putin, ‘Statement on Terrorist Attacks in the USA’ (11 September 2001), available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/copy/21328>).

⁸²Zemin Jiang, ‘Create a favourable strategic situation and strengthen our national strategic capabilities’, in *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*, 3 (2001), p. 345.

⁸³Zemin Jiang, ‘Create a bright future for Sino–Russian relations together’, in *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*, 3 (2001), pp. 299–300.

1972 ABM Treaty, Putin⁸⁴ ruled out coordination with China: 'Russia today has sufficient strength and resources to react to any change in the sphere of international and strategic stability.' China's narratives remained more cautious. Although underscoring China's superiority as 'an ancient civilization' and praising Beijing's rapidly growing 'international standing and influence', Jiang Zemin⁸⁵ described China as a 'developing country with a large population [and] weak foundation'.

Moscow's and Beijing's threat assessment remained incompatible. Although Russia's Foreign Policy Concept⁸⁶ lamented 'a growing trend towards the establishment of a unipolar world order', Moscow did not describe the USA or NATO as a threat. Even Washington's withdrawal from the 1972 ABM treaty received a relatively low-key response, with Putin⁸⁷ stating that Moscow did not consider the withdrawal 'could result in the emergence of new threats to Russia's security'. Rather, following Moscow's rapprochement with Washington after 9/11, Putin⁸⁸ focused on the common threat of international terrorism. For China, the 'West' appeared more threatening, especially in challenging China's domestic politics and the status of Taiwan. To quote Jiang Zemin,⁸⁹ '[i]nternational hostile forces want to Westernize and divide China'. However, China continued prioritising economic development and further integration into the world economy.⁹⁰ Far from the honeymoon in Russia–US relations, Beijing also expressed its support for combating international terrorism and welcomed 'positive atmosphere for further improving and developing Sino-American relations'.⁹¹ Yet, China was caught off guard by Russia's acceptance of the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty: Beijing interpreted the enhanced US missile defence as a greater threat to China's strategic deterrent than to Russia's,⁹² pointing to diverging assessments of urgent threats.

Thus, by 2001 the continuing low compatibility between Russia's and China's identity narratives, status expectations, and threat assessment had not produced necessary conditions for a substantial upgrade in their alignment. Using our typology, we again locate their relationship in the category of a 'thin strategic partnership'. Yet, by settling most of their border disputes and by refraining from highlighting their radical Otherness (the references to which, nevertheless, persisted in some domestic narratives in both states), Moscow and Beijing were readjusting their expectations of mutual support: there was now sufficient ground for further cooperation on a wider range of issues, while new organisational structures opened possibilities for further readjustment and renegotiation.

Snapshot 3: 2011

During 2001–2011, Russia and China settled their remaining border disputes and noticeably increased their economic cooperation: whereas China became Russia's main trade partner after the EU, China's trade with Russia accounted for a modest share of China's economy.⁹³ By 2011, they had also gained limited experience of diplomatic coordination by using joint veto in the UNSC (for

⁸⁴Vladimir Putin, 'Excerpts from the Transcript of a Press Conference for Russian and Foreign Journalists' (18 July 2001), available at: {<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21291>}.

⁸⁵Zemin Jiang, 'Speech at a meeting celebrating the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China', in *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*, 3 (2001), pp. 262–64; Zemin Jiang, 'Uphold the four cardinal principles', in *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin*, 3 (2001), p. 219.

⁸⁶'Foreign Policy Conception of the Russian Federation', in Andrew Melville and T. Shakhleina (eds), *Russian Foreign Policy in Transition* (CEU Press, 2000), p. 91.

⁸⁷Vladimir Putin, 'Interview with the Financial Times' (17 December 2001), available at: {<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/21447>}.

⁸⁸Vladimir Putin, 'Interview with the American Broadcasting Company ABC' (7 November 2001), available at: {<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/21392>}.

⁸⁹Jiang, 'Uphold the four cardinal principles', p. 225.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 210.

⁹¹Jiang, 'The main breaths on the propaganda-ideological front', p. 344.

⁹²Peter Ferdinand, 'Sunset, sunrise: China and Russia construct a new relationship', *International Affairs*, 83:5 (2007), pp. 841–67.

⁹³WTO 'Trade Profiles 2012' (2012), available at: {https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/anrep_e/trade_profiles12_e.pdf}.

the first time since 1972) in 2007 and 2008, with a third veto in 2011.⁹⁴ Following China's participation in a first multilateral military exercise with SCO members in 2003,⁹⁵ Moscow and Beijing conducted regular joint exercises – on six occasions between 2005 and 2010.⁹⁶

This process of aligning had enabled Moscow and Beijing to reinterpret their understandings of each other and of their relationship: by 2011, China was noticeably more visible in Russia's narratives, with the alignment habitually described as the 'highest point in the entire history of Russian–Chinese contacts'.⁹⁷ Both Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev saw China as particularly important in economic terms: it was 'becoming [Russia's] very good partner and a market for our goods and investment in our economy'.⁹⁸ Yet, Moscow's references to their historical interaction remained reserved: 'we do share certain history; it was different, sometimes hard, but that's our common history'.⁹⁹ As previously, this non-identification contrasted with the idea of Russia's European-ness: although Russian narratives increasingly emphasised civilisational uniqueness, they continued delineating Russia's identity by comparing it to Europe: 'we are united with Europe by shared values, which, however, are primarily Christian values'.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Russia was more visible in China's narratives, with Hu Jintao¹⁰¹ describing the relationship as 'having reached an unprecedentedly high level' and with China's White Paper on National Defense praising a 'steady' improvement in the 'strategic mutual trust'.¹⁰² Similar to Moscow, Beijing prioritised economic cooperation¹⁰³ while avoiding any references to cultural identification with Russia and instead articulating China's identity through comparison to the century of humiliation.¹⁰⁴

While the compatibility of their identities moved closer to medium – both were more visible in each other's narratives without being radical Others – it remained fragile, with tensions in their status expectations. Medvedev,¹⁰⁵ for example, acknowledged a challenge of China's growth: Russia could not 'afford for certain problems to be resolved here in a less effective manner than they are resolved in China'. For Putin,¹⁰⁶ Russia's great poweriness was contingent on reinvigorating Russia-centric integration processes, as evident in his vision of the Eurasian Union as a 'supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles of the modern world' – independently rather than jointly with China. Although Moscow and Beijing carefully signalled their equality, status tensions were visible in a question posed to Medvedev by China's Central Television:

⁹⁴ UNSC, 'The Security Council Veto', Security Council Report (2023), available at: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/working_methods_theveto-7.pdf.

⁹⁵ Information Office of the State Council, PRC, *China's National Defense in 2010* (2011), available at: http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/09/09/content_281474986284525.htm.

⁹⁶ Dmitry Gorenburg, Paul Schwartz, and Brian Waidelich, 'Russian–Chinese Military Cooperation, An Increasingly Unequal Partnership', CNA (2023), available at: <https://www.cna.org/reports/2023/05/Russian-Chinese-Military-Cooperation.pdf>.

⁹⁷ Dmitry Medvedev, 'Interview to China Central Television (CCTV)' (12 April 2011), available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/10911>.

⁹⁸ Vladimir Putin, 'Polnoe interv'yū Putina rossiiskim telekanalam' (17 October 2011), available at: <https://ria.ru/20111017/462204254.html>.

⁹⁹ Medvedev, 'Interview to China Central Television (CCTV)' (12 April 2011).

¹⁰⁰ Vladimir Putin, 'Polnoe interv'yū Putina rossiiskim telekanalam'.

¹⁰¹ Jintao Hu, 'My budem vseгда priderzhivat'sya nezavisimoi i samostoyatel'noi vneshnei politiki', *Rossiiskaya gazeta* (10 June 2011), available at: <https://rg.ru/2011/06/10/china.html>.

¹⁰² Information Office of the State Council, PRC, *China's National Defense in 2010*.

¹⁰³ RIA, 'Medvedev: dogovor o družbe s KNR pozvolil reshit' samye slozhnye voprosy' (16 June 2011), available at: <https://ria.ru/20110616/389210198.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Information Office of the State Council, PRC, *China's Peaceful Development* (2011), available at: http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/09/09/content_281474986284646.htm.

¹⁰⁵ Dmitry Medvedev, 'Interview to Financial Times' (20 June 2011), available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/11630>.

¹⁰⁶ Vladimir Putin, 'Novy integratsionny proekt dlya Yevrazii – budushchee, kotoroe rozhdaetsya segodnya', *Izvestiya* (3 October 2011), available at: https://russiaeu.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/statya_predsdatel'ya_pravitelstva_rossii_v_v_putina_novyy_integratsionny_proekt_dlya_evrazii_budushch/.

having reminded Medvedev that ‘we used to call the Soviet Union our big brother’, the journalist wondered if Russians were ‘uncomfortable’ about China’s development.¹⁰⁷ Beijing’s narratives remained cautious in describing China, despite its immense growth, as a ‘developing country with a huge population.’¹⁰⁸ However, they consistently underscored Beijing’s strategic independence,¹⁰⁹ incompatible with limits on its autonomy.

By 2011, Moscow and Beijing were increasingly concerned about Washington’s democracy promotion. Yet, the compatibility of their threat assessment remained low. As Russia was experiencing domestic protests, Medvedev¹¹⁰ complained about ‘attempts to manipulate Russian citizens.’ Putin,¹¹¹ who had been bitterly critical of the USA since his speech at the 2007 Security Conference in Munich, suggested that ‘some want to move Russia aside so that it (...) would not prevent them from dominating the globe.’ China’s narratives were again more cautious. Although acknowledging ‘disagreements between China and the United States on the issue of human rights,’¹¹² Beijing avoided any references to the US threat while continuing to interpret economic under-development as a key obstacle to national rejuvenation. Thus, Beijing continued emphasising its openness for closer cooperation with the USA. Even though China’s White Paper on National Defense noted Washington’s attempts to strengthen its presence in the Asia-Pacific, it refrained from interpreting it as a threat.¹¹³ Both states refrained from vetoing the UNSC resolution authorising force against Libya, even though both later criticised the West for exceeding the mandate.¹¹⁴

Thus, by 2011, Russia and China had successfully reassured each other regarding their willingness to provide mutual support. With their identity narratives increasingly closer to medium compatibility, they were building up strategic trust that constituted a necessary condition for upgrading their alignment to a thick strategic partnership. Yet, while maintaining the ‘fiction of equality’, the salience of strategic independence in their status narratives and the remaining low compatibility of their threat assessment indicated a lack of necessary conditions for more integrated formats of an alliance or a security community (whether allied or non-allied).

Snapshot 4: 2021

Between 2011 and 2021, Sino–Russian alignment experienced a rapid growth of economic cooperation, with Russia’s pivot to Asia beginning after Putin’s re-election in 2012 and accelerating in response to Western sanctions following Russia’s annexation of Crimea. By 2021, their bilateral trade reached an impressive USD 146 billion.¹¹⁵ Although initially cautious towards China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Russia introduced the ‘Greater Eurasian Partnership’ in 2015, linking the BRI with the EAEU and later expanding this concept to include other regional organisations, such as SCO and ASEAN. Thus, Moscow signalled its intention to remain a regional leader by channelling China’s economic influence within a Eurasian framework.¹¹⁶ This decade also saw an

¹⁰⁷ Medvedev, ‘Interview to China Central Television (CCTV)’, available at: {<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/10911>}.

¹⁰⁸ The White House, ‘Press Conference with President Obama and President Hu of the People’s Republic of China’ (19 January 2011), available at: {<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/19/press-conference-president-obama-and-president-hu-peoples>}.

¹⁰⁹ Hu, ‘My budem vsegda priderzhivat’sya nezavisimoi i samostoyatel’noi vneshnei politiki’.

¹¹⁰ Dmitry Medvedev, ‘Address to the Federal Assembly’ (22 December 2011), available at: {<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/14088>}.

¹¹¹ Vladimir Putin, ‘Stenogramma programmy Razgovor s Vladimirom Putinyim. Prodolzhenie’ (15 December 2011), available at: {<https://rg.ru/2011/12/15/stenogramma.html>}.

¹¹² The White House, ‘Press Conference with President Obama and President Hu of the People’s Republic of China’.

¹¹³ Information Office of the State Council, PRC, *China’s National Defense in 2010* (2011), available at: {http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/09/09/content_281474986284525.htm}.

¹¹⁴ Tim Dunne and Jess Gifkins, ‘Libya and the state of intervention’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 65:5 (2011), pp. 515–29.

¹¹⁵ General Administration of Customs, PRC, Customs Statistics (n.d.), available at: {<http://stats.customs.gov.cn/indexEn>}, accessed 11 December 2024.

¹¹⁶ Gaziza Shakhanova and Jeremy Garlick, ‘The Belt and Road Initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union: Exploring the “Greater Eurasian Partnership”’, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 49:1 (2020), pp. 33–57.

expanding Sino–Russian security cooperation, including thirty-five joint military exercises.¹¹⁷ The ‘Vostok 2018’ exercise in Siberia heralded a significant shift by ‘simulat[ing] military conflict with NATO’, unlike previous simulations of Russia’s defence against China.¹¹⁸ Putin’s admission in 2019 that Russia was assisting China in developing an early missile warning system¹¹⁹ suggested that their cooperation was advancing to previously off-limits areas. Their growing diplomatic coordination was evident in eleven joint UNSC vetoes between 2011 and 2021, mostly concerning resolutions on Syria. Putin and Xi Jinping, who had become the CCP general secretary in 2012 and China’s president in 2013, boasted a close personal relationship. During this decade, Putin visited China on ten occasions, with Xi visiting Russia on eight occasions, thus making Russia ‘the principal destination throughout Xi’s time in office and the second-most common source of incoming visitor.’¹²⁰

By more closely aligning their policies during this decade, especially since 2014, Moscow and Beijing reinterpreted their understandings of each other and renegotiated their willingness to provide support to the extent where their relationship can be conceptualised as a thick strategic partnership. In 2021, unlike in the previous snapshots, Russia’s and China’s narratives described each other as key partners, while praising their friendship and trust. Putin’s¹²¹ address to the Russian Parliament mentioned relationships with Asia ahead of Latin America, Africa, or Europe, while China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi¹²² talked about their ‘rock-firm and unbreakable’ unity. Yet, as before, Russia’s and China’s narratives did not rely on each other to delineate their identities while continuing to appeal to the ideas of Europe or the ‘West’: in Russia’s case, emphasising Russia’s civilisational uniqueness despite its ‘inseparable cultural and historical connection to Europe’;¹²³ and in China’s case, substantiating the ‘greatest dream’ of national rejuvenation by overcoming the legacy of the century of humiliation.¹²⁴ Importantly, some experts in both states displayed uncertainty about each other’s commitments. A policy brief by the Russian International Affairs Council, for example, lamented about ‘the population and political elites in both countries (...) remain[ing] suspicious about strategic intentions’,¹²⁵ while an editorial in China’s *Global Times*¹²⁶ pointed out that ‘some Chinese worry that once Russia’s leadership changes, Russia may tilt toward the West and join the containment against China’.

¹¹⁷ Dmitry Gorenburg, Paul Schwartz, Brian Waidelich, and Elisabeth Wishnick, ‘Russian–Chinese Military Cooperation’, CNA (2023), available at: {<https://www.cna.org/reports/2023/05/Russian-Chinese-Military-Cooperation.pdf>}.

¹¹⁸ Brian Carlson, ‘Vostok-2018’, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (2018), available at: {<https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/vostok-2018-another-sign-of-strengthening-russia-china-ties>}.

¹¹⁹ TASS, ‘Russia Helping China to Create Early Missile Warning System, Says Putin’ (3 October 2019), available at: {<https://tass.com/defense/1081109>}.

¹²⁰ Sense Hofstede, ‘Diplomatic Data Signals Shifts over the Xi Era’, Jamestown Foundation, *China Brief*, 24:22 (2024), available at: {<https://jamestown.org/program/diplomatic-data-signals-shifts-over-the-xi-era/>}.

¹²¹ Vladimir Putin, ‘Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly’ (21 April 2021), available at: {<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/65418>}.

¹²² Yi Wang, ‘Rise to the Challenges, Serve the Nation and Embark on a New Journey for Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics’ (16 January 2021), available at: {https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/202101/t20210116_678966.html}.

¹²³ Vladimir Putin, ‘Being Open, Despite the Past’ (22 June 2021), available at: {<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/65899>}.

¹²⁴ Jinping Xi, ‘Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China’ (1 July 2021), available at: {http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c_1310038244.htm}.

¹²⁵ Andrey V. Kortunov, Katya A. Kuz’mmina, and Darya A. Terkina, ‘Strategicheskoe vzaimodeistvie Rossii i Kitaya: znachimost’ i suchsnost’, in Andrey V. Kortunov, Katya A. Kuz’mmina, Darya A. Terkina, Feng Liu, and Zhihua Sun, *Policy Brief 28/2020: Strategicheskoe vzaimodeistvie Rossii i Kitaya* (Russian International Affairs Council, 2020), p. 11, available at: {<https://russiancouncil.ru/papers/Russia-China-Strategic-PolicyBrief28.pdf>}.

¹²⁶ Global Times, ‘China–Russia Cooperation Has No Upper Limits’ (22 March 2021), available at: {<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1219115.shtml>}.

This persistent tension was also evident in status expectations. While Putin¹²⁷ emphasised that Russia's defence capabilities had 'surpassed many countries, in some respects, including the United States', Xi¹²⁸ articulated a strikingly confident identity of a 'thriving nation that is advancing with unstoppable momentum towards rejuvenation'. Although both states reiterated their respect for equality,¹²⁹ some Russian and Chinese experts increasingly questioned the feasibility of such equality. As suggested by Zhao Huasheng from Fudan University,¹³⁰ if Moscow and Beijing established an alliance, 'the comprehensive power balance [would] be tilted towards China'. Some Russian experts were anxious about 'the overall balance of power abruptly changing in the PRC's favor'.¹³¹ Pointing at Beijing's increasingly assertive diplomacy, they called for hedging: 'Switching to China's side', they argued, 'corresponds neither to Russia's interests as a country seeking to become an independent center of influence in Eurasia, nor to the historical self-identification of its population which sees dependence on anyone as hardly possible'.¹³²

With status anxiety carefully downplayed in official narratives, by 2021 Russia and China had moved closer to more compatible threat assessment. Lamenting Washington's hegemony, Putin's¹³³ narratives were particularly preoccupied with Ukraine's NATO aspirations and promised a harsh response. China appeared equally critical of Washington, accusing it of 'bullying and provocations'¹³⁴ in the context of a rapid deterioration of the US–China relationship. Although significantly more combative, Beijing nonetheless emphasised its continuing openness for closer economic cooperation with Washington: 'instead of returning to notorious protectionism and disengagement, it is important to unite in the name of a more open, inclusive, mutually beneficial, balanced development of globalization'.¹³⁵ This openness worried some Russian experts who feared that China would reinvigorate its relationship with the United States 'at the first opportunity'.¹³⁶ Thus, China's continuing prioritisation of its economic development and its attempts to maintain economic links with the United States pointed to the remaining low (albeit noticeably increased) compatibility of Russia's and China's threat assessment. With the compatibility of their identity narratives and status expectations remaining medium, we can identify continuing necessary conditions for a thick strategic partnership rather than for deeper formats of an alliance or a non-allied or allied security communities.

Which way for Sino–Russian alignment? 2022 and beyond

Mapping the trajectory of Sino–Russian alignment onto our typology (Table 2), we locate their relationship in the category of a thin strategic partnership between 1996 and 2011, progressing to a thick strategic partnership and deepening their cooperation within this alignment type between 2011 and 2024. By the time of writing, the process of their aligning has not yet produced necessary

¹²⁷Vladimir Putin, 'Direct Line with Vladimir Putin' (30 June 2021), available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/65973>).

¹²⁸Xi, 'Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China'.

¹²⁹Vladimir Putin, 'Russia and China: A Future-Oriented Strategic Partnership', Article for the Chinese News Agency Xinhua (3 February 2022), available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/articles/67694>; Hua Zhang, 'Kitaisko-Rossiiskie Otnosheniya v Kontekste 100-Letnei Istorii KPK', *Trud* (16 July 2021), available at: http://ru.china-embassy.gov.cn/rus/sghd/202107/t20210716_9028847.htm).

¹³⁰Huasheng Zhao, 'Should China and Russia Form an Alliance?' (12 January 2021), available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analitics-and-comments/analitics/should-china-and-russia-form-an-alliance/>).

¹³¹Igor Denisov and Andrey Lukin, 'Korreksiya i Hedzhirovanie. Rossiya v Global'noi Politike', *Global Affairs*, 4 (2021), para. 19, available at: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/korrekcziya-i-hedzhirovanie/>).

¹³²*Ibid.*, para. 43.

¹³³Putin, 'Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly' (21 April 2021).

¹³⁴Yi Wang, 'Rise to the Challenges, Serve the Nation and Embark on a New Journey for Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics' (16 January 2021), available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/202101/t20210116_678966.html).

¹³⁵*Ibid.*

¹³⁶Denisov and Lukin, 'Korreksiya i Hedzhirovanie. Rossiya v Global'noi Politike'.

Table 2. Transformation of Sino–Russian alignment, 1991–2024.

	Compatibility of Identities		
	Low (Radical Others)	Medium (Non-Radical Others)	High ('we')
High compatibility of threat assessment	(Coalitions)	(Alliances)	(Allied security communities)
Low compatibility of threat assessment	Thin strategic partnership: Sino–Russian alignment in 1996–2011	Thick strategic partnership: Sino–Russian alignment in 2011–2024	(Non-allied security communities)
Compatibility of status expectations			



conditions for further upgrades to either an alliance or to an allied or non-allied security community, although it can do so in future. Moreover, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine posed a test to Sino–Russian alignment. Experts generally agree that the extent to which Moscow and Beijing have provided mutual support from 2022 onwards highlights both the progress they have achieved in upgrading their alignment and the limits on autonomy that they are willing to accept.¹³⁷ More importantly (and often overlooked by analysts), by demarcating these limits – that is, by engaging in the process of aligning during the Russo–Ukrainian war – Russia and China have also been re-interpreting their understandings of each other, of their status expectations and of the alignment’s ability to address what they see as their most urgent threats.

Just several weeks before the invasion, Putin and Xi Jinping announced that the ‘friendship between the two States has no limits’ and that ‘there are no “forbidden” areas of cooperation’ while reiterating that their relationship was not an alliance and that it was not directed against any third party.¹³⁸ Following the invasion, Beijing largely accepted Moscow’s narrative about the causes of the war, with China’s high-ranking officials and the media describing the USA as ‘the one who started the Ukraine crisis and the biggest factor fuelling it’.¹³⁹ Yet, Beijing also emphasised its respect for ‘the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries’.¹⁴⁰ Crucially, China abstained from voting on resolutions on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in the UNSC and the General Assembly. These limits on China’s diplomatic support were hardly surprising. As underscored by Yu Bin,¹⁴¹ a senior fellow at the East China Normal University, ‘Moscow and Beijing have been either noncommittal or neutral regarding almost all of each other’s “core interests”, be they Crimea, Taiwan, South China Sea, [or] Sino-Indian border disputes’. Yet, as Beijing was providing limited diplomatic support during the conflict that Moscow interpreted as a Western attempt to inflict a ‘strategic defeat’ upon Russia,¹⁴² the very process of aligning was likely strengthening the interpretation – already shared by some among Chinese and Russian elites¹⁴³ – that both partners would prioritise their national interests and should not count on each other’s unconditional support at times of crises.

¹³⁷Blank, ‘Liberalism’s puzzle’; Alexander Gabuev, ‘China’s Russia Strategy’, *The Catalyst*, 27 (Spring 2023), available at: <https://www.bushcenter.org/catalyst/broken-china/chinas-russia-strategy>.

¹³⁸Vladimir Putin, ‘Russia and China: A Future-Oriented Strategic Partnership’, Article for the Chinese News Agency Xinhua (3 February 2022), available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/articles/67694>.

¹³⁹Zhao, ‘Should China and Russia Form an Alliance?’

¹⁴⁰Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, ‘China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis’ (24 February 2023), available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html.

¹⁴¹Bin Yu, ‘China’s Neutrality in a Grave New World’, *Russia in Global Affairs* (11 April 2022), available at: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/chinas-neutrality/>.

¹⁴²Vladimir Putin, ‘Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly’ (21 February 2023), available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/7056>.

¹⁴³Denisov and Lukin, ‘Korrektsiya i Hedzhirovanie. Rossiya v Global’noi Politike’; Yu, ‘China’s Neutrality in a Grave New World’.

Sino–Russian economic cooperation, on the other hand, has clearly shown an upward tendency.¹⁴⁴ In the first year of the war, their total bilateral trade surpassed USD 190 billion while reaching over 200 billion in 2023.¹⁴⁵ As Russia's trade with the EU dramatically decreased, China increased its exports to Russia, particularly chemicals, vehicles, plastics, rubber, machinery, and electrical equipment.¹⁴⁶ And although Beijing refrained from openly supplying defence equipment, a report by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in the USA¹⁴⁷ suggested that China became 'an increasingly important buttress for Russia in its war effort'. These changing trade patterns have strengthened the already existing imbalance in the alignment, with China becoming Russia's largest trade partner and with Russia accounting for only 3 per cent of China's trade.¹⁴⁸ Sino–Russian defence cooperation has also continued, including military exercises. As argued by Korolev,¹⁴⁹ by 2022 Moscow and Beijing had already progressed to 'the borderline between moderate and advanced alignment', with the advanced stage (currently still unattained) including indicators ranging 'from integrated military command to joint troop placement/military bases to common defense policy'.

Yet, as proposed in our typology, for Sino–Russian alignment to develop further we would expect a change in necessary conditions: a greater compatibility between Moscow's and Beijing's threat assessment and status expectations (necessary for alliances and allied security communities) and/or a higher compatibility of identity narratives (necessary for non-allied and allied security communities). Despite the continuing emphasis on friendship, Moscow's and Beijing's identity narratives have remained uncertain about anything that brings the two countries together apart from their opposition to Washington. Moscow and Beijing have also continued underscoring their equality. Yet by 2022, the difference in their capabilities had dramatically increased. While in 1996 China's GDP was almost three times bigger than Russia's, in 2022 it was eleven times bigger. Moreover, in 2019 China also overtook Russia by GDP per capita, with the gap continuing to grow.¹⁵⁰

Aware of this disparity, Russia's China experts have pointed at Russia's 'comparative advantage in the military, intelligence and diplomatic fields'¹⁵¹ as a factor equalising Moscow's and Beijing's status in the alignment. Yet, this advantage is far from certain. While in the previous decades China had relied on arms transfers from Russia to modernise its armed forces, China's technological development allowed it to significantly decrease this dependence and in some emerging technologies even overtake Russia,¹⁵² while also rapidly building up its nuclear capabilities. According to Russia's leading strategic stability expert, Alexei Arbatov,¹⁵³ 'if foreign estimates [of China's missile program] are correct, then in the next decade a truly tectonic shift in the world order is about to happen' as China will become 'a full-pledged military superpower'. Other Russian experts have

¹⁴⁴ M. Papageorgiou and A. Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira, 'Assessing the changing Sino–Russian relationship: A longitudinal analysis of bilateral cooperation in the post-Cold War period', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 76:4 (2023), pp. 632–58, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2023.2276677>.

¹⁴⁵ General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China, Customs Statistics, available at: <http://stats.customs.gov.cn/indexEn>.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Office of the Director of National Intelligence (USA), 'Support Provided by the People's Republic of China to Russia' (July 2023), p. 3, available at: https://democrats-intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/odni_report_on_chinese_support_to_russia.pdf.

¹⁴⁸ Reuters, 'China's 2022 Trade with Russia Hit Record \$190 bln – Customs' (13 January 2023), available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-customs-says-trade-with-russia-hit-new-high-2022-2023-01-13/>.

¹⁴⁹ Korolev, *China–Russia Strategic Alignment in International Politics*, pp. 27, 32.

¹⁵⁰ World Bank, 'Data: All Countries and Economies' (n.d.), available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>, accessed 11 December 2024.

¹⁵¹ Aleksandr Lukin and Vasily Kashin, 'Russian–Chinese Cooperation and Security in Asia Pacific Region', *Comparative Politics Russia*, 2 (2019), p. 151.

¹⁵² Papageorgiou and Vieira, 'Assessing the changing Sino–Russian relationship'.

¹⁵³ Alexei Arbatov, 'Strategicheskaya Stabil'nost' i Kitaiskiy Gambit', *Mirovaya Ekonomika i Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya*, 66:3 (2022), pp. 13–14.

acknowledged a view held by some among the Chinese elites that China should strive towards bipolarity or that bipolarity has already taken shape¹⁵⁴ – a noticeably different understanding from the emphasis on multipolarity in official narratives. With the compatibility of Russia's and China's status expectations remaining fragile, the compatibility of their threat assessment has also remained lower than what we would expect in alliances. Despite Beijing's propaganda support for Russia's narratives and despite tensions in Sino–US relations around Taiwan and bilateral trade, Beijing has continued to view economic and technological gains from its relationship with Washington as essential (at least prior to the tariff war of the Trump administration). To quote Xi Jinping,¹⁵⁵ 'China is ready to be a partner and friend of the United States' and it 'has no intention to challenge the United States or to unseat it'. At the same time, following Trump's re-election as US president, Russia's official narratives regarding Washington also became relatively more cautious. To quote Putin,¹⁵⁶ he hoped that 'the US President and his team will (...) make decisions aimed at restoring Russian–US relations jointly with American businesses'.

While the necessary conditions for either a security community or an alliance appear currently missing, a further deterioration in the Sino–US relationship and a further rupture in Moscow's relationship with Washington under Trump could lead to greater compatibility of their threat assessment. Yet, greater compatibility of Russia's and China's status expectations, necessary for an alliance, is less probable in the near future. As the economic disparities grow and as China's military (including its strategic forces) continues its rapid expansion, maintaining narratives of equality is likely to be increasingly difficult – thus, hindering potential attempts to develop a functioning symmetrical alliance. Establishing a viable asymmetrical alliance looks equally difficult. While some scholars argue that 'Russia appears to be ready to accept China's rise to the status of a global superpower and the only true competitor of the United States',¹⁵⁷ a less equal alignment is likely to be difficult to maintain, as Russia's understandings of identity – in both its official narratives and wider discourses – continue to underscore Russia's great powerness and, thus, inappropriateness of a subordinate role. Finally, with both Russia's and China's narratives tightly linked to personalities of their leaders, a change in leadership in either state can lead to reinterpretation of their strategic narratives.

Conclusion

By focusing on alignment as a process that entails continuous readjustment of partners' expectations and renegotiation of their willingness to provide support, we have proposed a conceptual typology of six primary alignment types. These alignment types differ in the extent of compatibility between alignment partners on three dimensions – compatibility of their strategic narratives of identity (interpretations of the alignment partner as the Other), status expectations, and threat assessment. We have then applied this conceptualisation of alignment to Sino–Russian alignment over the past three decades, tracing changing compatibility of their strategic narratives across four snapshots – 1996, 2001, 2011, and 2021. We have shown that by engaging in closer cooperation Moscow and Beijing have successfully reinterpreted their understandings of each other to an extent that they are currently maintaining a thick strategic partnership, while their threat assessment continues to be insufficiently compatible for transforming their relationship into an alliance. We have also shown that while Moscow and Beijing continue emphasising their equality as alignment partners, some Russian and Chinese experts increasingly question their ability to practice this equality, especially if Russia's and China's leaders decide to pursue a closer alignment format of an alliance.

¹⁵⁴ I. Zuenko and F. Lukyanov, 'Vstrecha Xi i Baidena', *Rossiya v global'noi politike* (20 November 2023), available at: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/vstrecha-si-i-bajdena/>.

¹⁵⁵ Jinping Xi, 'Galvanizing Our Peoples into a Strong Force for the Cause of China–U.S. Friendship', Ministry of Foreign Affairs (16 November 2023), available at: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202311/t20231116_11181557.html.

¹⁵⁶ Vladimir Putin, 'Meeting with Heads of International News Agencies' (19 June 2025), available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/77209>.

¹⁵⁷ Gabuev, 'China's Russia Strategy'.

Our empirical analysis points at the importance of tracing changing strategic narratives of threat assessment (particularly in the case of China) and changing narratives of Russia's and China's status expectations for any policy discussions on implications of Sino–Russian alignment for international security. Crucially, any policy analysis should focus on the compatibility of their understandings rather than of their sameness. When a change in Russia's or China's leadership does occur, we expect a possible attempt to rearticulate some elements of their narratives. Going forward, our proposed conceptualisation of alignment and the conceptual taxonomy of six primary alignment formats could be developed further by investigating its applicability to multilateral alignments and by focusing on particularly interesting examples of overlapping alignment formats where we can observe a transformation of expectations of support and willingness to limit flexibility for some but not all alignment partners. Finally, while our exploratory narrative analysis uses a limited number of texts for each snapshot, future studies could explore a larger number of texts for each alignment partner, including competing domestic narratives in each state.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, we expect that our typology could be used for more systematic analysis of larger volumes of text using large language models (LLMs), which could enrich our understandings of longitudinal trends.

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¹⁵⁸See Ted Hopf, 'Hegemonic Affinities: China's Rise and the Distribution of Identity in Asia' (2022), available at: <https://makingidentitycount.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/hegemonicaffinitiesv3-final.pdf>.