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Authoritarian Synergy: The Drivers of Sino-Russian Military Cooperation

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**Authoritarian Synergy:
The Drivers of Sino-Russian Military Cooperation**

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1 Abbreviation

CCP – Chinese Communist Party

CSTO – Collective Security Treaty Organization

EEU – Eurasian Economic Union

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

PLA – People's Liberation Army

SCO – Shanghai Cooperation Organization

UNSC – United Nations Security Council

2 Introduction

The increased military cooperation between China and Russia in recent decades has reshaped global power dynamics and prompted further research. Despite their history of vacillation between camaraderie and rivalry, the authoritarian regimes have developed a strategic alliance. Although the states have diverging interests in foreign policy matters, similar historical experiences have fostered a sense of unity between them. They share a past of communist rule and search for great power, status, and pride. In addition, they both share a feeling of being humiliated by the West during different periods in history (Kaczmarek 2022, 62). Furthermore, both have undergone personalist rule, with Mao's China and Stalin's Soviet Union and Xi Jinping and Putin, who have sought to personalize their power in the past decade (Baturu, Anceschi, and Cavatorta 2024, 16).

The post-World War II period saw an enhanced alignment between the Soviet Union and China as both states were under communist rule. The Sino-Soviet alliance involved robust military cooperation between the states, including exchange of visits by senior military officers, technology sharing, military training, and donations of military equipment. Regardless of their shared ideological roots, the alliance was quickly weakened because of different approaches to communism, disagreements on how to deal with the United States, and China's resentment of its perceived subordinate status to the Soviet Union. These differences eventually led to the Sino-Soviet split, which lasted for several decades (Bekkevold 2022, 44; Yu and Sui 2020, 329). After years of dispute, they ultimately settled their border feuds, marking a significant milestone for future cooperation.

The end of the Cold War introduced a new chapter in the history of Sino-Russian relations. The fall of the Soviet Union created an opportunity for them to align their interests in countering the US's rising unipolar power (Yu and Sui 2020, 331). Recent decades have seen increasing economic and demographic asymmetry between the actors in favor of China as Russia was severely weakened after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. They have, however, become increasingly amicable over the past decades, especially after Xi Jinping came to power in 2012 (Bekkevold 2022, 41). In 2022, they announced a no-limits partnership, stating that the Sino-Russian friendship has no limits and no "forbidden" areas of cooperation (Russian Federation and People's Republic of China 2022). The contemporary cooperation has been

similar to the Sino-Soviet alliance with the addition of joint military exercises and the more significant role of multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Although the states officially denied speculations that their alignment was targeted at third countries or the status quo of the international system, scholars have attempted to hypothesize about the motivation behind their cooperation. This research will seek to examine this growing alliance by asking the following research question: What are the main drivers of Sino-Russian military cooperation? Some attribute their friendly attitude toward each other to their shared values that are closely related to their authoritarian nature. These values include territorial integrity and non-intervention in other states' internal affairs. Others argue that their cooperative behavior is driven by geopolitical factors and the need to counter the Western military power of the US and other NATO members. This argument is rooted in the theory of realism, which implies that states seek cooperation to increase their collective power and security (Waltz 2000, 28). Furthermore, the Sino-Russian arrangement has often been analyzed as temporary and strategic as "there are no eternal allies and no perpetual enemies, but only permanent interests" (Ratcliffe 2016).

This thesis will attempt to shed new light on the topic by incorporating domestic-level theories focusing on the authoritarian nature of the states. The literature on authoritarian cooperation highlights the objective of regime survival. Authoritarian leaders share the goal of securing authoritarian stability and thus, assuring the survival of their regimes. To ensure regime survival, leaders must balance the problems of authoritarian control and authoritarian power-sharing. This entails managing control over the regime's population on the one hand and the relationship between the leader and elite members on the other (Svolik 2012, 2). As a result, this thesis argues that authoritarian dynamics can affect foreign policy and, thereby, the cooperation between China and Russia, at least to some degree.

To answer the research question, this research will analyze Sino-Russian military cooperation from 2000-2022 by examining the theories mentioned earlier. The next chapter will review the literature on Sino-Russian military cooperation by highlighting the following plausible explanations: shared ideology, geopolitical interests, and authoritarian dynamics. Then, the process tracing methodology will be introduced, and the theories will be operationalized. Chapter 5 contains a case study of Sino-Russian military cooperation in three

periods. Each will be analyzed using the three theories presented in the literature review. The final chapter will conclude the thesis by highlighting the findings and potential for further research.

3 Literature review

The friendly attitude between China and Russia has come under scrutiny as their joint military exercises have multiplied in number and expanded in scope and range over the past two decades. In addition, the expansion of authoritarian states, followed by increased activity in the global arena, has attracted the attention of international relations scholars. This has inspired research to explore the linkage between authoritarian politics and authoritarian rule (Libman and Obydenkova 2018a, 1037).

Despite the increasingly institutionalized nature of the Sino-Russian alignment, the two big authoritarian powers have refrained from establishing official military alliance agreements or treaties. According to Korolev, their cooperation can be described as “on the verge of an alliance” (Korolev 2019, 248). Some argue that their authoritarian nature gives them a particular advantage over democracies in conducting foreign policy. As autocracies are less constrained by public opinion and institutional checks, they can be more flexible in their decisions and execution of policies (Kroenig 2020, 40). On the other hand, this lack of institutional constraints can also decrease accountability and trust between cooperating actors.

The literature on autocratic behavior and military alliances asserts that authoritarian regimes are inclined to avoid conditional deterrent treaties as they undermine their autonomy in foreign policy matters. Military alliances risk states being dragged into conflicts initiated by their allies. Therefore, states will seek to design their alliance agreements to mitigate this risk (Benson, Bentley, and Ray 2013, 48). The lack of trust and accountability derived from their authoritarian nature is consequently crucial to understanding their increased and sometimes restrained military cooperation. This chapter will review shared ideology, geopolitical interests, and authoritarian dynamics as potential explanations of what drives military cooperation between China and Russia.

3.1 Shared ideology

Military cooperation between China and Russia is often explained on the basis of values, ideology, and identity. According to this strand of literature, such constructivist immaterial factors are heavily dependent on a state's understanding and definition of its own identity (Davidzon 2022, 21). In terms of values and identity, both China and Russia reject the liberal international order created by the US. They perceive liberal norms of democracy- and human rights promotion and the interventionist behavior of the US as an existential threat.

China and Russia have asserted their shared anti-Western values through both institutions and statements. This is, for instance, manifested in the several joint declarations that the states have signed in the past three decades. The declaration, signed by former presidents Jiang Zemin and Boris Yeltsin, formally established a strategic partnership between the two countries and emphasized shared values of state sovereignty, good neighborliness, and mutual non-aggression (Yu and Sui 2020; Russian Federation and People's Republic of China 1997).

This was also reflected in the SCO, which was established in 2001 as a successor to the Shanghai Five, a group formed shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The organization was initially centered around solving border disputes between China and the newly independent states in Central Asia (Obydenkova and Libman 2019, 220). Eventually, the SCO introduced the "Shanghai Spirit," which incorporates the values of non-interference in domestic affairs and territorial integrity, i.e., those promoted by China and Russia. As members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), both states have frequently acted in solidarity by vetoing mandates for interventions in conflicts overseas and rejecting the use of sanctions. These examples demonstrate the shared Sino-Russian goal of promoting a more multipolar international order as an alternative to the unipolar world led by the US.

Moreover, the two states have also been recognized as taking on the role of "black knights," where they provide economic or military support to those states that are under democratizing pressures from Western powers (Tolstrup 2015). Both regimes perceived the so-called "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet states as a threat stemming from Western normative influences. This attitude has been enhanced by the protests in Ukraine in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea, as well as the anti-China protests in Hong Kong

several years later. Despite their shared position of non-interference in neighboring countries, China did not oppose Russia's interventions in Ukraine, providing the latter with indirect political solidarity. In turn, Russia has not responded to China's territorial disputes in the South China Sea toward Taiwan or Hong Kong (Kaczmarek 2022, 61; Korolev and Portyakov 2021, 14).

The literature suggests that anti-Western values alone are insufficient for genuine ideological convergence between China and Russia. Neither the ideology of Russia nor China prescribes a direct conflict and overthrow of the liberal world like e.g., the Marxist ideology of the Soviet Union did. Additionally, the regimes have different preferences regarding the international order. For instance, despite being a single-party communist regime in theory, China relies more on global market forces and trade than Russia (Chivvis and Keating 2024, 11). As a result, analysts have asserted that ideological convergence between the states has been overemphasized as a driver of their cooperation.

In turn, the focus has been directed to the non-democratic nature of the regimes and how it affects their foreign policy objectives. Regarding their non-democratic nature, it has been theorized whether China and Russia seek cooperation to promote "illiberal" values. This concept has been coined as "autocracy promotion." Nevertheless, this argument has proved rather tenuous as it is impossible to provide proof of whether regimes have clear intentions of such ideological commitment to authoritarianism (Tansey 2016b, 155–56). That is because political actors tend to strategically conceal their true intentions and reasons behind their actions, especially in non-democracies where transparency is limited (Kaczmarek 2017, 1361). A decisive commitment to authoritarian values would mean that Russia and China have tried to bolster other autocracies irrespective of different factors such as geographical or cultural proximity.

Others have sought to find out whether there exists an autocratic counterpart of the democratic peace theory where normative and institutional characteristics restrict the likelihood of conflict between autocracies (Walterskirchen 2017). There has, however, been little evidence for such mechanisms where autocratic norms generate peace among autocracies. Furthermore, Börzel (2015) argued that countervailing democracy must not be mistaken for the promotion of autocracy. Democracy countervailing activities may have the intentional or unintentional effect of bolstering autocratic regimes (Börzel 2015, 524). In other

words, it could just be a side effect of policies rooted in material gains that are justified or displayed as having an ideological component to it.

3.2 Geopolitical interests

Most early studies and current work focus on the geopolitics of Sino-Russian military cooperation. Moreover, it has been argued that geopolitics have not only enhanced their cooperation but also limited its scope to some extent because of their mutual and diverging interests. Both states benefit from their military cooperation as they seek to counterbalance the military might of the US and other Western powers. Their geographical position as neighbors in the East provides them with a mutual interest in fending off external powers and influences in their region (Lubina 2017, 15–16).

These dynamics have often been explained by the theory of neorealism, which defines the international system as anarchic, where power is a zero-sum game. It argues that the anarchic nature drives states to either compete for power or cooperate to ensure their survival. Realists emphasize a pragmatic view on the behavior of states as they cannot trust in the good intentions of others but must prioritize their survival capacities. As power is not distributed evenly within the system, states seek to either bandwagon or balance with other states to secure themselves from their adversaries (Davidzon 2022; Waltz 2000). Waltz argued that great powers can either increase their capacities or cooperate with other states to challenge the hegemonic rival (Waltz 2000, 28). He called this internal and external balancing. The neorealist strand focuses explicitly on material military capabilities and how they affect states' decision-making when seeking allies.

The end of the Cold War provides an essential historical context for recent developments in the relationship between China and Russia. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of the US as the sole global power, the structure of the international system changed drastically creating a unipolar moment. These events were further magnified with the enlargement of NATO in 1999 where several former members of the Warsaw Pact joined the Western block (Davidzon 2022, 162). The neorealist argument asserts that these developments led Russia, a weakened power, to form a strategic alliance with China to counterbalance the military might of the US-led hegemony, a method of external balancing. Moreover, it is thought that the trade sanctions imposed by Western powers have brought

China and Russia even closer together. It has isolated Russia from the West and forced it to navigate its gas trade toward its Eastern neighbors (Kirchberger, Sinjen, and Wörmer 2022, 3; Lubina 2017, 17).

Their geographical location also creates incentives to cooperate on regional border crossing problems. For instance, the SCO was established to combat shared border-crossing threats. China and Russia have regularly held joint military exercises under the pretext of countering terrorism within the SCO format as well as on a bilateral level. Some scholars have argued that their geographical proximity has created a pattern of interdependence that has spilled over to other fields of cooperation, such as arms and gas trade. The states had already established a trading relationship in 1989 in the last moments before the Soviet collapse. At the time, Russia sought to stimulate its weakened economy while China set out to modernize its army to close the gap with the US. In addition, they were the only primary arms-producing state that was willing to sell weapons to China after the Tiananmen protests and massacre (Obydenkova and Libman 2019, 219–21).

The strengthening of China's military not only serves the economic interests of the Russian military industry but also adds to the internal balancing mechanisms of both regimes. Their trade relationship has also expanded to the energy sector where Russia has increased its gas exports to China. This geopolitical strategic partnership benefits both actors and has enabled Russia to become less reliant on European markets while China has secured a stable energy income for its industries (Obydenkova and Libman 2019, 219–21). As a result, this regional synergy between China and Russia has been an important cornerstone in their military cooperation for multiple decades.

However, the states also have diverging geopolitical interests as they both strive to maintain their status as big powers in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Arctic. In terms of recent examples, Russia has primarily been concerned with promoting security interests, while China has emphasized economic objectives. This is manifested in Russia's interventions in the broader region of Central Asia as it has engaged directly with its military in Syria, Georgia, and Ukraine. Russia's influence remains relatively strong in Central Asia as it considers the former Soviet states still to be a part of its sphere of influence. This is evident in institutions led by Russia, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). China has, however, prioritized economic and diplomatic

measures by investing in energy industries and infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative (Kirchberger, Sinjen, and Wörmer 2022, 25). These dynamics have led scholars to describe the Sino-Russian relationship as neither ad hoc nor temporary but rather as a strategic partnership and competition.

Their diverging interests are also evident in the region of Southeast Asia. Putin's turn to the East can be seen as a response to China's emergence as a great power, which has, in turn, instigated increased activity of the US military in the region. It is believed that Russia's interest in forging new ties with Southeast Asia's power is to avoid becoming too dependent on China in terms of security in the region (Carlsson, Oxenstierna, and Weissmann 2015, 59). As a result, it has been argued that the geographical proximity of the states serves as a double-edged sword as it does not only fuel cooperation but also competition. Nevertheless, to fully understand the geopolitical interests of China and Russia, this thesis argues that they must be assessed within the context of domestic factors.

3.3 Authoritarian dynamics

The domestic politics of China and Russia remain briefly addressed in the literature, especially when it comes to the authoritarian nature of the regimes. Those who have sought to research how the internal dynamics of autocracies shape their foreign policy argue that autocracies act in self-interest, seeking stability and regime survival. Chiozza & Goemans, and Svobik have incorporated leader-level theories to analyze these mechanisms. Svobik asserted that authoritarian leaders face a specific dilemma, which he described as the problem of authoritarian control and authoritarian power-sharing. They face the threat of being overthrown by not only their populace but also members of the elite. Most leaders are, nonetheless, reliant on their elite members to suppress democratic uprisings as well as other rival elites (Svobik 2012, 2). Because of the secretive, competitive, and treacherous nature of the regimes, leaders are forced to manage this delicate balance of keeping both sides in check.

The theory of Chiozza and Goemans links the domestic to the international level. It emphasizes how the fear of forcible removal from office impacts foreign policy decisions made by authoritarian leaders. In brief, it states that authoritarian leaders use international conflicts as a political tool to secure their domestic survival (Chiozza and Goemans 2011, 12). Therefore, Sino-Russian cooperative behavior can be explained by the shared objective of repressing

internal and external threats to their rule (Kaczmarek 2022, 60). This dilemma causes the regimes to rely heavily on military strength and internal control, which can be enhanced through military cooperation with other states that are facing the same issues.

3.3.1 The problem of authoritarian control

As stated earlier, authoritarian leaders face threats of the masses revolting as they are excluded from power. Leaders do not only fear democratic uprisings from within their regime but also from other neighboring autocracies. According to the study by Odinius and Kuntz, autocracies are willing to provide military support to those regimes facing democratizing pressures in order to prevent the effects from spilling over to their own. Their study on the Arab Spring showed that authoritarian regimes were willing to provide political or material aid to fellow Gulf states that were facing a threat of democratization, especially to those that were perceived as having similar characteristics to their own (Odinius and Kuntz 2015). In terms of external interventions in conflicts, some autocracies have provided military assistance with the deployment of troops, while others provided economic aid to hinder the process of authoritarian breakdown (Tansey 2016a, 68; Vanderhill 2013, 20). China and Russia have never intervened in each other conflicts or in other regimes facing pressure to democratize. They have, however, taken similar steps to insulate themselves from the diffusion of democratic movements by using propaganda, legal restrictions, and suppression of civil society (Koesel and Bunce 2013, 760).

As Putin and Xi share the fear of democratic revolts and their potential spillover effects, they ultimately share the goal of maintaining the status quo of both regimes. The states have conducted regular joint military exercises since the early 2000s on a bilateral basis as well as through the framework of the SCO. The latter project has been presented by the member states as a regional organization to solve border-crossing problems such as the three evils: terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Critics of the SCO have argued that its broad definitions of terrorist and extremist threats provide the member states with justifications to crack down on any political threats to their governments (Tao 2013, 138; Ambrosio 2008, 1326).

The bilateral and multilateral cooperation through the SCO can help the regimes strengthen their authoritarian control in several ways. First, the counter-terrorism programs provide a platform for the states to exchange methods and technology that can be used to

monitor their population or repress dissent. Second, their joint counter-terrorist military drills provide legitimacy for their actions that would otherwise be condemned by the international community. They can divert the attention of the public from internal unrest by focusing on external achievements and mutual threats. By leading cooperation initiatives with strategic allies, Putin and Xi can enhance their image as strong, capable leaders in the eyes of their populations (Libman and Obydenkova 2018b, 153–55). The last and most crucial point to consider is that they can serve as a way to project power in an attempt to dissuade the population from revolting and thereby ensure authoritarian control.

3.3.2 The problem of authoritarian power-sharing

The problem of authoritarian power-sharing revolves around the threat that leaders face from within their ruling elite. Leaders often rely on a group of key political actors to stay in power called a ruling coalition. However, leaders cannot fully trust their elites as authoritarian regimes lack institutional checks and balances to monitor the loyalty of the elites. The problem of authoritarian power-sharing arises when leaders attempt to acquire more power at the expense of their elites, which can lead to the latter performing a coup to replace the former (Svolik 2012, 6). In order to secure their position, leaders buy support from elites by co-opting them with economic rents or political positions. By co-opting key opposition elites and buying their loyalty, they will, in turn, demobilize their supporters and reinforce authoritarian control (Gandhi and Przewoski 2007).

In some cases, authoritarian leaders seek cooperation with other autocracies for access to additional resources to pay off their elite members. Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner argued that these ties create incentives for autocracies to cooperate and prefer to be surrounded by other autocracies because of their similar incentive systems. In Russia's case, its relations with the non-democratic leadership of Georgia and Kyrgyz remained crucial for securing economic gains for business elites (Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner 2010, 96–97; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009). By generating extra rents through military cooperation, leaders can strengthen their ability to reward key elites with resources.

Military cooperation could also serve as a way to consolidate control over military elites and thereby mitigate threats from powerful elites. When it comes to leader-elite relations in China and Russia, both leaders have taken significant steps to personalize their

power during their time in office. The states have also established relations between Rosgvardiya, the Federal Service of the Troops of the National Guard, and the People's Armed Police Force. These paramilitary forces are the internal troops assigned with the unofficial task of protecting the security of the regime (Kaczmarek 2022, 65). Though Xi Jinping is believed to be more personalist than his predecessor, his personal power is constrained by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The single-party system is based on collective leadership but has nonetheless allowed for the rise of Xi as a somewhat personalist leader (Tsang 2020).

During his time in office, Xi has consolidated his power through anti-corruption purges and military reforms in the name of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The reforms were officially conducted to enhance the effectiveness of the military and ensure its competence in case of regional conflicts. According to Lim (2022), the reforms had multiple purposes for Xi. First, by reshuffling military positions and purging military officials, he managed to install personnel that was loyal to him. Second, the reforms reinforced the relations between the CCP and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) ensuring that the military loyalty aligned with the Party instead of professional autonomy. As militaries have the power and capabilities to both defend the state against external threats and turn their guns on the government, leaders must ensure good civil-military relations to mitigate this dilemma (Lim 2022, 266).

Military cooperation with Russia can also reinforce the relations between Xi and the military, providing a platform for the chairman to introduce further reforms and adjustments to the military leadership in the name of international cooperation. This coincides partly with the literature on authoritarian politics and regime survival which suggests that insecure leaders might initiate a diversionary conflict to keep dangerous actors within the military elite occupied (Chiozza and Goemans 2011, 28). In the case of China and Russia, military cooperation through regular joint exercises and other initiatives could be viewed as another way to keep dangerous elites distracted.

Putin's regime is defined by Putin's strong personal power, lack of mechanisms for leadership succession, and corruption, where decisions are made in favor of the ruling elites (Petrov 2024, 173). While President Vladimir Putin is central to the decision-making, specific elite members remain influential in foreign policy-making (Kaczmarek 2022, 63). The stakeholders of the military and intelligence industry have particular socio-economic interests related to the sustainment of the massive Russian military industry. Their legitimacy as key

players in Russian power politics is thereby reinforced or justified by Russia's military projects. These elite interests are believed to be central to Russia's approach to its cooperation with China (Gabuev 2015). In other words, elites from the military industry benefit from lucrative arms and gas trade agreements with China and their collective anti-Western campaign (Adomeit 2019). Thereby, Putin would benefit from various kinds of military cooperation with China as it is lucrative for key elite members of the military industry. In addition, it could provide an official justification for military reforms that would ultimately consolidate Putin's power, as in the case of China, with the purging and shuffling of military personnel to break up dangerous cliques.

To conclude, the increased military cooperation between Xi and Putin can be explained from a domestic level as a method to secure the survival of their regimes, which is in the best interest of both actors. The leaders can seek support from each other to mitigate the threats stemming from their populations and inner circle. The joint exercises provide a platform to modernize their militaries, learn from each other, and display power to domestic audiences. In addition, they provide an opportunity for leaders to consolidate their power over their military and secure economic gains for their ruling coalitions. These dynamics of the Sino-Russian military cooperation reveal a complex interplay of internal and external factors.

4 Research design

The objective of this research is to answer the following question: What drives Sino-Russian military cooperation? As the previous chapter explained, various theoretical frameworks already exist to answer this question, namely, a sense of shared ideology and geopolitical interests. However, this research will attempt to go beyond the more established theories and examine whether authoritarian dynamics can provide a deeper understanding of the alignment between the two states. The case study will be examined using process tracing to test the different explanations.

The process tracing method goes beyond identifying correlations between causes and outcomes. Its purpose is to identify and trace the causal mechanisms that produce a particular outcome. This method provides a unique way to gain a profound understanding of specific cases and their underlying causal mechanisms. However, a detailed focus on a small number

of cases may lead to limited generalizability and lead to explanations that are too closely fitted to the context of the case (Pedersen and Beach 2019, 5–6). The method is used to identify plausible mechanisms that could validate a theory or build a theoretical framework but cannot prove causal relationships. To compensate for this limitation, researchers can systematically evaluate the strength of the evidence to determine confidence in causal theories (Pedersen and Beach 2019, 172).

To answer the research question, this thesis will review Sino-Russian military cooperation between 2000-2022 in light of previously discussed theories. Due to constraints in time and resources, the scope of the research was limited to the aforementioned time frame. It was chosen in light of their increased diplomatic, economic, and military alignment in the past three decades. The major military cooperation events will be analyzed within their respective contextual background with the help of primary and secondary sources. To test the causal mechanisms, they must first be operationalized by formulating observable implications, i.e., creating predictions about how the mechanisms will manifest in empirical data. In other words, this process involves identifying observable implications that would either strengthen or weaken a theory (Pedersen and Beach 2019, 11). This chapter will outline the causal mechanisms and relevant observable implications that will be used to analyze the case study in the following chapter.

4.1 Shared ideology

The first theory of shared ideology posits that China and Russia seek cooperation to safeguard their shared ideology and values of non-interference and territorial integrity. According to the literature, the states reject the Western values of liberal interventionism and democracy promotion as they both perceive them as a direct challenge to their regime stability. Therefore, the causal mechanism for this theory implies that their shared ideology incentivizes them to seek cooperation to present a united front against the liberal order and increase their influence on the international stage.

If the theory is true, one should identify statements criticizing Western values as threats to security and stability. Timing is also relevant in this case, as one would expect to observe enhanced cooperation in times when Western actors of the liberal order seek to promote their values. Such cooperation could entail joint vetoes in the UNSC resisting Western

intervention in other states. Moreover, the theory posits that one should find evidence of joint efforts to support non-democracies facing regime instability with either military, political, or economic support. However, this support for authoritarian regimes should be provided solely because of their authoritarian ideology or values, irrespective of other factors such as economic ties. If the evidence shows that support for fellow autocracies is limited to specific authoritarian states, it will weaken the explanation and suggest that the cooperation is driven by other interests than simply the promotion of ideology and values. Though shared ideological rhetoric around joint military exercises and agreements might provide some support for the theory of shared ideology, it may overlap with geopolitical interests.

4.2 Geopolitical interests

The second theory emphasizes how the international level affects Sino-Russian military cooperation. It suggests that military cooperation is driven by the strategic interest in counterbalancing the military might of Western powers, which they view as a threat to their territorial sovereignty. If cooperation is driven by geopolitical interests, one would observe methods of cooperation that focus on enhancing and developing their joint military capabilities. For this theory to provide a plausible explanation to the research question, one should observe cooperation specifically aimed at countering external enemies, i.e. third states. Examples of that include joint military exercises where the militaries can learn from each other, technology sharing, and arms trade agreements.

In terms of the joint military exercises, both location and timing are relevant for the causal mechanism of the theory. It suggests that they would be held in strategic locations meant to simulate combat with external adversaries in times of increased US or NATO military presence in China or Russia's sphere of influence. Strategic locations could include naval drills in the South China Sea, exercises in the Arctic, former Soviet states, or other locations closer to NATO members. Regarding arms trading, one should expect the states to trade with weapons specifically used in combat with external threats such as the US or other NATO members as opposed to domestic threats. Such weapons could include missiles, air defense systems, and naval weapons. Moreover, the states would be expected to seek diplomatic alignment on defense issues. This could include a formal military alliance agreement or a united stance towards the use of nuclear weapons. To conclude, one would also observe

coordinated military actions in international geopolitical hotspots to contain Western influence.

4.3 Authoritarian dynamics

The third theory suggests that China and Russia seek cooperation because of their shared goal of authoritarian stability. As both states are autocracies, Xi Jinping and Putin are faced with the same dilemmas of balancing authoritarian control and power-sharing. In terms of the former theory of maintaining authoritarian control, one should observe evidence of cooperation where the states share methods and technology to monitor their population and, most importantly, prevent a democratic uprising. Such cooperation could be manifested in joint military exercises officially claimed to be aimed at countering domestic threats such as terrorist activity, but could in practice be used to train the militaries in methods and practices to contain unwanted opposition. The inclusion of paramilitary forces tasked with the unofficial assignment of protecting regime security would further support this theory.

This type of exercise could also serve as a power display to discourage potential demonstrators from revolting. That would, however, require evidence of military exercises being conducted in the capital areas of either state, where protests or coups would most likely take place. Additionally, the timing of such cooperation methods is also relevant. As autocracies fear the potential spill-over effects of democratic revolutions in their neighboring countries, one should observe enhanced cooperation in the aftermath of democratic protests or uprisings within either Russia, China, or other non-democratic regimes.

The problem of authoritarian power-sharing revolves around the leader-elite relations within the regimes. As stated before, leaders and elites are mutually vulnerable as they both seek to secure their power at the cost of the other. The theory suggests that leaders seek cooperation to generate rents to co-opt key elite members and secure their continued support. Such cooperation could manifest in arms trade deals involving companies or institutions connected to key elite members of the regimes. It is nevertheless important to note that evidence of such deals can be challenging to find because of the lack of transparency within each regime.

On the other hand, military cooperation can also act as a platform to consolidate a leader's power over military institutions. This causal mechanism implies that military

cooperation, especially joint military exercises provides an opportunity or justification for leaders to make reforms in the military in their favor. By making structural changes or enforcing reforms, leaders can personalize their power over key military institutions and hinder military elites from getting too powerful. According to this mechanism, one should observe evidence of leaders shuffling positions or conducting purges within the military and promoting loyal individuals in key positions instead. Furthermore, such changes would be expected to occur before major joint military exercises.

5 Case study: Sino-Russian military cooperation 2000-2022

This chapter will review Sino-Russian military cooperation between 2000-2022. To structure the analysis, the time frame will be broken up into three periods. The periods will be introduced with an overview of the major cooperation events and then analyzed in light of the observable implications for each theory. The first period from 2000-2009 represented the foundational years of contemporary Sino-Russian cooperation. Significant milestones were achieved during this period, such as the establishment of the SCO and their first joint military exercises. This period also saw the first joint vetoes by the states in the UNSC, signaling a united front in the international community. The second period, spanning 2010-2015, was marked by the geopolitical turmoil of the Arab Spring in 2010 and turbulence in Eastern Ukraine following Russia's annexation of Crimea. In addition, Xi Jinping came to power in 2012 which strengthened the ties between Beijing and Moscow even more. Also, the total number of joint military exercises between the states doubled compared to the previous period. The final period of 2016-2022 was marked by a strategic deepening of Sino-Russian ties in the aftermath of Russia's interventions in Ukraine. As Russia faced Western sanctions and economic hardship, Moscow pivoted toward Beijing. This era witnessed a significant increase in the frequency, scope, and geopolitical range of their joint military exercises, reflecting intensified military collaboration.

5.1 2000-2009 Foundations of cooperation

The early 2000s saw a rapprochement in Sino-Russian political-military cooperation with the signing of the Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation. Although it was based on a former deal signed in the 1990s, the treaty of 2001 marked a significant milestone in their

military alignment (Gorenburg et al., 2023, 6). These developments happened only a decade after the end of the Cold War and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union. The relative growth of the US's power was further enhanced by the NATO enlargement in 1999 where several former Warsaw Pact states joined the organization (Davidzon 2022, 152). The signing of the treaty coincided with the establishment of the SCO, which was formed by China, Russia, and four former Soviet states in Central Asia. Shortly after, the states initiated their first joint military exercises, including the Peace Mission 2005. Over this period, a total of ten joint military exercises were conducted in various locations within the territories of SCO states.

Simultaneously, China and Russia jointly resisted Western interventions in third states by vetoing resolutions in the UNSC for the first time. This period also saw a surge in arms trade, peaking in 2005 (SIPRI 2024). The trade, however, declined after 2005 due to China's increasing self-sufficiency in arms production and growing frustration on behalf of the Russians, who accused the Chinese of repeated theft of intellectual property. Overall, the era laid the foundations for contemporary Sino-Russian cooperation across multiple domains. The observable implications gathered from this period showed stronger support for the theory of geopolitical interests and authoritarian dynamics compared to shared ideology. Although the states were observed consistently advocating for their shared values, the findings could not confirm that the cooperation was mainly primarily driven by ideological motivations. On the contrary, the evidence suggested that their cooperation was mainly driven by shared interests of ensuring authoritarian regime survival and counterbalancing the growing power of the US and its allies.

Shared ideology

In terms of the theory of shared ideology, the Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation was a significant proclamation of their shared ideology. The neighbors pledged to deepen their strategic defense cooperation according to the following values: mutual respect of sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality, mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence. The treaty specifically stated that neither party was allowed to enter into new alliances with a third country, which could result in the compromise of the territorial integrity of the other contracting party (PCR Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2001). Furthermore, it declared that neither the treaty itself nor the subsequent military cooperation was directed at a third

country. In brief, the treaty laid the groundwork for further political-military alignment without establishing a defense agreement between the parties.

In the previous month, the states established the SCO, which included the four former Soviet states in Central Asia. The project evolved as a successor of the Shanghai Five, an organization created with the agenda of addressing border disputes and regional security threats (Cabestan 2013, 423). It endorsed values similar to those included in the Treaty of 2001 under the name of the “Shanghai Spirit”. However, neither the bilateral treaty nor the multilateral establishment of the SCO included a direct anti-Western rhetoric of any kind, rejecting Western values or framing them as dangerous to regime stability. On the other hand, it demonstrated the state's willingness to align with each other instead of conforming to the liberal international order promoted by the US. This was manifested in one of the articles, which stated that the contracting parties should strengthen their cooperation in the UNSC. These events unfolded only two years after the US-led NATO intervention in Kosovo, which bypassed the UNSC. Both China and Russia condemned the unilateral military intervention as they claimed it to be illegitimate and undermine the values of sovereignty and international law (European Parliament. Directorate General for External Policies of the Union. 2013, 6).

In the subsequent years, China and Russia signaled their increasing political-military alignment by putting on a united front in the UNSC. They vetoed two resolutions on the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar and Zimbabwe, providing support to fellow non-democratic regimes. In both instances, China and Russia emphasized the harmful consequences of interventions in the states' internal matters. The Chinese representatives and his Russian counterpart argued that the situation did not pose a threat to international security and thus did not justify intervention. It is also important to note that the color revolutions in the post-Soviet space had taken place in the years leading up to the veto of 2007. (UNSC SC/8939 2007; (European Parliament. Directorate General for External Policies of the Union. 2013, 7). This was the first time that the states vetoed a resolution jointly in the UNSC, suggesting a further political alignment in the international community.

The Russo-Georgian war in 2008 put, however, a strain on the Sino-Russian relationship. As Russia's interventionist behavior went against the Sino-Russian values of non-interference in domestic affairs, China decided not to recognize the disputed territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (European Parliament. Directorate General for External Policies

of the Union. 2013, 22). Their voting behavior in the UNSC showed that while the states showed a degree of ideological alignment and convergence, China was not ready to provide political support to Russia's interference in Georgia. Although they have jointly promoted their shared values, the regimes might have prioritized other interests that contradict them.

In summary, some observable implications were found for the theory of shared ideology during this period. The states did provide support for other non-democratic regimes in the UNSC where they vetoed and condemned Western liberal interventions. Although neither the bilateral Treaty of 2001 nor the establishment of the SCO included direct criticism or rejection of Western values, the joint vetoes in 2007 and 2008 showed otherwise. This development could be a response to the color revolutions in the precluding years, which Russia and China perceived as being driven by the influence of Western values. However, the Russo-Georgian revealed limitations to their united ideological front as Russia challenged their value of non-interference. As a result, shared ideology cannot fully explain the motives behind Sino-Russian cooperation during that period.

Geopolitical interests

During this period, China and Russia conducted their first joint military exercises. The exercise in 2005 was the first Peace Mission, which would become a series of regularly conducted drills. China and Russia stated that the Peace Missions were meant to train the militaries in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency (Weitz 2021, 2). However, the first mission differed substantially from the subsequent ones, implying a more geopolitical and neorealist motive. It involved large-scale land and amphibious maneuvers aimed at simulating conventional combat with a third state.

Although China and Russia stated that the Peace Mission in August 2005 was not directed against any particular country, the location, timing, and drills involved suggested otherwise. It was conducted in Russia's Vladivostok and then in China's Shandong Peninsula, which is located in the Yellow Sea right across the Korean Peninsula. The nature of the exercise could be interpreted as a simulation of a hypothetical occupation of the Korean Peninsula. If the regime in Pyongyang were to collapse, it would be in the interest of China and Russia to occupy the territory before the US and South Korea, as a reunification of the Korean states

would bring US forces closer to their borders (Weitz 2015, 6). The timing of the exercise was also significant because of the summit held in Moscow the previous month.

The summit led to the signing of the Sino-Russian Joint Declaration on the International Order in the 21st Century. The declaration was a clear signal from both states that they rejected the presence of US forces in their neighborhood. First and foremost, it called for the US to withdraw its bases in the territories of the SCO members Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In addition, it demanded that the US increase transparency in its arms trade agreements with Taiwan. During the summit, the leaders allegedly talked about how they worried about the rapprochement between the US and Taiwan on the one hand and the US-Japan alignment on the other. In addition, they discussed the color revolutions that had swept across former Soviet states (Bin 2005).

However, the subsequent Peace Mission 2007 was less sophisticated than the previous exercise due to internal divisions. Russia wanted to incorporate the CSTO into the exercise, where it remained influential, whereas China wanted it to remain in the SCO framework. Further disputes involved the location of the exercise, as Russia claimed it would be too provocative to conduct it in the Zhejiang province near the Taiwan Straits. This was important for Russia to remain outside China's conflict with Taiwan (Bekkevold and Lo 2019, 96).

In 2009, the states expanded their bilateral military exercises by conducting a navy drill in the Gulf of Aden involving anti-piracy tactics. The exercise can be interpreted as an attempt to enhance their influence in a region critical for the maritime route connecting Asia and Europe (China Power Project 2024). In addition to the joint military exercises, arms trade between Russia and China during this period also provided some support for the theory of geopolitical interests. China purchased air defense systems, missiles, submarines, and aircraft meant for deployment against an attack from an external actor as opposed to domestic threats. Though the rhetoric surrounding the Peace Missions was strongly emphasized by their shared ideology, it was clearly driven by the threat of Western military forces in the region. It had a distinctive character of power politics and neorealism despite the official reasoning provided by the states. As a result, these events offer supporting evidence for the theory of geopolitical interests.

Authoritarian dynamics

The emergence of the SCO in the early 2000s has drawn attention not only because of its massive size and achievements in securing borders but also because most of its members are non-democratic regimes. Therefore, the organization has been described as a “club of autocrats” meant to sustain authoritarian values under the pretext of “the Shanghai Spirit” (Ambrosio 2008, 1322). One of the most important projects adopted by the SCO is the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure, a permanent functioning body under the SCO that was created to coordinate their joint mission of combatting the three evils: terrorism, separatism, and extremism. The framework established the base for their joint military exercises meant to train law enforcement bodies in anti-terrorist tactics. The project’s broad definition of terrorist activity has, however, been criticized by external observers who claim that it provides justification for cracking down on political opposition in the name of counterterrorism (Chen 2023, 234).

In 2007, the states organized a bilateral exercise with their paramilitary forces (Gorenburg et al. 2023, 49). The choice of location for the exercise is of particular significance, given that it was held in Moscow and its surrounding regions. Both the timing and the location of the exercise provide at least supporting evidence for the theory of authoritarian control. Still, there are two important things to consider. The exercise could have been a response to the terrorist attacks that occurred in Moscow in 2004 (Bianchini and Fiori 2020, 251). On the other hand, it could also have been attributed to the color revolutions that occurred in 2000-2005. Therefore, one can argue that while the exercise might have had genuine counterterrorism purposes, it could also have been applied as a method of diffusion-proofing in order to dissuade potential protesters from organizing a democratic uprising.

In terms of the observable implications of authoritarian power-sharing, there was limited evidence of purges or shuffling of positions that could be linked to one of the cooperation events. Some purges were conducted in both militaries in 2003, the year of their first joint exercise involving ground forces. However, the purges conducted in the previous months included commanders of the Chinese Navy and the Russian Air Force, which have limited relevance to the exercise of 2003. In addition, there was no evidence of purges before the Peace Mission 2005, the most significant exercise of the period (Sudduth 2021). Moreover, no specific evidence was found of arms or gas trading deals that benefitted elite members of either regime. Such instances are challenging to observe or document, given the limited

transparency of the regimes. Therefore, the period of 2000-2008 revealed some evidence for the theory of authoritarian dynamics, which was primarily focused on the problem of authoritarian control.

5.2 2010-2015 – Strategic deepening of relations

Sino-Russian military cooperation continued to expand in the following years, which were marked by regular joint military exercises and political alignment in the UNSC. Major geopolitical events of the period and leadership change in China led to further alignment between the two states. Rising tensions between the US and the powers in the East were magnifying as Washington announced its pivot to Asia. They worsened even more during the anti-Putin protests in 2011-2012, which the Kremlin perceived as being supported by the US. This period also saw the revival of Russian arms sales to China after several years of decline (Bekkevold and Lo 2019, 92). The year 2015 was significant in terms of the Sino-Russia arms trade, especially compared to the previous years (China Power Project 2024). The purchase of missiles, air defense systems, and naval weapons in big numbers suggests China's attempt to increase its deterrence against external rivals as opposed to domestic threats.

The total amount of joint military exercises doubled from the previous period (China Power Project 2024). While most exercises were held in the territories of Russia, China, or other SCO members, they expanded their geographical range further with two exercises in the Mediterranean Sea. Notably, Russia demonstrated an expansionist demeanor in several geopolitical events, such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the military intervention in Syria in the following year (Gorenburg et al. 2023). In addition to the aforementioned geopolitical tensions, the period also included events of authoritarian instability following the Arab Spring and efforts by the leaders to consolidate their power. In summary, more substantial evidence was found in support of the theories of geopolitical interests and authoritarian dynamics compared to the findings of shared ideology.

Shared ideology

The Arab Spring of the early 2010s and its aftermath had a significant impact on the international community. It raised the issue of humanitarian crises and the responsibility of states to protect their populations from atrocities. The brutal protests and conflicts between the leaders and the masses invoked discussions in the UNSC. The Security Council drafted

several resolutions in the following years about the situation in Syria, where the Assad regime had responded brutally to the democratic protests. China and Russia's voting behavior during these years was somewhat inconsistent in terms of the bolstering of fellow non-democratic regimes (European Parliament. Directorate General for External Policies of the Union. 2013, 4).

They had both abstained from voting on the UN intervention in Libya, which eventually led to the fall of Gaddafi's regime. Additionally, they had jointly condemned Iran's suspected nuclear program. When it came to the resolutions on Syria, however, China and Russia consistently vetoed resolutions that called upon leader Bashar al-Assad to step down and cease violence toward protesters (European Parliament. Directorate General for External Policies of the Union. 2013, 7). Like before, the representatives from both countries in the UNSC stressed the values of sovereignty and non-interference. Vitaly Churkin from Russia asserted that the resolution would be counterproductive as it did not mention efforts to end attacks by armed groups or their association with extreme actors (UNSC SC/10536 2012). This emphasis on countering extremist groups highlights the values of the SCO and its goal of countering terrorist and extremist threats. Furthermore, the representatives from both China and Russia accused the other permanent members of the UNSC of abusing their position to promote regime change in third states.

The year 2014 presented another turning point in Sino-Russian relations as Russia annexed Crimea. The annexation sparked further conflicts in Ukraine's eastern regions and sent shockwaves through Europe. The referendum held in Crimea, where the majority of voters allegedly supported a return to Russia, was heavily criticized by the international community. It led to the isolation of Russia in the international arena as Western states imposed sanctions on Russian gas, arms, and other products. Thus, it incentivized Russia to expand its market toward China in the east. The UNSC drafted a resolution condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine. China abstained from the vote, providing Russia with indirect political support. Russia justified its actions in Ukraine with the precedent of the Kosovo intervention. According to analysts, China's decision to abstain was meant to oppose the Western double standards in Crimea (Sheldon-Duplaix 2022, 110). Just like in the case of Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, China did not vocally condemn Russia's actions but

sought to keep its distance from the conflict in Ukraine. Little evidence was, however, found on China's reaction to Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015.

This evidence shows that China and Russia continued to reject Western liberal interventions. On the other hand, their inconsistent voting behavior during this period weakens the theory of shared ideology. They did not provide support for Gaddafi's regime in Libya as they did with Assad's regime in Syria. This evidence raises the question of what other interests are at play for each state. In addition, Russia's aggression in Ukraine put yet another test to the Sino-Russian relationship as it contradicted the values of sovereignty and non-interference.

Geopolitical interests

Despite their deepening bilateral relations, China and Russia continued their cooperation through the SCO. The Peace Missions in 2010 was the largest exercise conducted outside of Russian and Chinese territory. It demonstrated the great tactical and logistical capabilities of the PLA, showing that they could respond to threats in Central Asia stemming from either terrorist groups or even state actors. After 2012, the frequency of joint exercises increased drastically as China and Russia expanded their bilateral cooperation to include joint naval drills (Weitz 2021, 2).

The first "Joint Sea" of 2012 was conducted in the Yellow Sea and involved a combined fleet of ships simulating the rescue of hijacked ships, escorting commercial vessels, and joint air defense. In brief, it involved a series of maritime anti-terror training. Still, China and Russia did not claim the exercise to be counterterrorist. They stated that its purpose was rooted in the objective of enhancing teamwork, sharing techniques, and enhancing regional stability. This emphasis rhymes with the declarations made by the US and its allies in the region in light of their pivot to Asia (Weitz 2015, 15–16). As a result, the drills could be meant as a response to increased US presence in the region, demonstrating the states' efforts to increase their joint capabilities to counter external forces in the region.

In 2014 and 2015, the states ramped up the exercises, which doubled in numbers compared to previous years. They also expanded the range of their naval drills as they held two exercises in the Mediterranean Sea. The location is of strategic geopolitical importance to Russia because of its military presence in Syria (Sheldon-Duplaix 2022, 110). Also, Russia

launched a military intervention in Syria in 2015 as Assad's regime struggled in its battle with terrorist and rebel groups. Putin's intervention in Syria can, however, be interpreted both through the lenses of geopolitical interests and authoritarian dynamics. As Syria was not only a fellow autocracy but also one of Russia's main allies in the region of the Middle East, Putin had a stake in the survival of Assad's regime. The breakdown of Assad's regime could not only have spillover effects of authoritarian breakdown but also lead to Russia losing its naval base in Syria and, thereby, its influence in the region (Geukjian 2022, 132–33).

China's interests in the Mediterranean are more ambiguous, yet its participation shows that it is willing to balance geopolitical matters alongside Russia. This is particularly significant given Russia's isolation from the international community due to heavy sanctions imposed by the Western block. Additionally, China's presence in the Mediterranean Sea aligns with its Belt and Road Initiative and its broader ambition to establish itself as a global maritime power, safeguarding critical shipping routes and overseas infrastructure. In summary, the timing and context of Sino-Russian military exercises during this period strongly support the theory of advancing shared geopolitical interests.

Authoritarian dynamics

In 2013, China and Russia conducted another exercise involving their paramilitary forces, this time in Beijing. It was a continuation of the series of exercises performed with the paramilitary forces of both states. According to Chinese media, the exercise in Beijing demonstrated improved counterterrorism techniques, such as eliminating threats within a crowd (Gorenburg et al. 2023, 49). Like the previous exercise held in Moscow in 2007, the fact that it was conducted in Beijing provides some support for the theory of authoritarian control. The timing of the exercise is also significant because of domestic unrest within China, which was rooted in the major international political events of the Arab Spring. It led to the collapse of several authoritarian regimes in North Africa and the Middle East. The "Jasmine Revolution" in Tunisia inspired people in China to take to the streets and protest in early 2011 (Koesel and Bunce 2013, 760). Russia also experienced an outburst of anti-protests in Moscow and St. Petersburg in 2011-2012 after the State Duma elections (Bianchini and Fiori 2020, 22). In summary, both regimes had experienced massive protests in the years leading up to the paramilitary exercise in Beijing in 2013. The location and timing of the exercise line up with

the causal mechanism of authoritarian control. However, it does not explain why the exercise was held in China's capital and not Moscow.

When considering the observable implications of authoritarian power-sharing, some evidence of power consolidation was found in the case of China. After Xi Jinping came into office in late 2012, he soon introduced drastic military reforms to tackle corruption within the PLA, coinciding with the increase in joint military exercises held with Russia. The unprecedented reforms took place over several years. They included purges, shuffling, and promotions of officers with ties to the president across the PLA and structural changes in the military institutions. According to analysts, President Xi's promotions created a faction within the military comprised of officers who served alongside the president in the Nanjing Military Region (McCauley 2015, 11). These strategic reforms could, however, not be linked to a specific event of Sino-Russian military cooperation, leaving this evidence of relevance.

The Russian military also underwent several reforms aimed at countering corruption and improving efficiency. However, no concrete evidence has been observed of purges or other methods of consolidating power. In the realm of economic gains from Sino-Russian cooperation, some of Putin's close allies have benefited significantly from lucrative deals and Chinese investments. For example, Rosneft, the state-owned oil company, and Rostec, a defense manufacturer led by Sergey Chemezov, a long-time ally of Putin, have seen substantial advantages (Kluge 2024, 30–31). Additionally, Gennady Timchenko, a wealthy oligarch and another close associate of Putin, was appointed by the President as chair of the Russian-Chinese Business Council. Timchenko has profited substantially from Sino-Russian cooperation, particularly from loans from Chinese banks. After all, it is challenging to estimate the roles that these individuals play within the Russian elite and the extent of the regime's reliance on their support. Nevertheless, this period offers stronger evidence of mechanisms of authoritarian control rather than power-sharing within Putin's governance structure.

5.3 2016-2022 – Consolidation and global posturing

The years 2016-2022 were characterized by intensified military relations between the states. China and Russia conducted a total of 56 joint military exercises of various kinds and expanded their geographical scope even further. The power dynamics and rivalry between China and the US continued to shape Sino-Russian relations as President Trump's trade war with China drove

Beijing closer to Moscow. Since both states faced sanctions from the US, their relationship was ultimately strengthened by their united stance in the UNSC.

The period included the largest joint military exercises conducted at the time, which were part of the Russian Vostok series held in the Eastern Military Districts of Russia. The initial Vostok exercises simulated an attack against a hypothetical invasion by a state in Russia's Far East, a role that could only be assumed by China. Nevertheless, China's participation in Vostok-2018 and again in Vostok-2022 demonstrated a shift in Russia's perspective on China. Furthermore, both regimes worked to maintain their sphere of influence as Xi discussed the unification of Taiwan with China while Putin initiated a war in Ukraine in February 2022. At the same time, both Putin and Xi consolidated their power over the military, making the regimes even more personalized. The increased geopolitical tensions between the Western bloc and Eastern states coincided with heightened Sino-Russian military cooperation, indicating evidence tied to geopolitical interests. Although some signs of authoritarian dynamics were observed, they were not as compelling as the evidence supporting the theory of geopolitical interests.

Shared ideology

Throughout the years of 2016-2022, China and Russia continued to veto resolutions in the UNSC jointly meant to relieve the humanitarian crisis in Syria. In 2019, they also vetoed a resolution on Venezuela's political and humanitarian situation. Nicolás Maduro had assumed power through fraudulent elections in 2018, which were highly condemned by international observers. Once again, the Russian representative accused the US of illegal interference by imposing a regime change in Venezuela (UNSC SC/13725 2019). Both China and Russia had maintained friendly relations with Venezuela for some time. They had provided financial, military, and political support to the regimes of Venezuela in recent decades, along with other non-democratic states. Although the veto in the UNSC suggests joint support for fellow authoritarian leaders, alternative motivations could have driven the alignment. Adomeit (2022) suggested that the states' involvement in Venezuela is most likely uncoordinated and mainly meant to counteract US interests (Adomeit 2022, 26–27).

In 2022, China and Russia vetoed a resolution drafted to condemn intercontinental ballistic missile tests conducted by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The delegates

from both states argued that deploying sanctions would be ineffective and have a humanitarian impact. They added that imposing sanctions would further impact Pyongyang's attitude toward disarmament and risk potential escalation. Overall, the responses of China and Russia emphasized their preference for dialogue over sanctions. However, it could also be interpreted as a signal of protection from Western interference and influence in the region.

In the same year, China and Russia released a joint statement in early February expressing their worries about the new era of international relations. The sides noted in the statement that they condemned actions of interventionism and the efforts of certain states to impose their own standards of democratic values, clearly a reference to the US and its allies, which were named in the statement. Furthermore, the states criticized the establishment of exclusive blocks and alliances as such activity was against true democratic values. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, such evidence can overlap with the theory of geopolitical interests, mainly since the reference to exclusive alliance building implies a balancing method.

Geopolitical interests

One of the states' most notable joint military exercises during this period was the Joint Sea of 2017. It was held in the Baltic Sea, located close to the Baltic states and other NATO members. The previous Joint Sea exercises had primarily been held in sensitive Eastern Asian locations, such as the Yellow Sea, the Sea of Japan, and the East China Sea. These areas are strategically important to China, including the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands claimed by both China and Japan (Weitz 2021, 4). The choice of location signals reciprocal support for each other in geopolitical sensitive regions, as hypothesized by the observable implications of the second theory of geopolitical interests.

The states signaled deeper military ties as Russia joined the Chinese naval parade with other countries. In turn, China participated twice in the extravagant Vostok exercises hosted by the Russian military in Russia's far east districts (Gorenburg et al. 2023, 49). Also, new joint military drills were introduced during this period, such as joint aviation patrols and computer-enabled missile defense exercises (China Power Project 2024). This development happened in the aftermath of the missile tests conducted by North Korea, which sparked further trilateral cooperation between the US, Japan, and South Korea. The US government announced that it would provide deterrence support to its Asian allies by deploying advanced missile defense

systems. The announcement provoked China and Russia to raise objections to the initiative. Two years later, Chinese and Russian bombers flew into the overlapping airspace of Japan and South Korea (Weitz 2021, 2–3).

These tensions escalated further as the US enhanced its military cooperation with Australia in the Indo-Pacific in the subsequent years. In February 2022, China and Russia condemned the alliance in their joint statement. According to the statement, they were mainly concerned that the US plan to deploy intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles would cause instability and insecurity in the region. These developments showed heightened tensions between the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific and the Sino-Russian axis. Later that month, Russia invaded Ukraine. Just like in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation in 2014, it ultimately drove Moscow and Beijing closer to each other. Despite Russia's war in Ukraine, the joint military exercises continued as before, as the states conducted 10 exercises in the year 2022. Two were held in the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea (China Power Project 2024). The former exercise was held with Iran and was part of a series focusing on anti-air, counter-piracy, and nighttime maritime operations.

Authoritarian dynamics

In July 2016, the states organized an exercise involving paramilitary forces in Moscow and Smolensk, a city near the Belarus border (China Power Project 2024). This was part of the Cooperation series, which had previously taken place in 2013 and 2007. As previously argued, such an exercise held in either capital with paramilitary forces can be interpreted as a projection of power intended to dissuade public protests. However, these observations could not be directly connected to democratic uprisings in neither Russia, China, nor other authoritarian regimes. Therefore, this limits the validity of the causal mechanisms, suggesting that China and Russia would conduct such exercises to prevent democratic spillover effects on their regimes.

When evaluating the causal mechanisms for authoritarian power-sharing, the evidence appeared limited. No substantial data could be found on purges or shuffling of positions within the militaries that could signal efforts of personalization by either leader. Moreover, arms trade between the states declined significantly during this period. However, according to SIPRI's Arms Transfers Database, Russia placed an order for several armored

vehicles in 2022 (SIPRI 2024). This trade could be a sign of cooperation between the states and support from China during Russia's war in Ukraine. However, due to the highly opaque business environment in Russia and China, it was impossible to determine what individuals within either regime profited from the trading (Kluge 2024, 31). These findings suggest that while there are instances of cooperation between China and Russia, the evidence does not fully support the theorized mechanisms of authoritarian dynamics.

6 Conclusions

This thesis set out to unravel the key factors shaping the military alignment between China and Russia by incorporating the unique dynamics of authoritarian regimes. The case study presented in the previous chapter revealed both consistencies and some limitations in their partnership. To summarize, the research explored common themes in the literature on Sino-Russian cooperation, such as shared ideology and geopolitical interest, while adding the dimension of authoritarian dynamics. The findings show that Sino-Russian military cooperation in the period of 2000-2022 was mostly driven by shared geopolitical interest and authoritarian dynamics, particularly the common strive for regime survival.

Limited evidence was found in support of the theory of shared ideology. It is important to note that some of the theory's observable implications overlapped with those of geopolitical interests, making the distinction between the theories complicated. Although the observations showed that China and Russia provided protection for fellow autocracies by vetoing interventionist resolutions proposed in the UNSC, it is unlikely to be tied to a motivation of ideology and values. In other words, their cooperation efforts might have a primarily geopolitical motivation instead of an ideological component. The perceived protection of fellow autocracies is most likely motivated by the fact that neither Russia nor China wanted to set a precedent for Western-led interventions in authoritarian regimes facing criticism for their non-democratic behavior or neglect of human rights. These results coincide with previous research on the concept of autocracy promotion, which has been declared to have significant conceptual flaws (Tansey 2016b, 155). Moreover, it is complex to determine leaders' commitment to ideological values and whether they influence their decisions. This is true not only for authoritarian regimes but also in democracies.

Nonetheless, significant evidence was found to support the theory of geopolitical interest throughout all three sub-periods. Regular exercises simulating conventional combat with a third state were held in strategic locations, i.e. within China's and Russia's spheres of influence and in other more provocative locations close to NATO states. Furthermore, the states provided political support to each other consistently in times of heightened military threats from the US and its allies. The joint military exercises in provocative locations close to NATO members and participation in naval parades can be interpreted as a power projection signaling a united Sino-Russian military front. Evidence of coordinated actions in geopolitical hotspots was also observed where the states joined efforts to counter Western influence. This was further supported by evidence of arms trading between the two, where Russia supplied China with missiles, deterrence technology, naval weaponry, and other types of weapons that are deployed in interstate conflicts as opposed to domestic conflicts.

In terms of authoritarian dynamics, some evidence supporting the theory was identified across all three subperiods that can support the theory. Notably, more substantial evidence was found for the mechanisms of authoritarian control compared to those of authoritarian power-sharing. As hypothesized, joint military exercises involving paramilitary forces were conducted in the capital of either state during all three subperiods, three times in total. The timing of two of the three exercises aligned with the causal mechanism proposed by the theory. Both exercises were preceded by instances of authoritarian breakdown or domestic unrest in China and Russia. As hypothesized earlier, these exercises conducted under the pretext of counterterrorism likely served a dual purpose by training the militaries to suppress revolts that could threaten regime stability.

Conversely, little evidence was found in support of authoritarian power-sharing. There were no identifiable purges, shuffling of key military positions, or other methods of power consolidation mechanisms that could be linked to cooperation projects between China and Russia. Furthermore, no substantial evidence was found of arms trade agreements benefitting key elite members of either regime. The causal mechanisms for the authoritarian power-sharing were significantly more complicated to observe, primarily due to limited data availability and the lack of transparency in both states. These limitations highlight the broader challenges of researching authoritarian regimes and politics, where access to reliable data remains restricted.

Overall, this research has suggested that authoritarian dynamics can provide a more profound understanding of international relations, especially in light of recent events of heightened authoritarian activity (Libman and Obydenkova 2018a). Due to data and time limitations, this research did not include the recent years of 2023 and 2024. These years have nevertheless been extremely eventful in terms of Sino-Russian military cooperation on the one hand and domestic authoritarian politics on the other. Both Putin and Xi have purged and shuffled the positions of multiple military elites in 2024 (Baev 2024, 5). Future studies might examine whether these signs of turbulence will lead to enhanced cooperation between the states. Lastly, the causal mechanisms of authoritarian control or power-sharing might be examined in other authoritarian partnerships, especially in light of the recent rapprochement between Russia and North Korea.

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