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Russia's Position in the US–China Strategic Rivalry in the Asia-Pacific: A Realist Constructivist Perspective

Guzanfar Ali Garewal¹¹ Lecturer, Department of International Relations, NUML, Islamabad; Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Defense & Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.Email: gagarewal@numl.edu.pk

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission: June 29, 2026 Revised: July 12, 2026 Accepted: July 28, 2026 Available Online: August 11, 2026 Keywords: <i>Russia; China; United States; Asia-Pacific; strategic triangle; realist constructivism; Sino-Russian alignment; reverse Kissinger; hedging; regional order.</i> Corresponding author: Guzanfar Ali Garewal Email: gagarewal@numl.edu.pk	The Asia-Pacific today is the main theatre of great-power politics due to its geostrategic location and its weight in the world economy. As a result, Washington and Beijing are vying to expand their influence both in the region and beyond. Meanwhile, the presence of Russia as a third major power makes that competition more obscure. This paper analyzes Russia's position within the Sino-American rivalry. Russia is best understood as a balancer pursuing, on its own, strategic and economic interests that have been aligned with those of China, and are in part constructed alongside them, from a realist-constructivist perspective. The alignment is a matter of choice, not nature. The shared reading of American policy as threatening could provide a basis for this partnership. However, it is likely to be bounded by historical memory, by an asymmetry of dependence that favours Beijing, and by divergent conceptions of what a desirable regional order would look like. Additionally, the article states that the United States' effort to 'Reverse Kissinger' to detach Moscow from Beijing will not work. The forecasted path is one of prolonged and structured competition rather than systemic warfare. The United States' best course is to accommodate China's regional roles rather than contain it, while Russia's interest is in maintaining rivalry not resolving it.

Introduction

Few regions have been written about as intensively, or as narrowly, as the Asia-Pacific. Much of the scholarship of the past decade has settled into a dyadic habit. The United States and China are treated as the only consequential actors, their interaction is measured against the yardstick of power transition, and every other state in the theatre is sorted into the derivative categories of ally, client, or hedger.¹ The material asymmetry between the two 'Titans' and everyone else is real, and the literature organised around the widely resonated 'Thucydides Trap' has given the dyad an intuitive narrative shape.² It obscures the fact that the Asia-Pacific is not a two-body problem but a system in which a third great power — diminished, resentful, and nuclear-armed — retains the capacity to alter the balance without ever being able to dominate it.

¹Ayesha Zafar, "US–China Tit-for-Tat Politics in the Asia-Pacific: Beyond Thucydides Trap to Multipolarity and Complex Interdependence," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, February 15, 2022.

²Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

Russia occupies an awkward place in this literature. Artyom Lukin has observed, with some justice, that there is scarcely any Russian-American bilateral relationship in the Asia-Pacific to investigate: strategic interaction between Moscow and Washington has been centred on Europe since 1945, and East Asia barely registers in their bilateral dealings.³ Russia's Pacific presence is demographically thin and economically marginal, and it lacks the naval capacity to project force in a predominantly maritime theatre. On a narrowly material reading, then, Moscow is a rounding error. But the same author immediately qualifies the point, and the qualification is the more important half of the argument: Russia remains one of only three great powers in the contemporary system, and the position it takes in the unfolding contest between the other two cannot be ignored by either of them. The puzzle this article addresses are precisely that gap between Russia's modest regional weight and its outsized systemic relevance.

The central argument advanced here is that Russia occupies the position of an indispensable but subordinate balancer. It is vital because its alignment materially changes the strategic calculation confronting the United States, because it supplies China with capabilities and diplomatic support that Beijing cannot easily source elsewhere. It is dependent because Moscow has neither the economic base nor the political will for an independent strategic scale in Pacific waters, and because the terms of its relationship with Beijing have been more favourable to the latter since 2022. The alignment that results in real, consequential, and bounded — an entente that will not become an alliance, sustained by convergent grievance rather than shared purpose.

Explaining a relationship of this kind requires a framework that can hold material capability and social meaning in the same analytical frame. Structural realism explains why Moscow and Beijing drew together but cannot explain why they have declined to formalise the arrangement, nor why Russia refuses the junior status that its material position would seem to dictate. Constructivism explains the identity commitments that produce those refusals but tends to under-specify the constraints within which identities operate. Realist constructivism, as formulated by J. Samuel Barkin, offers a way through: it treats power politics and normative structure as co-constitutive rather than rival explanations, and it insists that the study of power is inseparable from the study of how actors understand what power is for.⁴

Methodologically the study is qualitative and interpretive, built on policy documents, think-tank assessments, books, research journals and the secondary theoretical literature. Section II examines China's preference for non-military instruments and the practice of strategic silence that accompanies them; Section III analyses the drivers and ceilings of the Sino-Russian alignment; Section IV explains why the Asia-Pacific has become the arena in which the triangle is contested and evaluates the 'reverse Kissinger' gambit against it; Section V sets out the theoretical framework; Section VI concludes the debate.

China's Emerging Clout and the Primacy of Non-Military Instruments

China's real strength is not the growth of the People's Liberation Army but the deliberate concentration of Chinese efforts in economics, technological advancement, industrial production & AI Power domains. Military competition is where the United States sustains its superiority; finance, infrastructure, institutional design, technical standards, and narrative are where the incumbent advantage is marginal and gradually eroding.

China's is leading in the manufacturing of solar panels, electrical vehicles, batteries, wind turbines & rare earth minerals. It is the largest trading partner of 120 states in the world. It has penetrated in the global economic system. It follows dual approach in terms of institutions, One It is creating minilateral & multilateral institutions such as SCO & BRICS+ group, 2nd approach is to press for more share & influence in the existing institutions such as IMF & the UN. It has enhanced its role in the UN peace keeping missions. It is exercising its economy as an instrument to further its muscle in the Asia-Pacific.

Both the powers have securitized the competition in the domains of advanced technologies & AI. American export administration regulations announced in October 2022 restricted advanced semiconductors, production equipment, and supercomputing hardware destined for China, with material consequences for Chinese artificial intelligence development.⁵ Beijing's response has been to accelerate indigenisation, and the contest has since generalised into a broader argument about which power will hold the commanding heights of the next technological cycle.⁶ Financially, the same insulating impulse

³Artyom Lukin, "The Russia-US-China Strategic Triangle in the Asia-Pacific," in *Trump's America and International Relations in the Indo-Pacific: Theoretical Analysis of Changes and Continuities*, ed. Tsuneo Akaha, Jingdong Yuan, and Wei Liang (Cham: Springer, 2021), 99–100.

⁴J. Samuel Barkin, "Realist Constructivism," *International Studies Review* 5, no. 3 (2003): 325–42; and Barkin, *Realist Constructivism: Rethinking International Relations Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁵Arakaki, "The United States and Competition with China," 58.

⁶Jake Sullivan, "The Tech High Ground: What It Will Take to Gain the Advantage Over China," *Foreign Affairs* 105, no. 3 (May/June 2026): 70–85.

produces de-dollarisation: alternative payment channels, expanded local-currency settlement, and the construction of institutions designed to blunt the effect of sanctions. Analysts at Brookings note that Beijing and Moscow are jointly developing supply chains and financial mechanisms intended precisely to reduce their exposure to American economic coercion.⁷ Whether such measures can displace dollar centrality is doubtful; that they raise the cost of using it as a weapon.⁸

Alongside these material instruments sits a normative offer. The Global Development, Global Civilisation, and Global Security Initiatives are framed in the inclusive, sovereignty-respecting idiom that plays well across the Global South, and are paired with the older formulation of a community of common destiny. American assessments read this vocabulary as incompatible with the existing order and as a challenge to the legitimacy of the US alliance system.⁹ Read less adversarially, it is a bid for normative authority pursued through language rather than force — an attempt to make Chinese preferences appear as general interests.

Complementing all of this is a practice best described as strategic silence. Beijing systematically declines to arbitrate, to condemn, or to commit. It supported Russia economically and diplomatically after February 2022 while withholding overt lethal assistance; it backed Iran rhetorically during its confrontation with Israel and the United States while remaining militarily absent; and it has declined to restrain either partner or to shoulder the burden of ending the conflicts in question.¹⁰ Silence of this kind is cheap, reversible, and deniable. It also has costs that Chinese strategists may be underweighting. By minimising exposure to crises rather than managing them, Beijing helps perpetuate instability that ultimately damages its own commercial interests — a point that goes to the heart of the divergence between Chinese and Russian statecraft examined below.

The Sino-Russian Alignment: Drivers and Ceilings

The convergence of Moscow and Beijing is over-determined at the level of threat perception. Stephen Walt's revision of balance-of-power theory holds that states align against the actor they perceive as most threatening rather than against the most powerful actor as such.¹¹ Both capitals identify the United States as their principal adversary, and each finds the other's grievances legible.

American policy has done much to produce this legibility. The 2017 National Security Strategy named China and Russia jointly as powers challenging American influence and interests, and the 2018 National Defense Strategy made long-term strategic competition with the two of them the Department of Defense's principal priority.¹² Whatever the analytical merits of that pairing, it was also a performative act: it told Moscow and Beijing that Washington had already decided they belonged in the same category, and thereby lowered the cost of behaving as though they did. This is one of several points at which a purely material account of the alignment is inadequate. The coalition was in part talked into being.

The substantive content of the relationship is nonetheless considerable, and it is asymmetric. Chinese microelectronics, machine tools, military optics, drone and turbojet engines, armoured vehicles, satellite technology, and specialist materials have flowed to Russia both directly and through third countries, materially assisting the reconstitution of the Russian defence industrial base.¹³ The traffic runs in both directions — Russian air and missile defence systems and submarine-quieting technologies have improved Chinese capabilities, and the two states collaborate in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and space — but the balance of dependence has shifted decisively toward Beijing since 2022.¹⁴ Militarily, joint activity has become routine rather than exceptional: live-fire maritime drills in the South China Sea, joint long-range bomber patrols near Alaska, and a widening programme of exercises.

⁷Patricia M. Kim, Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, Angela Stent, and Tara Varma, "The China-Russia Relationship and Threats to Vital US Interests," Brookings Institution, December 16, 2024.

⁸On the mechanics and limits of financial coercion, see Edward Fishman, "How to Fight an Economic War: A Field Manual for a Ruptured World," *Foreign Affairs* 105, no. 3 (May/June 2026): 40–56.

⁹Arakaki, "The United States and Competition with China," 59.

¹⁰Kim, "Why 'China First' Will Fail," 152–53.

¹¹Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 21–26.

¹²Arakaki, "The United States and Competition with China," 44, 49.

¹³Kim et al., "The China-Russia Relationship."

¹⁴Kim et al., "The China-Russia Relationship."

The leadership variable is not decorative. Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin preside over personalist systems in which foreign policy is unusually responsive to the convictions of a single figure, and both have invested personal prestige in the relationship, describing their alignment as one of standing 'back-to-back' against the liberal order.¹⁵

Against these drivers stand structural ceilings that make formal alliance improbable. The first is historical. The Sino-Soviet partnership of the 1950s ended in acrimony and, by 1969, in armed clashes at Zhenbao Island; both capitals learned from that episode that ideological affinity is a poor guarantee of strategic reliability.¹⁶ The second is doctrinal. China's aversion to binding commitments is not tactical but rooted in the memory of that failure, and it applies to Russia as much as to anyone else.¹⁷ The third is status. Moscow has no interest in serving as Beijing's junior partner, and its outreach to Iran, North Korea, and India is best read as an effort to preserve freedom of manoeuvre rather than as opportunism.¹⁸

Evidence of these ceilings can be observed in real time. Oriana Skylar Mastro's account of the Russia–North Korea Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership shows Moscow acting in a manner that plainly cuts against Chinese preferences: by supplying Pyongyang with capabilities, combat experience, economic relief, and diplomatic standing, Russia has loosened precisely the dependence that kept North Korea subordinate to Beijing for decades.¹⁹ Michael Beckley and Hal Brands capture the resulting configuration acutely: what looks from a distance like a bloc is better described as a syndicate of sanctioned regimes bound mostly by shared grievance, pursuing distinct and ultimately divergent imperial projects that may yet collide in the Arctic and Central Asia.²⁰ The older formulation remains the most economical: this is an axis of convenience, not a union.²¹

Why the Asia-Pacific?

Three Pacific Powers and a Region That Cannot Be Conceded

The Asia-Pacific concentrates the strategic variables that matter simultaneously to all three states. Each is a Pacific power by virtue of both geography and strategic orientation. The region accounts for a disproportionate share of global manufacturing, trade, and economic growth; its maritime sea lanes carry the energy supplies upon which the industrial economies of China, Japan, and South Korea depend; and its semiconductor manufacturing capacity is concentrated to an extent that constitutes a systemic vulnerability, particularly given the centrality of advanced chips to contemporary military and civilian technological platforms. such as the F-35 sourced overwhelmingly from Taiwan.²² A theatre in which economic interdependence and military flashpoints overlap this tightly is one in which no great power can afford strategic indifference.

The regional label itself is contested, and the contest is substantive rather than semantic. The displacement of 'Asia-Pacific' by 'Indo-Pacific' in Western usage served a specific strategic purpose, and Rushali Saha is right that conflating a geographic space with a strategy aimed principally at China has tended to alienate regional states rather than unite them.²³ Rory Medcalf's defence of the concept concedes as much while arguing that the wider map better reflects the region's actual connectivity.²⁴

The American Project and Its Present Strain

American strategy in the theatre has been continuous in objective and volatile in method. The pivot announced in 2011 sought to shift attention from Iraq and Afghanistan to a region whose fate would, in the then-Secretary of State's formulation,

¹⁵Beckley and Brands, "Heartland vs. Rimland," 123.

¹⁶On the Zhenbao clashes and their place in Chinese strategic memory, see S. Philip Hsu, "Domestic Power Reshuffles in 2022 and U.S.-Taiwan-China Relations," *Foreign Policy* at Brookings Policy Brief (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, May 2023), 11.

¹⁷Kim, "Why 'China First' Will Fail," 153.

¹⁸Kim et al., "The China-Russia Relationship."

¹⁹Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Kim's Dangerous Liaisons: Russia, China, and the Growing North Korea Threat," *Foreign Affairs* 105, no. 3 (May/June 2026): 114–16.

²⁰Beckley and Brands, "Heartland vs. Rimland," 122–23.

²¹Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

²²Arakaki, "The United States and Competition with China," 57.

²³Rushali Saha, "The Pitfalls of Great-Power Competition in the Indo-Pacific," *South Asian Voices*, April 28, 2022.

²⁴Rory Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future* (Carlton, Vic.: La Trobe University Press, 2020), chap. 1.

determine the century.²⁵ Successive administrations layered new instruments onto that foundation – the Free and Open Indo-Pacific framing, the Quad, AUKUS, maritime domain awareness assistance to Southeast Asian partners, and freedom of navigation operations – while retaining the objective of preventing any single power from dominating the region.²⁶ The 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy and successive National Defense Strategy documents restated it in progressively sharper language.

What has changed is the confidence of the coalition on which the strategy depends. Beckley and Brands describe a rimland alliance system unmatched in aggregate power but fractured in purpose, in which allies have become dependents rather than force multipliers and some now regard American unilateralism as a greater danger than the adversaries the alliances were built to deter.²⁷ Jennifer Lind and Daryl Press document the corollary in the nuclear domain, where confidence in extended deterrence has decayed to the point that successor arrangements must be seriously contemplated.²⁸ A. Wess Mitchell's call for a grand strategy of consolidation – concentrating finite resources on the primary theatre while relying on regional partners elsewhere, on the model of Fisher's pre-1914 Admiralty – is an intelligent response to overextension, but it is also an admission that the era of costless global presence has ended.²⁹

The 'Reverse Kissinger' and Why It Fails

Against this background, the recurring proposal to detach Moscow from Beijing deserves careful examination, because it is intuitively attractive and analytically weak. The historical referent is the opening to China of 1971–72, and the referent is systematically misread. Washington did not manufacture the Sino-Soviet split; it recognised a rupture that had already produced armed clashes on the Ussuri, and it monetised that rupture at low cost.³⁰ The manoeuvre worked because the estrangement was genuine, because Beijing feared Moscow more than it feared Washington, and because the United States could offer China something it urgently wanted and could not obtain elsewhere. None of these conditions obtains today.

There is, first, no rupture available to exploit. Russian dependence on China is a direct consequence of Western sanctions, and therefore an artefact of the very policy a wedge strategy would have to reverse. Second, the offer problem is intractable. What could Washington plausibly extend to Moscow that Beijing does not already supply – markets for hydrocarbons, dual-use inputs, diplomatic protection in the Security Council, and silence on the war? Any offer substantial enough to matter would require concessions on Ukrainian territory that would corrode American credibility with the very allies the strategy is meant to reassure.³¹ Third, and most fundamentally, the incentive structure is wrong. Moscow gains from the persistence of the US–China rivalry, because that rivalry absorbs American attention and leaves Russia greater latitude in the post-Soviet space, which remains the true centre of gravity of Russian foreign policy. Michael Kofman's assessment of Russian military reconstitution – a question of when rather than whether – confirms that Moscow's planning horizon remains overwhelmingly European.³² Why would Russia board a vessel it believes to be taking on water, in exchange for a seat it does not want, in a theatre it cannot contest?

China's Stakes and the Encirclement Problem

For Beijing the region is not one theatre among several but the space in which sovereignty claims, regime legitimacy, and strategic access converge. The East and South China Seas and, above all, Taiwan is framed domestically as question of national restoration rather than of foreign policy, which sharply constrains the room for compromise. Chinese counter-intervention capabilities have been developed explicitly to dissuade, deter, or defeat third-party intervention in the region, and American

²⁵Arakaki, "The United States and Competition with China," 47–48.

²⁶Arakaki, "The United States and Competition with China," 53–55; Zafar, "US–China Tit-for-Tat Politics."

²⁷Beckley and Brands, "Heartland vs. Rimland," 120–21.

²⁸Jennifer Lind and Daryl G. Press, "The Broken Nuclear Umbrella: What Comes After Extended Deterrence," *Foreign Affairs* 105, no. 4 (July/August 2026): 76–89.

²⁹A. Wess Mitchell, "A Grand Strategy of Consolidation: How Trump Can Revitalize American Power," *Foreign Affairs* 105, no. 3 (May/June 2026): 129–31.

³⁰Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 163–94; and Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), chap. 8.

³¹Kim et al., "The China-Russia Relationship."

³²Michael Kofman, "The Next Russia Threat: Moscow's Military Power After Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs* 105, no. 4 (July/August 2026): 41–43.

planning has responded with successive operational concepts intended to defeat those capabilities.³³ The interaction is a textbook security dilemma: each side's defensive preparation reads as offensive preparation to the other.

The most policy-relevant work on this problem suggests that the binary of invasion versus status quo is the wrong frame. S. Philip Hsu argues persuasively that Beijing's more probable path runs through coercive actions falling between grey-zone operations and kinetic warfare — limited blockades, actions against outlying islands, the accumulation of pressure designed to force negotiation rather than to seize territory — and that American strategy, oriented toward preventing large-scale armed conflict, lacks a systematic preventive answer to coercion of this kind.³⁴ Dennis Blair's caution against panic about Chinese military advantages is a useful corrective to threat inflation, but it does not dissolve the deterrence gap Hsu identifies.³⁵

The Paradox of the American Presence

An underappreciated feature of the regional order is that the American military presence serves interests in Beijing that Chinese rhetoric cannot acknowledge. The alliance system functions as a lid. It suppresses regional armament, forecloses the militarisation of Japan beyond current limits, and — most consequentially — removes the incentive for Japanese and South Korean nuclear acquisition. Lind and Press make clear that this restraint is contingent on allied confidence in extended deterrence rather than on any settled preference for non-proliferation.³⁶ Were the United States to withdraw, the resulting order would not be a Chinese sphere but a crowded, armed, and possibly nuclearised neighbourhood in which regional states balanced China directly and in which Russia might find it advantageous to join them. Beijing's stated preference and its revealed interest are therefore not identical — an underused source of strategic stability.

Russia's Stake: Balancer, Not Soloist

Russia's regional position is best characterised as defensive and derivative. Its Pacific littoral is extensive but demographically sparse, contributing a small share of national output, and it lacks the naval capability for force projection in a maritime theatre.³⁷ Moscow does not seek geopolitical expansion in the Asia-Pacific; it seeks to reduce the vulnerability of its eastern territories and to avoid the strategic loneliness that would follow from confrontation with both Washington and Beijing simultaneously.

Yet a great power cannot be indifferent to upheaval in the region that will structure the coming decades, and Russia holds instruments that punch above its regional weight. Arms transfers are the clearest case. Moscow's defence relationship with Vietnam and its long-standing supplier relationship with India generate friction with Chinese objectives rather than reinforcing them, and Russian naval activity has conspicuously avoided the contested waters in which Beijing would most value visible support.³⁸ Russia thus adds to Chinese aggregate power at the systemic level while complicating Chinese positioning at the regional level. This is the signature of a balancer rather than a bloc member: it participates without integrating, and it retains the option value of its own ambiguity. Meanwhile the rivalry between the other two poles delivers Russia its principal strategic dividend — space in Eurasia, where its core interests actually lie and where it has sought accommodation with Chinese economic penetration on terms it can still influence.³⁹

Divergent Worldviews and the Case for Accommodation

The deepest constraint on Sino-Russian alignment is that the two states want different things from the international environment. Chinese prosperity depends on stable sea lanes, functioning markets, and predictable rules; Russian statecraft since 2014 has been organised around militarised disruption and a tolerance for instability that Beijing does not share. Bomassi's study of regional agency shows how this divergence is exploited in practice: hedging by India, Indonesia, Vietnam,

³³Arakaki, "The United States and Competition with China," 51–52.

³⁴Hsu, "Domestic Power Reshuffles," 12–13.

³⁵Dennis Blair, "The Mirage of China's Military Edge: Panic Is Misguided—and Counterproductive," *Foreign Affairs* 105, no. 4 (July/August 2026): 24–39.

³⁶Lind and Press, "The Broken Nuclear Umbrella," 78–82.

³⁷Lukin, "The Russia-US-China Strategic Triangle," 99.

³⁸Bomassi, "Strategic Friction."

³⁹Gaye Christoffersen, "Sino-Russian Accommodation and Adaptation in Eurasian Regional Order Formation," in *Russia in the Indo-Pacific: New Approaches to Russian Foreign Policy*, ed. Gaye Christoffersen (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 179–97.

and the Philippines pulls Beijing and Moscow back into bilateral logics rather than joint positioning, producing parallel engagement instead of integration.⁴⁰ India's conduct is the paradigm case.

This regional texture supplies the strongest argument against containment. Southeast Asian institutionalism treats both Washington and Beijing as dialogue partners rather than as leaders or norm-setters, and a discourse that equates support for a rules-based order with hostility toward China places regional states in a position they have consistently refused to occupy.⁴¹ The alternative reading, advanced by Ayesha Zafar, is that the region is better described through multipolarity and complex interdependence than through bipolar collision, and that small and middle powers are agents of rebalancing rather than objects of it.⁴² The competing case deserves a fair hearing: Ely Ratner and Nick Danby argue that American leverage over Chinese vulnerabilities should be built and used rather than husbanded, and that accommodation without pressure invites further revisionism.⁴³ The disagreement is genuine, and it is ultimately about sequencing rather than about ends — which is why it is worth noting that American doctrine has already moved some distance toward the accommodationist position, framing the objective as a stable coexistence with China on terms favourable to American interests rather than as the transformation of the Chinese system.⁴⁴ Accommodation, in other words, is not a departure from American strategy but the logical terminus of its own stated premises.

Realist Constructivism as an Analytical Framework

The empirical account above generates three puzzles that no single paradigm resolves. Why has an alignment driven by powerful structural incentives stopped short of alliance? Why does Russia refuse a junior status that its material position appears to dictate? And why do wedge strategies premised on rational material calculation keep failing? Structural realism supplies the first half of each answer and stalls on the second. Waltz's system holds that unbalanced power invites counterbalancing, and Mearsheimer's offensive variant predicts that a rising China will seek regional hegemony and that the incumbent will resist.⁴⁵ Both predictions have been substantially borne out. Neither explains variation in the *form* that balancing takes.

Constructivism addresses the residual. Wendt's central claim — that anarchy has no independent logic apart from the meanings states assign to one another — directs attention to the intersubjective content of the relationships rather than only to their material configuration.⁴⁶ But constructivism deployed alone risks the opposite error, treating identity as though it floated free of the capabilities that make some self-understandings sustainable and others merely aspirational.

Barkin's realist constructivism resolves the apparent opposition by denying that it is one. Realism, on his reading, is a substantive theory about power politics and the limits of moral aspiration in international life; constructivism is a set of claims about how social reality, including power, is constituted. They answer different questions, and a synthesis that studies the mutual constitution of power and norms is both possible and, for cases like this one, necessary.⁴⁷ Applied here, the framework operates in three ways.

First, material structure defines the boundaries of strategic possibility. Russia cannot emerge as the dominant Pacific power; demographic, economic, and naval realities preclude such an outcome, and no narrative of national resurgence can conjure the blue-water fleet required to sustain it. Analysts who anticipate an independent Russian strategic ascent in the region are, in effect, reasoning against arithmetic.

Second, identity shapes the choices made within those structural constraints. Russian foreign policy is organised around *derzhavnost*—the conviction that great-power status is constitutive of the Russian state rather than merely instrumental to its

⁴⁰Bomassi, "Strategic Friction."

⁴¹Saha, "The Pitfalls of Great-Power Competition."

⁴²Zafar, "US-China Tit-for-Tat Politics."

⁴³Ely Ratner and Nick Danby, "The Fault Lines in China's Power: America Must Build—and Use—Leverage Against Beijing," *Foreign Affairs* 105, no. 4 (July/August 2026): 135–50.

⁴⁴Arakaki, "The United States and Competition with China," 60–61.

⁴⁵Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 121–28; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 400–402.

⁴⁶Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425; and Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 246–312.

⁴⁷Barkin, "Realist Constructivism," 325–28, 337–40.

security. This helps explain why Moscow rejects the junior partnership that structural logic appears to prescribe, why it cultivates relationships with Pyongyang, Tehran, and New Delhi despite Beijing's evident discomfort, and why symbolic parity in joint communiqués often carries greater significance for Russian negotiators than the material terms of trade.

Constructivist readings of the partnership have shown that the relationship is sustained as much by mutually recognised status claims as by the balance of capabilities.⁴⁸ Parallel mechanisms operate elsewhere in the triangle. The Chinese narrative of national rejuvenation and the century of humiliation renders Taiwan non-negotiable in a way that no cost-benefit calculation captures; and the American self-understanding as guarantor of an international order explains why engagement with China was never merely commercial but was premised throughout on an expectation of political transformation — an expectation whose disappointment, more than any single Chinese action, produced the shift to strategic competition.⁴⁹

Third, the security dilemma is socially mediated rather than mechanically generated. Jervis established that misperception, not merely capability, drives spirals of insecurity; a constructivist supplement adds that what counts as a threatening capability is itself determined by the identities actors ascribe to one another.⁵⁰ The same carrier deployment reassures Tokyo and alarms Beijing not because of its tonnage but because of the relationships within which it is read. This is why the 2017–18 doctrinal pairing of China and Russia mattered: it did not describe a bloc so much as help constitute one.

The analytical payoff is threefold. The framework predicts bounded alignment — deep enough to impose real costs on Washington, shallow enough to fracture under stress — because material incentives and identity commitments pull in different directions. It predicts rivalry without systemic war, because the identities in play are competitive rather than annihilationist and the material costs of war are prohibitive for all three. And it explains why wedge strategies fail: they treat alignment as a purely material bargain and therefore offer inducements that cannot address the status commitments actually holding the relationship together.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Russia's position in the US–China rivalry in the Asia-Pacific is neither that of a bloc member nor that of a free agent. It is an indispensable but subordinate balancer, adding materially to Chinese power while withholding the commitment that would make that power politically coherent, and preserving an ambiguity whose value would be destroyed by resolution. The alignment with Beijing is a marriage of convenience in the precise sense: contracted under duress, sustained by shared adversity, and vulnerable to any improvement in either party's circumstances.

The most probable trajectory is sustained rivalry rather than war. Great powers have learned, at considerable expense, that direct conflict between nuclear-armed peers offers no decisive victory, and they have accordingly displaced competition into proxies, sanctions, export controls, and the weaponisation of the interdependence that once was thought to pacify them.⁵¹ Each of the three powers holds leverage over the others sufficient to make escalation unattractive, and no regional state — including those most exposed to Chinese pressure — has an interest in a systemic war fought across its own territory. Confidence should be bounded, however. The transitional character of contemporary military power, in which established forces adapt unevenly to new technologies, is exactly the condition under which miscalculation becomes most likely.⁵²

Six recommendations follow. First, Washington should abandon the wedge strategy and accept that Russian alignment with China is a datum rather than a variable it can cheaply manipulate; effort spent courting Moscow is effort not spent on the coalition that actually constrains Beijing. Second, policy should move away from containment and toward managed accommodation, recognizing China's regional role while safeguarding specific interests—freedom of navigation, allied territorial integrity, and technological security—rather than seeking to halt Chinese influence altogether. Third, the deterrence gap surrounding coercive actions short of invasion requires a dedicated preventive strategy, rather than continued dependence on an architecture primarily designed to deter large-scale military aggression.

⁴⁸Ying Liu, "Strategic Partnership or Alliance? Sino-Russian Relations from a Constructivist Perspective," in *Russia in the Indo-Pacific: New Approaches to Russian Foreign Policy*, ed. Gaye Christoffersen (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 92–116.

⁴⁹Arakaki, "The United States and Competition with China," 50, 60.

⁵⁰Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 58–67; and Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167–214.

⁵¹Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 42–79.

⁵²Kofman, "The Next Russia Threat," 42; Paul Scharre, "Losing the War of the Future: How New Technologies Threaten America's Military Advantage," *Foreign Affairs* 105, no. 4 (July/August 2026): 8–23.

Fourth, crisis-management mechanisms between the two militaries should be insulated from political fluctuations, as their importance is greatest precisely during periods of heightened tension. Fifth, regional agency should be treated as an asset rather than a problem to be managed: the hedging of India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines already imposes more friction on Sino-Russian coordination than any American initiative, and it is best supported indirectly, through legal capacity, maritime domain awareness, and diversified defence partnerships. Sixth, for Moscow, the rational course is to preserve rather than resolve the rivalry, and to resist the deepening dependence on Beijing that a formalised alliance would entail.

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