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**Smart Balancers Kill Many Birds with Few Stones—Sino-Russian Security Cooperation in the Maritime Domain**

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SMART BALANCERS KILL MANY BIRDS WITH FEW STONES

Sino-Russian Security Cooperation in the Maritime Domain

Maximilian Ernst and Tongfi Kim

Security cooperation between China and Russia has increased dramatically over the past three decades, covering various strategic, defense-technological, and geographical areas. Against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and Beijing's cautious support of Moscow since then, the salience of Sino-Russian strategic alignment only has increased further. In this context, one notable development in the last decade is the execution of the two countries' joint military exercises, as well as coercive joint operations conducted in the submarine and surface maritime domains, importantly in both the European and western Pacific theaters. In this article, we offer an explanation about why China and Russia are increasing their maritime-security cooperation, and why they are going about it in a particular way. Moreover, this article will show that Russia's war in Ukraine did not interrupt Sino-Russian joint operations in the maritime domain, suggesting that this phenomenon continues to be a feature of Sino-Russian security cooperation.

We focus on the unique characteristics of the maritime domain and the multiple functions that Sino-Russian maritime-security cooperation serves in the two countries’ efficient and low-risk balancing strategies. Clearly, Beijing's and Moscow's efforts to enhance their military capabilities must be understood in the context of the intensifying geopolitical competition of China and Russia with the United States and its allies in both Europe and the Asia-Pacific. Our focus, however, is on the merits of balancing in the maritime domain.
Minimizing the costs and risks of balancing is important for any state, but it is crucial for a coalition facing stronger opponents. The actual and potential military capabilities of China and Russia are collectively lesser than those of the United States and its regional allies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific, and intense arms acquisition or alliance formation will be counterproductive if it triggers counterbalancing from the United States and its partners. Cooperation in the maritime domain allows Beijing and Moscow to coordinate operational practices and gain experience in far-off seas, which is an important functional benefit. However, the most important motives of Sino-Russian security cooperation, especially in the maritime domain, need to be understood within the context of a full spectrum of balancing strategies in international relations and the relatively lower risk of escalation in the maritime domain.

In this article, we examine Sino-Russian maritime-security cooperation through the lens of balance-of-power theory, including wedge strategies, which are forms of negative balancing. We argue that China and Russia are engaging in balancing in multiple aspects simultaneously and that the maritime domain offers an ideal condition for multipurpose balancing acts with a relatively limited risk of repercussions. Starting in 2012, Sino-Russian joint naval exercises and operations have taken place mostly in international waters, but sometimes they have violated the territorial waters of third parties. These activities improve the two powers’ military capabilities, gain high visibility on the international stage, signal alignment and support on individual and shared interests, and even exacerbate disputes among U.S. allies; and yet we speculate that they are less likely to escalate into a military conflict or trigger counterbalancing than similar actions on and above land.

For both research on balance-of-power theory and policy making, it is important to understand the efficacy and efficiency of Sino-Russian security cooperation, which often satisfies multiple strategic goals with one action. When one focuses on the most commonly used indicators for internal balancing (arms buildup) and external balancing (formation of defense or offense pacts), China and Russia may not appear to be balancing against the United States. We demonstrate, however, that China and Russia are balancing intelligently against the United States—limiting the costs and risks of their balancing. For the United States and its allies in Asia and Europe, a better understanding of Sino-Russian security cooperation is essential both for alleviating the harm of Sino-Russian joint wedge strategies and for improving the allies’ own balancing strategies.

Although we focus on the “smart” balancing behavior of China and Russia, we do not intend to be alarmist. The success and impact of Sino-Russian balancing strategies cannot be judged at this point, and our primary focus is to explain the expected benefits and likely motives of the countries’ balancing strategies. In fact, the overall advantages the United States and its allies maintain over China
and Russia are the main reasons why Beijing and Moscow must take a low-risk approach and avoid the more-well-known means of balancing: alliance formation and arms buildup. China and Russia have consultation pacts but no publicly known mutual-defense agreement—perhaps because it is too risky to commit to defend each other against the United States. Given that most global wealth is concentrated within the United States and its allied nations (and informal partners such as India and Saudi Arabia), internal balancing through heavy military buildup is also counterproductive for China and Russia if it triggers reactions by the United States and others.

By invading Ukraine, Russia took a high-risk approach in February 2022, but the need for the low-risk approach has grown for both China and Russia. Beijing needs to avoid triggering the West’s balancing against itself, and Moscow, which is overstretched already owing to the war, is more dependent on China now than before and is in no position to entangle Beijing in a high-risk strategy. China is unlikely to abandon Russia completely, but it certainly will adjust its level of support as it sees fit.

In the next section, we briefly discuss a variety of actions that states can take to enhance the balance of power in their favor. Subsequently, we explain why the contemporary maritime domain offers an excellent stage for balancing with low costs and risks. In the empirical sections, we examine Sino-Russian maritime-security cooperation that works as (1) positive internal balancing, enhancing the countries’ military capabilities; (2) positive external balancing, strengthening their alignment and bargaining power; and (3) negative external balancing, driving a wedge in U.S. alliances and weakening the opponents’ collective power. This 2 × 2 (positive versus negative and internal versus external) classification also allows for negative internal balancing, which diminishes U.S. military capabilities, but this is better done covertly (e.g., via cyber attacks and disinformation campaigns) and does not apply to Sino-Russian maritime-security cooperation. Since many Sino-Russian joint actions serve multiple purposes, some observations will be discussed in more than one category. We conclude with the implications of our findings for theory and policy making.

VARIETY OF BALANCING OPTIONS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

In the literature on balance of power, scholars predominantly focus on arms buildup and alliance formation as the two most important options for balancing against opponents, but the range of actions that can affect the balance of power is much wider. As Hans Morgenthau writes, the “balancing process can be carried on either by diminishing the weight of the heavier scale or by increasing the weight of the lighter one,” but the former option has been neglected unjustifiably.
by many international-relations scholars. In his discussion of balancing, Kenneth Waltz defines internal balancing as “moves to increase economic capability, to increase military strength, [and] to develop strategies,” and external balancing as “moves to strengthen and enlarge one’s own alliance or to weaken and shrink an opposing one.” Despite Waltz’s enormous influence on our discipline, in particular on balance-of-power theory, research on balancing strangely has omitted the analysis of weakening and shrinking opposing alliances. For instance, major works in the literature focused on balancing strategies identified by Adam Liff all focus on arming and alliances, except for that of Waltz, who—at least in his definition of balancing—considered weakening of the opposing alliance.

The neglect of balancing actions to weaken the opposition is evident in analyses of Sino-Russian security cooperation as well. While arguing that China and Russia were not balancing against the United States, Lieber and Alexander focused on (the absence of) arms buildups, alliance formation, and the establishment of diplomatic redlines. More recently, Alexander Korolev argues that China and Russia are balancing against the United States by increasing their capabilities and aligning with each other, given system-level pressures, while they hedge toward one another owing to unit-level factors; again, the focus is on increasing a nation’s power rather than weakening an opponent’s.

A major exception to the tendency discussed above is the literature on wedge strategies. States use wedge strategies to seek to divide opposing alliances or coalitions or prevent their formation. The idea to drive a wedge into a coalition of potential or real adversaries has been an observable tool of statecraft in diplomatic history. Notable examples are premodern China’s strategies to “use barbarians to control barbarians” (i.e., employing one peripheral vassal state to balance another state on China’s periphery) and the Soviet Union’s failed efforts to divide NATO members over the stationing of intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe. Yet until recently, the concept of wedge strategies had not been developed systematically in international-relations theory. Starting with the explicit theorization by Timothy Crawford in 2008, the literature has been growing steadily (e.g., Crawford in 2011 and 2014, Izumikawa in 2013, Huang in 2020, and Crawford and Vu in 2021). An adversary of an existing or potential alliance either can offer a reward or can coerce its target state to weaken the alliance. The literature has found that reward-based wedge strategies tend to be more successful, but Yasuhiro Izumikawa explains conditions under which coercive wedge strategies are likely to be employed. With a similar focus on diminishing the opponent’s power, Kai He develops a theory of negative balancing strategies, which refer to “a state’s strategies or diplomatic efforts aiming to undermine a rival’s power.”

As we show in the later sections, China and Russia are engaging in actions that serve multiple goals, and an exclusive focus on the two popular indicators...
of balancing (arms buildup and alliance formation) will mislead observers about the nature of their strategies. Their balancing policy is efficient because each action benefits them in multiple ways. Moreover, we argue that they also have minimized the risks embedded in balancing actions by taking advantage of characteristics of the maritime domain.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MARITIME DOMAINS AND EFFICIENT AND LOW-RISK BALANCING

The following three characteristics of the maritime domain make it a good stage for balancing by countries such as China and Russia: (1) oceans are important routes for power projection; (2) international waters and disputed waters can give high visibility to actions taken there; and yet (3) the escalatory potential of these actions is, compared with their counterparts on land, relatively limited, owing to their usually considerable distance from the metropolitan regions of the target states. We will explain these three characteristics in more detail in the following paragraphs.

First, improving maritime capabilities is crucial for the rivals of a dominant naval power. China and Russia need to strengthen their maritime power to compete against the United States, both in their immediate neighborhoods (e.g., antiaccess/area-denial efforts) and on a global level. The maritime domain—in particular the Yellow Sea and the East and South China Seas—is the primary physical space of strategic competition between the United States and China; the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea are important for Russia to secure its military and commercial sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and remain a great power. Although the Arctic is also a maritime space that is strategically important for both Russia and China, thus far we have not witnessed meaningful security cooperation between the two sides there. A likely explanation is that China and Russia in fact have conflicting interests in the Arctic. This, however, supports our argument that Beijing and Moscow are managing their alignment intelligently: engaging in maritime-security cooperation where it meets their common interests of balancing against the United States and its allies, while also cautiously avoiding other contentious strategic spaces.

Joint naval exercises offer opportunities to improve capabilities while also reinforcing incentives for military-industrial cooperation, all of which helps both China and Russia to develop their arsenals more efficiently. Increased Sino-Russian defense cooperation would allow for economies of scale in arms production and would improve interoperability. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Arms Transfers Database, China, at its purchasing peak in 2005, “accounted for 60 per cent of all Russian deliveries of major weapons,” but China’s defense industry also could arm Russia in the future. Naval technology
is an important candidate in this respect, and joint naval exercises are opportunities for China and Russia to showcase their technological advances.\textsuperscript{17} China’s and Russia’s desires to improve their power-projection capabilities are particularly important for positive internal balancing taking place in the maritime domain.

Second, unlike land territories, the contemporary maritime domain is a global common, which is inherently international, facilitates global commerce, and therefore affords high international visibility to actions in and above it.\textsuperscript{18} In other words, whatever signals states seek to send to the world are enhanced by the maritime domain’s visibility.\textsuperscript{19} Enhancing such signals is important for Beijing and Moscow, because other states need to recognize the two governments’ improved strategic alignment clearly before it translates into stronger coercive power, and also because a more visible wedge divides the opposition more effectively. For instance, as we discuss in later sections, the Sino-Russian joint operation in the airspace over Dokdo/Takeshima in July 2019 was highly successful both in signaling China and Russia’s strong strategic alignment and in dividing two U.S. allies, South Korea and Japan. Thus, this characteristic is particularly important for positive and negative external balancing.

Third, because maritime domains are distant from the population centers of most states, acts of military cooperation there, despite their visibility, offer buffers to everyone who is potentially on an escalation ladder to a larger conflict. Sending tanks to or flying warplanes over another country’s (claimed) land territory is significantly more provocative and riskier than sending ships or flying warplanes over its (claimed) territorial waters. For instance—and to demonstrate that it is not only China and Russia but other powers that exploit the advantages of the maritime domain that we are proposing—freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) by the United States and its allies such as the United Kingdom, France, and Japan in the South China Sea may be unpalatable to China, but similar actions over land territories claimed by China would be far riskier.\textsuperscript{20} Whereas the other two characteristics mentioned above relate to the costs and efficiency of balancing, this characteristic reduces the risks associated with balancing of all kinds. With these characteristics in mind, in the following sections we examine three types of balancing that China and Russia pursue through their maritime-security cooperation.

Positive Internal Balancing and Sino-Russian Maritime-Security Cooperation

Positive internal balancing refers to moves to improve a state’s individual military capabilities in preparation for a potential war against an adversary.\textsuperscript{21} Sino-Russian maritime-security cooperation works as positive internal balancing in three major senses. First, it facilitates the countries’ defense-industrial cooperation and helps create efficient arms buildups. Existing and potential synergies in their defense-industrial cooperation are identified frequently; joint exercises and
operations further deepen the cooperation by improving the interoperability of the two militaries and strengthening the confidence in the sustainability of their strategic alignment. Second, maritime-security cooperation helps improve power-projection capabilities, which both China and Russia are eager to develop, for both prestige and strategic necessity. Third, the cooperation improves the two countries’ maritime capabilities through mutual learning.

Setting aside their calculated efforts to deepen their strategic alignment, China and Russia already have had a natural complementarity that helps each of them improve its military capabilities. In the defense-industrial domain, Russia possesses technological know-how and mature, well-tested weapon systems but faces budgetary constraints. This is only exacerbated further by Western sanctions against Russia’s financial sector and energy exports after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. China’s defense industry, on the other hand, has not closed the military-technological gap with the United States yet. Thus, imports from Russia to China and the two nations’ coproduction of weapon systems are highly beneficial to both countries. That being said, it remains to be seen to what extent Western sanctions against Russia in response to its invasion of Ukraine will inhibit Sino-Russian defense-industrial cooperation. After all, despite the Sino-Russian strategic alignment, some Chinese companies, including state-owned enterprises, are avoiding trade with Russia to avoid the impact of secondary sanctions. Given the dual-use property of most modern weapons technology, this dynamic plausibly may affect Sino-Russian defense-technological exchanges also.

Thus far, China and Russia consciously have been cultivating the complementarity that exists in their respective defense industries. Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir V. Putin decided in 2012 to make the arms trade the “central pillar” of the Sino-Russian bilateral relationship and agreed to resolve the remaining obstacles to their defense cooperation, such as what one observer labeled “Russian concerns over Chinese intellectual property theft and latent security concerns over China’s rising military power, as well as Beijing’s frustrations over Moscow’s reluctance to transfer weapons to China.” Western sanctions against Russian energy exports and weapons embargoes against China already had been facilitating these dynamics to a significant extent for some years. Since Russia’s aggression against eastern Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian arms sales to China, including naval systems, have increased rapidly; whereas in the prior decade Russian arms sales to China averaged just over $600 million per year, this number almost tripled in three years and reached $1.7 billion in 2018. Moreover, in the long run, with the rise of China’s shipbuilding industry, Russia could benefit from purchasing Chinese ships, because Russia’s capability to produce surface ships declined after the Cold War. Some have suggested that China’s participation in joint
exercises in European waters has given it an opportunity “to show off its ships and spin it into a potential ship deal for Russia to purchase” Chinese frigates.  

Joint exercises help strengthen this mutually beneficial arrangement by further improving the interoperability of the two militaries and creating an expectation for stable and long-term cooperation. This cooperation increases the benefits from the complementarity and serves the role of mutual reassurance in an otherwise risky cultivation of mutual dependence. Such mutual reassurance is important for China and Russia because the two countries have had a hostile relationship in the past, and other major sources of arms in the international market are aligned with the United States.  

As can be seen in the table, China and Russia have engaged in numerous joint naval exercises. Since their first joint military exercise, the PEACE Mission in August 2005, China and Russia have conducted more than twenty-five joint exercises, as of the end of 2021.  

In fact, since 2012, China and Russia have held joint naval exercises on an annual basis. The exercises have been conducted in waters that are of particular strategic relevance to China (the Yellow Sea and East and South China Seas), to Russia (the Mediterranean Sea, Baltic Sea, and Sea of Okhotsk), and to both (the Sea of Japan). These exercises serve a range of objectives: the exchange of operational concepts and the improvement of interoperability of weapon systems, the provision of operational experience, the development of tactical proficiency, the establishment of procedures, and the maintenance of flexibility. In later sections, we also discuss their role in positive and negative external balancing.  

These exercises display Chinese and Russian abilities to project power credibly into faraway seas and to enhance deterrence against American, Asia-Pacific,  

### MAJOR SINO-RUSSIAN NAVAL EXERCISES, 2012–21  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Host/Region</th>
<th>Participating Vessels and Manpower</th>
<th>Exercise Objective / Mission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22–27 April 2012</td>
<td>China / Yellow Sea</td>
<td>China: 5 destroyers, 5 frigates, 4 missile boats, 1 escort ship, 1 hospital ship, 2 submarines, 13 aircraft, 5 ship-based helicopters Russia: 1 Slava-class guided-missile cruiser, 3 Udaloy-class destroyers, 3 supply ships, 4 helicopters</td>
<td>AAW, ASW, SAR, ASuW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–12 July 2013</td>
<td>Russia / Sea of Japan</td>
<td>China: 4 destroyers, 2 Jiangkai II–class frigates, 1 fleet replenishment ship, 2 submarines Russia: 12 vessels from the Pacific Fleet, 1 submarine, 3 aircraft, 2 helicopters</td>
<td>air defense, maritime replenishment, ASW, joint escort, rescue operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–24 May 2014</td>
<td>China / East China Sea</td>
<td>China: 6 warships (including 2 destroyers), 2 submarines, 7 aircraft, 4 helicopters Russia: 1 missile cruiser, 13 additional surface ships, 2 submarines, 9 aircraft, helicopters, special forces</td>
<td>ASuW, SAR, MSO, VBSS, anchorage defense, maritime assaults, antisubmarine combat, air defense, rescue and escort missions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notes: AAW = anti-air warfare; ASuW = anti-surface warfare; ASW = anti-submarine warfare; MCM = mine countermeasures; MSO = maritime security operations; PLAAF = People's Liberation Army Air Force; SAR = search and rescue; VBSS = visit, board, search, and seizure.


### MAJOR SINO-RUSSIAN NAVAL EXERCISES, 2012–21 CONTINUED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Host/Region</th>
<th>Participating Vessels and Manpower</th>
<th>Exercise Objective / Mission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18–21 May 2015</td>
<td>Russia/Mediterranean</td>
<td>China: 2 frigates, 1 supply vessel Russia: 6 <em>Slava</em>-class guided-missile cruisers, 1 <em>Krivak</em>-class frigate, 2 <em>Ropucha</em>-class landing ships</td>
<td>navigation safety, ship protection, at-sea replenishment, air defense, ASW and ASuW, escort missions and live-fire exercises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–28 August 2015</td>
<td>Russia/Sea of Japan</td>
<td>China: 2 destroyers, 2 frigates, 2 amphibious landing ships, 1 replenishment ship, 5 aircraft (PLAAF: J-10 fighters and JH-7 fighter-bombers) Russia: 1 cruiser, 1 destroyer, 2 frigates, 4 corvettes, 2 submarines, 2 tank landing ships, 2 coastal minesweepers, 1 replenishment ship</td>
<td>ASW, AAW, amphibious assault, MCM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12–20 September 2016</td>
<td>China/South China Sea</td>
<td>China: 2 destroyers, 3 frigates, 1 logistics supply ship, 2 landing ships, 2 submarines, 11 aircraft, 8 helicopters, 160 marines with amphibious armored equipment Russia: 2 destroyers, 1 landing ship, 2 auxiliary ships, 2 helicopters, 96 marines and amphibious combat vehicles</td>
<td>SAR, ASW, joint island-seizing missions, amphibious assault, live-fire exercises, boarding, air defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–21 July 2017</td>
<td>Russia/Baltic Sea</td>
<td>China: 1 destroyer, 1 frigate, 1 replenishment ship Russia: 2 corvettes, 1 support vessel, naval helicopters (Ka-27) and land-based Su-24 fighter-bombers</td>
<td>ASW, AAW, ASuW, antipiracy, SAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–25 September 2017</td>
<td>Russia/Sea of Japan and Sea of Okhotsk</td>
<td>China: 1 destroyer, 1 frigate, 1 submarine escort ship, 1 rescue submarine Russia: 1 ASW destroyer, 1 corvette, 1 rescue ship, several diesel-powered submarines and supply ships</td>
<td>ASW, submarine rescue, joint marine-combat drills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–17 September 2018</td>
<td>Russia/VOSTOK 2018 maneuver</td>
<td>China: 3,200 troops, 24 helicopters, 6 aircraft (est.) Russia: troops and units from all Russian service domains Mongolia also a participant</td>
<td>exercises in all domains; focus on command-and-control procedures and tactics, new airborne and naval assault tactics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 April–4 May 2019</td>
<td>China/Yellow Sea and East China Sea</td>
<td>China: 2 guided-missile destroyers, 3 guided-missile frigates, 1 submarine, 1 rescue ship Russia: 1 guided-missile destroyer, 1 frigate, 1 large landing ship, 1 search-and-rescue support vessel, 1 diesel-electric attack submarine 7 aircraft, 4 helicopters, 80 marines from both parties</td>
<td>live-fire exercises, SAR, ASW, submarine rescue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14–17 October 2021</td>
<td>Russia/Peter the Great Bay, Sea of Japan</td>
<td>China: 2 destroyers, 2 frigates, 1 supply ship, ASW-capable planes and helicopters Russia: several vessels from the Pacific Fleet, including ASW ship <em>Admiral Paneleev</em>, several corvettes, 1 submarine, mine-sweepers, ASW-capable planes and helicopters</td>
<td>communications, MCM, air defense, live firing, ASW</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and European competitors. For China, such exercises provide especially valuable lessons, because until recently the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) lacked experience in blue-water operations. But the Chinese leadership understands the necessity to be able to project power beyond its littoral waters, not only to balance U.S. power in the western Pacific, but also because its economy is export oriented and dependent on global maritime security. Given China’s geoeconomic objectives associated with the twenty-first-century Maritime Silk Road, Beijing needs to be able to underwrite its global maritime infrastructure commitments with suitable offshore operational capabilities. These exercises are also important for Russia, because it wishes to reestablish its navy’s credibility after a decline owing to economic and political problems in the 1990s and early years of the following decade, a dynamic that also is exacerbated further by its war in Ukraine.

In 2015, there were two exercises: one in May in the Mediterranean Sea, and one in August in the Sea of Japan, both hosted by Russia. The exercise in the Mediterranean Sea was the first time Chinese vessels participated in such an exercise in European waters; it was seen as a demonstration of China’s ability to protect the Belt and Road Initiative, in which the Greek port of Piraeus had become an important link. The role of this port—and the Mediterranean Sea as a faraway sea that matters to China’s global strategy—can be seen in the Chinese shipping company COSCO’s acquisition of 51 percent ownership of the port in 2016. In September 2016, China hosted joint exercises in the South China Sea. The South China Sea is of immediate strategic priority to China as the only place where China’s ballistic-missile submarine fleet—which plays an integral role in China’s nuclear deterrent—has direct access to waters deeper than two hundred meters without having to pass through the first island chain, where detection is possible by U.S. and allied sensors.

In September 2018, Chinese and Russian naval units participated in the cross-domain exercise VOSTOK 2018, along with vessels from the Mongolian navy. It was not a naval exercise per se, but it included a maritime dimension in Russia’s Far East. The focus was on command-and-control procedures and tactics, as well as new airborne and naval assault tactics. In April and May 2019, China hosted naval exercises in the Yellow and East China Seas. In October 2021—after having paused in 2020—the Chinese and Russian navies conducted another joint sea exercise in the Sea of Japan, with Russia as host. The two navies practiced communications, mine countermeasures, air defense, live firing against maritime targets, joint maneuvering, and antisubmarine warfare (ASW). After the exercise, the vessels of both navies conducted a joint patrol around the Japanese archipelago, passing through the Tsugaru Strait and the Osumi Strait together for the first time. During this operation, the joint Sino-Russian patrol conducted
helicopter drills, which triggered the Japan Self-Defense Force to scramble fighter jets to respond to a possible intrusion into Japanese airspace.\textsuperscript{42}

Naturally, joint military exercises are an excellent tool for mutual learning as well. Notably, China has organized its force structure and developed key military-strategic doctrines derived from Russian experiences and practices, and military exercises have played a key role in China's adoption of Russian military best practices.\textsuperscript{43} Examples of this include China's adoption of the Soviet nuclear submarine bastion concept in the South China Sea, as well as hybrid measures such as the use of fishing boats by the maritime militia to infiltrate the maritime domain of Southeast Asian states as a form of gray-zone coercion.\textsuperscript{44} China's gray-zone tactic of using fisherman militia members as “little blue men” in the South China Sea possesses striking similarity to Russia's “little green men” used in eastern Ukraine since 2014.\textsuperscript{45} ASW also has been a recurring theme in their joint exercises, as both states share concerns about U.S. attack submarines, and China has purchased Russian ships and attack submarines optimized for ASW. The growing number of defense-technological transfers from Russia to China since 2015 demonstrates that Russian military technology, until now, has retained an edge over China's defense industry in some areas.\textsuperscript{46} Particularly, Russia's expertise in building submarines, such as the Project 677 Lada-class attack submarine, “will help China to overcome enduring deficiencies in hull design, quieting technologies, land attack, and automation.”\textsuperscript{47} Russia's advanced experience in tracking U.S. submarines, in both the technological and operational dimensions, is of increased interest to the PLAN.\textsuperscript{48} Military exercises fulfill the immediate purpose of sharing experiences and integrating operational practices—notably, also in new geographical environments.\textsuperscript{49}

Finally, as discussed in the following sections, joint exercises and operations are sometimes not about positive internal balancing, even if their ostensible goals are improvement of capabilities and information gathering. For instance, the Sino-Russian joint operations on 23 July 2019 in the airspace over Dokdo/Takeshima and near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands may have been marginally useful in the improvement of China’s and Russia's military power vis-à-vis South Korea and Japan, but they were primarily a political act of signaling—for both positive and negative external balancing.

**Positive External Balancing and Sino-Russian Maritime-Security Cooperation**

Positive external balancing refers to moves to strengthen one's military alignment with another actor in preparation for a potential war against an adversary. Formation of a new alliance is considered to be the quintessential act of positive external balancing, but this balancing can be done naturally without forming an alliance or among states that are already formally allied.\textsuperscript{50} As scholars Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullmann point out, “Russia is amplifying America's China challenge,”
and “Russia, too, is using its growing ties with Beijing to offset vulnerabilities in its relationship with the United States.” Sino-Russian maritime-security cooperation works as positive external balancing by deepening the two nations’ functional mutual dependence and by signaling their cooperative intent to each other and to third parties. We have discussed the deepening of mutual dependence in the previous section, as it relates to positive internal balancing as well; here, we focus on the signaling aspect.

Actions in the maritime domain are highly visible, and China and Russia also have made conscious efforts to amplify the strength of their signals. For instance, Presidents Xi and Putin attended the opening ceremony for the May 2014 joint naval exercise, which had the objective of showing Russian support for Beijing’s claims on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, as well as Beijing’s air-identification zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea. In addition to the confidence-building dimension as well as the acquisition of skills and testing of capabilities, these exercises serve political purposes that go beyond simply demonstrating capabilities and signaling military cooperation. The locations of the exercises were chosen deliberately, as they were tied to specific political and territorial contentions that China and Russia have with other regional states in the western Pacific and European theaters. Participation thus signaled support for the host’s territorial claims.

Sino-Russian joint naval exercises often exhibit clear expressions of support by one party for the other’s geopolitical position and ambition in the region where the exercise takes place. The western Pacific theater—with its subregions of the Yellow Sea and the East and South China Seas—is the most important geographical area relative to China’s national security. Beijing sees itself confronted with a strong coalition of the United States and its allies along the first island chain, threatening to block China’s SLOCs and complicating Beijing’s objective to become a dominant power in the region. Russia’s participation in maritime exercises hosted by China serves as an explicit expression of Russian political support for China’s position relating to territorial disputes with other regional states, as well as for China’s opposition to the U.S. military presence in the region. To make this even more clear, shortly before the start of the September 2016 joint exercise in the South China Sea, Putin criticized the ruling of the arbitration court in The Hague in July 2016, which rejected China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea. The exercise that followed included amphibious operations intended to deter other claimants, and the two militaries for the first time communicated via a common command-information system. To underwrite the support of one party for the other, Sino-Russian naval exercises usually receive ample news coverage by Chinese, Russian, and foreign media, and the foreign and defense ministries of both countries publish press releases celebrating these
exercises. But the strongest expression of mutual support of this sort arguably was the above-mentioned attendance by President Putin at the 2014 JOINT SEA exercise in China, providing him and President Xi ample opportunity for photos and public statements highlighting the strength of the bilateral relationship.

Similarly, China’s participation in maritime exercises in the European theater is an important expression of Chinese support for Russia’s goals in Europe. The Baltic Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Black Sea are subregions of the European theater that profoundly impact Russian national security. In the case of the Baltic Sea, the presence of NATO navies may complicate and even block Saint Petersburg’s and Kaliningrad’s SLOCs, as well as the Russian Baltic Fleet’s ability to sail into the Atlantic. The Mediterranean Sea is also a NATO-dominated body of water in which Russia seeks to retain undisputed access. This desire for access is demonstrated by Moscow’s support for the Assad regime in Syria, where Russia maintains its only Mediterranean naval base, at Tartus. The strategic significance of the Black Sea has risen, especially since Russia’s annexation of Crimea, and it is notable that China sent ships to the Russian Black Sea coast before the May 2015 joint exercise in the Mediterranean Sea, although they did not visit Crimea itself. The July 2017 exercise in the Baltic Sea was significant for its geographical proximity to many NATO member states, and it received much attention and media coverage in Europe and the United States. In the words of Michael Paul, it brought the PLAN “surprisingly close to one of the most turbulent fault lines in the East-West relationship.” The participating vessels met in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad and then sailed together to Saint Petersburg. This joint exercise also showed Chinese political and military support for Russia, which was under increased pressure from the European Union and NATO after Russia’s annexation of Crimea. As Richard Weitz points out, “[T]hat Beijing sent a flotilla halfway around the world to some of the globe’s most sensitive waters demonstrated how important China sees its defense ties with Moscow.”

In September 2017, Russia hosted joint exercises in the Seas of Japan and Okhotsk. Prior to this time, Russia had closed the Sea of Okhotsk (the body of water lying west of the Kuril Islands and the Kamchatka Peninsula) to foreign shipping and fishing, after it won a favorable decision from the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf in 2014. During the 2017 maneuver, several Chinese and Russian warships, including submarines, set out in the Sea of Japan and sailed into the Sea of Okhotsk, where they trained on ASW and submarine-rescue missions and conducted joint marine-combat drills. Russia’s ability to defend its own interpretation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and create facts on the ground in the Sea of Okhotsk furthermore is considered to serve as a precedent and strengthen China’s position to do the same in the South China Sea.
On 23 July 2019, Russia and China conducted what was—according to Russia’s Defense Ministry—the first long-range joint air patrol in the Asia-Pacific region with China. According to the ministry’s statement, “The joint patrol was carried out with the aim of deepening Russian-Chinese relations within our all-encompassing partnership, of further increasing cooperation between our armed forces, and of perfecting their capabilities to carry out joint actions, and of strengthening global strategic security.”

What is striking about this joint “patrol” is the flight path of the Russian and Chinese planes (see the map). First, two Chinese H-6 strategic bombers entered the South Korean ADIZ and were joined by two Russian Tu-95 strategic bombers, remaining within the ADIZ for about twenty-four minutes. A few hours later, a Russian A-50 long-range surveillance plane entered the ADIZs of both South Korea and Japan and subsequently intruded into the airspace over the Dokdo/Takeshima islets, over which South Korea and Japan have a territorial dispute. The Russian surveillance plane entered the airspace over the contested islands twice, at 9:09 AM and 9:33 AM local time. In response, the South Korean air force scrambled F-15F and KF-16 fighter jets to intercept the Russian plane, sending altogether thirty warnings, and firing warning shots—eighty during the first violation and 280 during the second. The Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) also scrambled fighter jets to intercept the Russian and Chinese bombers and the Russian surveillance plane but did not shoot at them. However, Japan voiced a
strong protest to Russia. Notably, Japan also issued a diplomatic protest against South Korea, whose fighter jets, in Tokyo’s view, not only violated Japanese airspace but fired shots within it.\textsuperscript{66}

At the time of the incident, international attention was focused predominantly on the operation in the airspace over Dokdo/Takeshima, but Chinese and Russian warplanes subsequently continued to fly toward the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, which are claimed by Japan and China. More than two months after the operations, Japanese defense officials began to reveal that JASDF fighters scrambled as Chinese and Russian warplanes approached the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.\textsuperscript{67} Thus, on the same day, China and Russia conducted two operations over the Sea of Japan and East China Sea that had significant divisive political impact on U.S. allies and expressed Russian support for Chinese territorial claims.

These actions constitute an important instance of positive external balancing because they sent strong signals of cooperation between China and Russia directed at South Korea, Japan, the United States, and other countries. Both operations were highly effective in strengthening the perceived strategic alignment between China and Russia. The operation over Dokdo/Takeshima was also a high-profile case of negative external balancing, which will be discussed in the next section. Together, these highly visible and provocative actions signaled that the two countries’ interests are aligned and that they are willing to accept the diplomatic costs and military risks involved.

Finally, we also should point out that the level of provocation and the military risks of the operations were—relative to their political significance—fairly limited because they took place in the airspace above the maritime domain. Equivalent operations on or above land that also included violations of the target country’s territorial sovereignty would be many times more dangerous.\textsuperscript{68} Perhaps for this reason, we do not find many cases where military exercises on or above land have violated another country’s sovereign territory.\textsuperscript{69} The fact that to date such coercive operations with intentional, provocative violations of territorial rights mostly have appeared on and above the maritime domain demonstrates that state actors are well aware of the benefits of conducting such operations in the maritime domain. Thus, military exercises in the maritime domain allow China and Russia to conduct visible external balancing operations efficiently and relatively safely.

**Negative External Balancing (Wedge Strategies) and Sino-Russian Maritime-Security Cooperation**

The terms \textit{wedge strategies} and \textit{negative external balancing} refer to moves to divide and weaken opponents’ coalitions. There are two major types of wedge strategies. On the one hand, wedge strategies can be created on the basis of reward (“selective accommodation”), using “concessions and other inducements to lure
a target away from other adversaries, which are dealt with more firmly”; on the other hand, wedge strategies can result from coercion, which helps the divider “expose and exacerbate gaps in the adversaries’ strategic interests, increasingly strain their ability to cooperate, and precipitate defections.” As discussed below, coercive wedging is more relevant to our case.

Sino-Russian security cooperation in the maritime domain, especially the coercive joint air operations over the western Pacific, drives a wedge into U.S. alliances. The July 2019 joint operation over the Sea of Japan—notably, the Russian reconnaissance planes’ repeated flights in the airspace over Dokdo/Takeshima—caused considerable damage to the Seoul-Tokyo relationship, which had been strained already. Since Japan claims Dokdo/Takeshima as its own territory, Tokyo considered Seoul’s reactions to the Sino-Russian joint operation to be an infringement of its sovereignty. The then chief cabinet secretary Yoshihide Suga issued a strong protest against Seoul as well as Moscow: “In light of Japan’s stance regarding sovereignty over Takeshima, the South Korean military aircraft’s having carried out warning shots is totally unacceptable and extremely regrettable.” Many might dismiss this as another diplomatic row between the two constantly arguing Asian neighbors, but the lack of coordination exposed by the incident—not least in a military context—should be worrisome to Washington and its allies. Japan and South Korea are not allied directly, but the political and military relations between the two East Asian hosts of U.S. military bases and troops are important to the national security of the United States and the allies.

It is highly unlikely that China and Russia conducted the “air patrol” over the disputed islets without considering the likely impact, as it came at a time of already heightened tensions between Japan and South Korea. In the fall of 2018, Tokyo and Seoul clashed over Japanese compensations for forced labor and so-called comfort women during Japan’s colonial rule, leading to the lowest point in the Japan–South Korea relationship in decades. In December 2018, a South Korean navy vessel locked its fire-control radar on a Japanese surveillance plane, resulting in a limited diplomatic crisis and mutual accusations of wrongdoing. In July 2019, the Japanese government changed its regulations about chemical exports to South Korea—a move that Seoul considered to be a retaliation and “economic warfare” against South Korean policy on the wartime forced-labor disputes.

It was at this time of heightened South Korea–Japan tensions that China and Russia conducted the joint air operation over waters and territorial features disputed between Seoul and Tokyo. South Korea decided to escalate the dispute by announcing in August 2019 the termination of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan, which the countries had entered in November 2016, with strong U.S. encouragement. The intelligence-sharing agreement contributes not only to South Korean and Japanese national security
(especially vis-à-vis North Korea) but also to the United States and its regional allies' deterrence effort aimed at China. While Moscow was the main culprit for the repeated intrusion into the airspace over Dokdo/Takeshima, Beijing arguably benefited most from the frictions among U.S. allies. Seoul, swayed by U.S. pressure, eventually canceled its decision to leave GSOMIA six hours before the agreement officially lapsed in late November 2019, but uncertainty over South Korea's continuing participation in the agreement lingers.

On 22 December 2020, the Russian and Chinese air forces conducted a similar operation, flying two Russian Tu-95 and four Chinese H-6K bombers over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea, entering the South Korean and Japanese ADIZs and again flying over the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima. Both Japan and South Korea scrambled fighter jets to track the joint Sino-Russian patrol mission, but Seoul and Tokyo this time were able to manage their responses and not let the situation spiral into a diplomatic disaster. The Russian Defense Ministry later published a statement explaining that the mission was intended to “develop and deepen the comprehensive Russia-China partnership, further increase the level of cooperation between the two militaries, expand their ability for joint action and strengthen strategic stability.”

On 19 November 2021, the Chinese and Russian air forces performed a similar joint operation over the Sea of Japan, entering South Korea's ADIZ from the northeast. On that day, two Chinese and seven Russian military planes entered South Korea's ADIZ, in response to which South Korea scrambled fighter jets and a refueling plane. Since, then, China and Russia have repeated this operation several times. On 24 May 2022, four Chinese H-6 and two Russian Tu-95 strategic bombers conducted a joint patrol, followed by a Russian Il-20 reconnaissance plane a few hours later, over the East China Sea close to South Korean and Japanese airspace, entering South Korea's ADIZ. Analysts and experts concur that this was a joint Sino-Russian signal in response to the Quad summit hosted in Japan on that same day. On 30 November 2022, two Chinese H-6 bombers entered South Korea's ADIZ, followed by six Russian aircraft—four Tu-95 bombers and two SU-35 multirole fighter aircraft. On the same day, Japan also scrambled fighters in response to China and Russia's joint patrol when it entered Japan's ADIZ. All these events received ample media attention.

Such joint air force operations with the objective to test the ADIZs of both South Korea and Japan represent a novel phenomenon that builds on the established practices of China and Russia to violate South Korea's, Japan's, and Taiwan's territorial airspaces and ADIZs independently. In the assessment of the U.S. Defense Department, such operations primarily are designed to improve and demonstrate Russia's and China's capability to strike U.S. and allied military bases in the region—that is, they work as internal balancing.
the July 2019 incident, they also have the capacity to exacerbate political disputes among U.S. allies. When one considers the essential role that the allies play in U.S. efforts to complicate and deny China's ability to access the western Pacific, it becomes clear that the exploited division between Seoul and Tokyo poses a real threat to the U.S. Indo-Pacific force posture.  

Even when the location of operations is not tied to a maritime territorial dispute, Sino-Russian maritime-security cooperation can serve the function of negative external balancing. Demonstrations of military power can reveal and widen gaps in the opposing coalition's divergent strategic interests and lead to the defection of a weak link in that coalition. In Europe, strategic interests of NATO members vary greatly. Although Russia's invasion of Ukraine has increased dramatically the threat perception toward Russia among all Europeans, countries geographically closer to Russia still view Moscow as a more menacing actor than some Western European states. China, meanwhile, represents a more abstract and geographically distant security challenge to Europeans, and readiness to confront China is limited and varies across Europe. This leaves ample opportunity for joint Sino-Russian operations to exploit NATO members' divergent interests toward Russia and China.

The same logic of exploiting opponents' divergent interests applies to the western Pacific, where many states maintain an alliance or partnership with a United States increasingly geared toward containing Chinese military influence. With the exception of Japan, however, Asia-Pacific states do not have major disputes with Russia and do not perceive Moscow as a significant threat. Some Asia-Pacific states support Western sanctions against Russia, but this does not change the fact that Russia is not an immediate military threat to Asia-Pacific states other than Japan, just as China is not an immediate military threat to Europeans. Hence, when confronted with a Sino-Russian coalition, U.S. allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region are less likely to resist the challenge effectively, even if they could overcome the difficulty of uniting against China. From China's perspective, for instance, the 2016 Sino-Russian joint exercise in the South China Sea worked as a wedge in the traditionally good relationship between Russia and Vietnam, and it deterred further challenges from other claimants in the South China Sea disputes. By complicating the strategic calculations of U.S. allies and partners, Russia enhances China's coercive wedging; such effects are unlikely to be obtained if China alone increases its coercive pressure in Asia.

Furthermore, Sino-Russian maritime-security cooperation also can work as a retaliation against cooperation within U.S. alliances, thereby discouraging the allies' future collaboration. In fact, Michael Paul argues that China and Russia began their first joint naval exercise in the Yellow Sea in 2012 partly because of
U.S. exercises with South Korea there, which China had criticized repeatedly.\textsuperscript{90} Similarly, Sino-Russian joint naval exercises can serve as retaliations against the U.S., French, and British navies’ FONOPs in the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{91} The Sino-Russian exercise in the Baltic Sea is a prominent example in this regard. Similar to China’s frustration over the U.S. presence in the Yellow Sea, Russia’s dispute with Japan over the Kuril Islands in the Sea of Okhotsk pushes Moscow to assert military power in this subregion of the western Pacific theater.\textsuperscript{92} Putin has emphasized the threat the U.S.-Japan alliance poses to Russia’s security and has treated U.S.-Japan security cooperation as an obstacle to the return of the islands to Japan.\textsuperscript{93}

As discussed earlier, the maritime domain offers an excellent stage for China and Russia to engage in coercive wedging, because actions there are highly visible and yet entail a smaller risk of escalation to a large conflict compared with similar actions on land. Although the negative external balancing actions taken by China and Russia are provocative, they are still far from triggering a military conflict. Consequently, it is premature to conclude that China and Russia already have strong common strategic interests to overcome their fear of entanglement or entrapment.\textsuperscript{94} Beijing and Moscow do not have a harmony of interests; they consciously are cultivating shared strategic interests.\textsuperscript{95}

In this article, we offered one explanation for why China and Russia have increased their maritime-security cooperation—namely, that the characteristics of the maritime domain allow the two nations to engage in efficient and low-risk balancing. The visibility of actions in maritime domains improves the signaling necessary for positive and negative external balancing, and the geographical distance from population centers makes all types of balancing there less provocative and less risky relative to similar actions on and above land. These properties of the maritime domain are important, especially because the United States and its allies maintain the overall military-strategic advantage. Furthermore, we demonstrated that Sino-Russian maritime-security cooperation simultaneously strengthens the two countries’ individual capabilities (positive internal balancing), enhances their strategic alignment (positive external balancing), and undermines the cohesion within U.S. alliances and partnerships (negative external balancing). By analyzing the full spectrum of balancing strategies that China and Russia are pursuing in the maritime domain, this article sheds new light on the dynamics between the world’s two most important competing geopolitical groups: U.S. alliances and the Sino-Russian coalition.

For academic research on balancing, our findings suggest that different aspects of balancing strategies need to be analyzed simultaneously, because effects of a major action taken by a state can be observed in multiple dimensions. In
particular, states confronted with a powerful counterbalancing coalition (similar to the U.S. alliances) will pursue courses of action that achieve desirable effects with minimum efforts and risks. Future research also should explore trade-offs among different aspects of balancing; for instance, under what conditions will a state’s positive internal balancing harm its positive or negative external balancing? In this regard, investments in maritime capabilities offer an additional benefit to China and Russia, because these resources could have been spent on land-based capabilities that might exacerbate threats they pose to each other along their shared borders. In other cases, as seen in the Anglo-German naval race before the First World War, investments in navies can harm a state’s external balancing effort significantly.96

Our analysis of Sino-Russian joint balancing shows the many ways through which multiple actors can engage synergistically in a variety of balancing actions. Literature on positive external balancing naturally has examined multiple actors’ collaboration, but we find that internal balancing can reap significant benefits from external cooperation and that wedge strategies also benefit from having two dividers, which enables more-effective exploitation of gaps in the targets’ strategic interests; future research on balancing systematically could examine the differences between balancing by a single actor and balancing by multiple actors. If Sino-Russian joint wedge strategies continue in the Asia-Pacific and Europe, they would allow comparisons of the responses to negative external balancing by the hub-and-spoke alliances in the Asia-Pacific region and the multilateral alliance of NATO.

Our analytical framework can help policy makers of the United States and its allies better address future Sino-Russian balancing strategies. In the aftermath of Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and China’s quiet support thereof, the issue of Sino-Russian security cooperation in both the Asia-Pacific and Europe undoubtedly has grown in salience. For instance, NATO members could learn lessons from the July 2019 Sino-Russian coercive air force operations over islands disputed between South Korea and Japan and prepare for similar, wedge-strategy-informed actions in the European theater. It would be useful to ask what NATO should do if China, Russia, or both enter the waters contested between Turkey and Greece to provoke countermeasures by both Turkish and Greek coast guards, navies, or air forces, which in turn realistically could exacerbate the Aegean dispute. As the different reactions to the Sino-Russian joint operation over Dokdo/Takeshima in December 2020 demonstrate, wedge strategies are ineffective if the target states refuse to be divided.97

The efficient and low-risk balancing strategies of China and Russia may appear to be daunting, but the United States and its allies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific should not lose sight of their own advantages. China and Russia are boosting
their strategic alignment in maritime domains not because they have a harmony of interests or are willing to get entangled in the partner’s conflict. Beijing and Moscow are smart about their balancing because they understand the risk of triggering counterbalancing by the United States and its partners. Finally, the United States and its partners have been engaging in actions in maritime domains similar to the Sino-Russian cooperation discussed in this article (e.g., FONOPs), and the West’s self-assessment will benefit from explicitly laying out the wide spectrum of balancing strategies in international relations.

NOTES

The authors presented an early version of this article at the Dreizack (Trident) 2020 Maritime Security Conference in Rostock, Germany, and received useful feedback, as well as from Anthony Rinna, Sebastian Bruns, and Jens Heinrich and the Review’s referees.


2. The argument we develop below will be falsified if China and Russia start deprivatizing maritime-security cooperation as their mutual trust grows, or if evidence emerges that they perceive maritime balancing to be more costly or risky than that which occurs on land.


5. For examples of the dominant focus on arming and alliances, see James D. Morrow, “Arms versus Allies: Trade-Offs in the Search for Security,” *International Organization* 47, no. 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 207–33; Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for
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13. Sharman points out that the sea has provided “a ‘broad highway’ for both trade and coercion between continents” in “the construction of the first global international system from the late 1400s.” J. C. Sharman, “Power and Profit at Sea: The Rise of the West in the Making of the International System,” International Security 43, no. 4 (Spring 2019), p. 165.


18. International maritime law defines territorial waters and exclusive economic zones, but there are international disputes over a range of activities allowed in these waters. This argument applies best to our current international system, because our global economy depends on maritime trade, and technological development has allowed states to monitor the maritime domain better.

19. The maritime domain allows for less visible, even covert, exercises if that is desired. But when Chinese and Russian exercises are conducted in the western Pacific or the seas contiguous to Western Europe—seas through which many countries’ SLOCs pass—Beijing and Moscow can be sure of global attention. Moreover, as exemplified below, the Chinese and Russian governments as well as their media outlets have made sure that the joint exercises receive attention through press releases and media coverage, and in some instances even through the attendance of Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin.

21. With this definition, we see balancing as a continuous variable rather than a binary variable with a clear threshold.


28. Schwartz, The Changing Nature and Implications of Russian Military Transfers, p. 2. For the year 2020, however, the value returned to the pre-2015 level. The future will tell whether the year 2020 was an outlier in an ongoing trend of increased Russian arms sales to China or if China’s heightened interest in Russian arms lasted only four years. SIPRI Arms Transfers Database (for TIV of arms exports from Russia, 2010–20, accessed July 2021), armstrade.sipri.org/.


32. Ryan D. Martinson, “China’s Far Seas Naval Operations, from the Year of the Snake to the Year of the Pig,” Center for International Maritime Security, 18 February 2019, cimsec.org/.


International Institute for Strategic Studies, 29 April 2022, www.iiss.org/.


37. Three-fourths of the East China Sea is less than two hundred meters (m) deep, and the Yellow Sea’s mean depth is only 44 m. The South China Sea is the only spot where China has direct access to deep waters with an average depth of about 1,200 m. The deepest portion of the South China Sea is as deep as 5,016 m. See also Sarah Kirchberger, Assessing China’s Naval Power: Technological Innovation, Economic Constraints, and Strategic Implications (Berlin: Springer, 2015), pp. 47–49.


51. Kendall-Taylor and Shullman, Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership, p. 3.


68. Consider, for example, the tensions that followed Turkey’s downing of a Russian warplane on 24 November 2015.


85. While some eastern European states have grown cautious of Chinese economic cooperation, as the failed 17 + 1 initiative shows, it can be asserted that most eastern Europeans, and in fact most European governments, value their economic relationship with China and most likely are deterred from responding to a military challenge involving China. See Andreea Brinza, “How China Blew Its Chance in Eastern Europe,” *Foreign Policy*, 11 April 2019, foreignpolicy.com/.

anonymous referee pointed out, however, this might have motivated Vietnam to consider closer ties with the United States and to move away from Russia.


93. “Putin Calls Japan-U.S. Security Alliance a Threat,” *Kyodo News*, 20 December 2019, english.kyodonews.net/. The 1960 U.S.-Japan security treaty applies to “the territories under the administration of Japan,” and the “Northern Territories” of Japan currently are administered by Russia.


95. In fact, Beijing and Moscow also have “conflicting types of relations,” and “[t]here has been a stealthy geopolitical competition of moderate intensity wherein both China and Russia have attempted to expand the scope of their respective regional influence.” Korolev, “Systemic Balancing and Regional Hedging,” p. 390.


97. As an anonymous referee pointed out, the effectiveness of negative external balancing may decline over time as the target states become more conscious of the harm of wedge strategies.

98. Since there are clear differences in the regime types of the two opposing balancing coalitions, future research also can examine the role that democratic institutions play in balancing strategies. For instance, democratic coalitions may be better at resisting wedge strategies, because of veto players and the transparency of their political systems. See, for example, Ajin Choi, “The Power of Democratic Cooperation,” *International Security* 28, no. 1 (Summer 2003), pp. 142–53.