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A Fragile Anti-US Alliance: Russia Accuses China of Technology Theft

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The relationship between Russia and China is based on shared short-term strategic interests, but their differences lie just beneath the surface. Occasionally they erupt into the public eye, as occurred when Russia recently accused China of technology theft. The dynamic of the Russian-Chinese alliance is similar to that of Moscow's alliances with Turkey and Iran, which also function by focusing on immediate interests and putting off serious differences as long as possible.

Chinese Russian military and geopolitical cooperation is flourishing — for now.

If, however, the weapons industry is anything to go by, a fraying at the edges of the close ties between the two Asian powers may be starting. China is allegedly stealing Russian military technology, as it allegedly does in the West, and Moscow is not pleased.

To be sure, [Russia remains by far China's foremost arms supplier](#) even if China has no scruples about technology theft. Russia's weak economy desperately needs the revenues derived from weapons sales, revenues that undergird Moscow's geopolitical heft. Because of that dependency, it has been willing to look the other way as China has absconded with its technology. The question is for how long.

A related question applies to Russia's other opportunistic alliances. Moscow's relationships with Ankara and Tehran, for example, are driven by short-term interests, first and foremost a desire to institutionalize a multipolar world in which US power would be counterbalanced by others.

These alliances, adopting pragmatic approaches, have worked so far by focusing on immediate interests while carefully managing significant differences.

Those differences surface regularly. Recently, not only alleged Chinese intellectual property theft but also diametrically opposed Russian, Turkish, and Iranian policies toward conflicts in Syria and Libya have figured prominently in media reports.

In a rare public display of friction that echoed longstanding US allegations of Chinese technology theft, Russian state defense conglomerate Rostec recently [accused China of illegally copying Russian military hardware and weapons](#).

“Unauthorized copying of our equipment abroad is a huge problem. There have been 500 such cases over the past 17 years. China alone has copied aircraft engines, Sukhoi planes, deck jets, air defense systems, portable air defense missiles, and analogues of the Pantsir medium-range surface-to-air systems,” said Yevgeny Livadny, Rostec’s chief of intellectual property projects.

Livadny appeared to be referring, among other things, to alleged Chinese intellectual property theft after Russia’s 2015 sale to China of six S-400 anti-aircraft systems and 24 Su-35 fighter jets for \$5 billion.

China is also thought to have benefitted from Russian technology when, in 2017, it rolled out its fifth generation Chengdu J-20 fighter, which is believed to be [technologically superior to Russia’s SU-57E](#).

China is further [suspected](#) of having based its J-11 fighter jet and HQ-9 surface-to-air missiles on Russia’s Su-27 fighter jets and S-300 missile systems, which were purchased in the 1990s.

Chinese technology theft is unlikely to persuade Russia to forego the strategic advantages of its geopolitical cooperation with China any time soon. But with China’s defense industry significantly improving its technological capabilities, Russia needs to ensure that it remains crucial to the People’s Republic’s military development—not only for economic reasons but also to maintain a balance in an alliance that is based on pursuing short-term common interests while kicking potential friction points down the road.

When it comes to arms, Russia is pressuring China to engage in joint weapons development while seeking to maintain a technological edge.

Russia recently sought to press its technological advantage by [announcing](#) that its new Avangard hypersonic intercontinental glide vehicle, which can fly 27 times the speed of sound, has become operational.

Positioning Russia as the first country to have hypersonic weapons, the Avangard is launched atop an intercontinental ballistic missile. But unlike a regular missile warhead that follows a predictable path after separation, it can make sharp maneuvers in the atmosphere en route to its target, making it much harder to intercept.

In geopolitical terms, the Avangard may give Russia a first-starter advantage, but it is at best just another band-aid to work around the fragility of not only the Russian-Chinese alliance but also the alliances with Turkey and Iran.

The fragility of those alliances is evident in Turkish and Russian attempts to balance their competing interests in Syria and Libya. Turkey has criticized the ongoing Syrian-Russian assault on Idlib, the last Syrian rebel stronghold, and [called for an immediate ceasefire](#).

Turkey and Russia are also at odds when it comes to Russian interference in Ukraine, the exploitation of natural gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean, and the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict in the Caucasus over Nagorno-Karabagh. They are also competing for influence in the Balkans and Central Asia.

In Libya, [Russia supports rebel Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar](#) while Turkey has responded positively to a [request by the UN-recognized government headed by PM Fayeze al-Sarraj for military assistance](#).

“We believe that [foreign interference will hardly help](#),” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in response to reports that Turkey would [deploy its navy to protect the Libyan capital of Tripoli](#), the seat of Sarraj’s government, which has been under attack by Haftar’s Russian, Egyptian, UAE, and French-backed forces for the past eight months.

Peskov conveniently ignored the [presence of hundreds of Russian mercenaries and snipers](#) who are supporting Haftar’s insurgents.

To be sure, the Turkish-Russian alliance taps into longstanding anti-Western civilizationalist ideologies adopted by men like PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and president Vladimir Putin.

In discussing the fragility of the Turkish-Russian alliance, scholars Gonul Tol and Omer Taspinar could to varying degrees have been talking about relationships between Russia and China, Russia and Iran, or Turkey and Iran.

“Moscow and Ankara [disagree on almost all issues of regional and strategic significance](#),” they wrote. “In other words, a Eurasianist Turkey may very well be frustrated with both Washington and Brussels, but its military arrangement with Moscow does not automatically translate into harmony based on shared national interests in relations with Russia.”

Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg’s Institute for Fan Culture.