

THE ECONOMICS OF RUSSIAN ARMS SALES TO CHINA: 1992 TO 2017

Dr. Pawan Kumar Yadav

M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science

S. M. College, Chandausi, Distt.-Sambhal, (U.P.)

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, informally known as the Soviet Union, which existed on the territory of most of the former Russian Empire in Eurasia since December 1922, disintegrated into 15 independent states on 26 December 1991. Consequently, the Russian Federation was internationally recognised to be the legal successor to the Soviet state on the international stage. The post-Soviet period has seen the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China (hereinafter China) seeking to strengthen their techno-military cooperation and develop friendly exchanges between their military forces at various levels. The two governments opened negotiations on a series of agreements including mutual force reductions, demarcation of disputed border areas, the resumption of military-to-military exchanges, as well as greatly expanded economic relations. Sales of weapons and defence technology were at the heart of the new Russo-Chinese military relationship.

One of the most interesting facets of Russia's foreign policy during the post-Cold War period has been the sales of Russian military materiel and technologies to China. When Russia resumed its delivery of weapons to China in 1992 following the 30-year Sino-Soviet Cold War, it was perceived as a sensation which demonstrated how the world had changed by

the late 20th century. Over the past two decades, Russia has viewed its arms deliveries to major neighbouring states as a foundation for a new continental alliance meant to restrain the United States, as well as a means for helping the domestic defence industry to survive.

The primary object of this paper is to examine the progress of Russian arms sales to China from 1992 to 2017. This paper also examines the Russia-China techno-military relations with the aim of revealing the nature of their military ties. It seeks to answer a critical question: *Have the economic interests taken precedence over political cooperation?* Have Russia and China, two traditional adversaries, put aside historical legacies and mutual mistrust to create a full-fledged military partnership?

It is posited in this paper that economic and geopolitical considerations tend to overshadow the ideological factor in relations between Russia and China.

LOGIC BEHIND RUSSIAN ARMS SALES TO CHINA

In several respects, Russia and China have been natural arms sales partners. In view of the post-Cold War 'drastic changes' in the world's military-political situation, elements of the defence industries in both Russia and China established relationships with their counterpart

organisations. The foundation for these relationships was set during the visit of Russian President Boris Yeltsin to Beijing in late April 1996.¹ These relationships continue to be endorsed. Indeed, they are supported even more strongly by Russia's present leadership, based on their apparent intent to secure short-term gains in hard currency for the Russian economy and political clout from Russia's comeback in the global arms business.²

RUSSIAN THINKING

The Russian Federation had inherited a huge military-industrial complex (MIC) from the former Soviet Union comprising 1,600 defence enterprises that had a staff of nearly two million people. In fact, Russia's first-rate defence industry, besides its impressive fuel and energy complex, was one of the few areas where it could successfully compete for a share in the world market. Because of decline and malaise in its conventional forces caused by budgetary cuts and sharp economic decline and other difficulties, domestic defence orders could no longer sustain the huge MIC. Russia needed to export arms for the very survival of its defence industries and research and development (R&D) facilities even at the minimum level.

The break-up of the Soviet Union left most Russian contractors without substantial government funding. Aircraft manufacturers like Mikoyan, Sukhoi and Mil, for example, were seriously affected when the flow of state subsidies dried up, which left little for R&D. In addition, the former Soviet satellite states, which traditionally turned to Russian manufacturers for military hardware, now shop the world market. Thus, Moscow's need to sell weapons was almost compulsive.

In a November 1993 speech at a defence plant in Tula³, Boris Yeltsin emphasised the importance of recapturing Russia's position in global arms trade, and other senior officials have made the same point, noting China's importance as a key market.⁴

On 4th August 1999, Sergei Stepashin,

Russia's Prime Minister at that time, said that 'arms exports allow Russia to keep up its potential to provide a defence capability for Russia without additional investment.'⁵ According to him, 'military-technical cooperation with foreign countries is very important for Russia for several reasons. It plays a major role in strengthening Russia's military and political influence in the world. It is important for Russia's social and economic development, especially so in sustaining the people working in the military-industrial complex.'⁶ In fact, Ilya Klebanov, Russia's Vice-Premier, emphasised that the sale of weapons is the 'life buoy for our defence industries now that the defence budget is so small and military state orders are so few.'⁷ Weapons sales to China and other countries like India allow Russia to continue to invest in R&D, and retain a technical edge for the day.

In other words, Russia's willingness to transfer advanced technology and weapons to China emerged from the desperate economic plight of the Russian defence industry, and pressure from the defence ministry officials to overrule the objections from their foreign ministry counterparts. Moreover, Russian arms sales to China helped to keep production lines in Russia open,⁸ and brought much-needed revenues needed for the upkeep and continuation of Russia's MIC and R&D facilities. For example, the sale of 12 *Kilo*-class submarines to China provided badly needed funds to develop the *Lada*-class submarine.⁹

Arms sales to China also offers leverage against Japan and the West, reducing the possibility that a declining Russia will be taken for granted. They also allow Russia to demonstrate that it remains an influential great power, and that it is capable of establishing a more balanced position between East and West – goals that have become especially significant with Russia's growing disenchantment with the West.¹⁰

To a certain extent, the sales of Russian arms and military technology to China can help

Russia in acquiring control over the Chinese defence production.¹¹ It is also expected to result in China's behaviour becoming 'more predictable' from Russia's perspective.¹² Arguably, arms sales would help Russia to create 'a security window' in China.¹³

'We need China's political support, so this is why we take this inevitable risk,' said Russian defence analyst Ruslan Pukhov, director of the Moscow-based Centre for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST). 'Obviously, anyone who can commit hundreds of millions of dollars to defence contracts is important, but because of the political dialogue China is doubly important.'¹⁴

CHINESE THINKING

The Chinese armed forces are determined to modernise themselves within the limits of their economic resources. Given that the Chinese armed forces were built with Soviet weapon technology to begin with, and given that the US and Western Europe refuse to supply high-technology weapons to China, Russia is an ideal source of modern military technology for Beijing. Defence imports from Russia have helped China to acquire a capability that it did not possess earlier.

For China, Russian arms offer many benefits. They are easier to integrate into a force structure still dominated by weapons of Soviet manufacture or design, and the Chinese have had far greater success in reverse engineering and retrofitting with Russian arms than with Western military technology. Russian weapons contribute to military modernisation and power projection, two important priorities for Chinese military planners.

At a time when China's relations with Australia, Japan, the US and some ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) states are strained by controversies ranging from human rights to territorial disputes over islands in the East China and South China seas, the Russian connection reduces isolation and provides leverage.

Faced with a Western arms embargo since the Tiananmen Square massacres of 6th June 1989, China has relied heavily on Russian technology to develop indigenous industries. Indeed, Beijing reportedly was appealing to Moscow for weapons within days of that event.¹⁵

In fact, Russo-Chinese military cooperation became the focal point of China's efforts to engage Russia in a substantive military relationship, obtain advanced military equipment and technology to modernise the People's Liberation Army (PLA) inventory, enhance air force and naval capabilities, and to advance Chinese power projection in East and Southeast Asia. From China's perspective, as the technology of modern weapons and equipment is complicated, the cycle of its development is long and a large amount of funds is needed, importing advanced technology from Russia was seen as an effective way to learn from others' strong points and to make up for the Chinese shortcomings, shorten the cycle of development of weapons and equipment and reduce expenses.¹⁶

BEAR HUGS DRAGON

The issue of Russian arms sales to China was first brought on the table for discussion during the visit of Admiral Liu Huaqing, Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission, to Moscow in June 1990.¹⁷ Admiral Liu's visit was followed by extensive and frequent dialogue between the two sides on the transfer of advanced weapon systems regardless of the break-up of the USSR and the domestic crisis in Russia.¹⁸

In May 1991, Moscow agreed to sell 24 Sukhoi Su-27s to China. Reportedly, only 35 per cent of the sales price was to be paid in hard currency. The rest was to be paid as barter, in the form of foodstuffs and consumer goods.¹⁹ In August 1992, China's Minister for Defence, Qin Jiwei, led a defence delegation to the Russian Federation. From China's standpoint, however, the most significant purchase

breakthrough came as a result of the October 1992 visit of Deputy Defense Minister Andrei Kokoshin to China, which resulted in an agreement to transfer significant technology and production rights.²⁰

However, it was Russian President Boris Yeltsin who concluded the most extensive military agreement with China since the 1950s. After travelling to Beijing in December 1992, Yeltsin promised to sell to China 'the most sophisticated armaments and weapons'.²¹ On 18th December 1992, the two governments signed an agreement on military-technical cooperation.²² Article 14 of the twenty-one-point joint declaration issued during Yeltsin's visit stated that the two parties would 'maintain military contacts in accordance with accepted international practice so as to build up their mutual confidence and cooperation in the military field.'²³ These 'contacts' have been frequent.

In April 1993, the Commander of the PLA Navy, Zhang Lianshong, visited Russia, and during his visit inspected *Admiral Kuznetsov*, the aircraft carrier of the Northern Fleet, and the shipyard that produces *Severodvinsk* nuclear submarines.²⁴ General S.P. Seleznev, Commander of the Leningrad Military Region, led a delegation to Beijing in May 1993.²⁵ In August 1993, three ships of the Russian Pacific Fleet visited Qingdao.²⁶

In November 1993, the Russian Minister of Defence, Gen. Pavel Grachev, visited China and signed a five-year Agreement on Military Cooperation, which provided for consultations on ministerial and military regional levels and exchange of information and experience in the military field.²⁷

In 1993, a closed exhibition-demonstration of Russian military technology took place in China. Many types of latest weapon systems were exhibited, including air defence missile complex S-300 PMU-1 and others. The achievements of the Russian MIC made a good impression on the Chinese, and important agreements followed for the delivery of those

weapon systems to China that the PLA did not possess so far, above all, diesel submarine of *Kilo*-class (project 877) and modern strategic air defence complex S-300 PMU-1 of longer operational range.²⁸

In May 1995, during his visit to China, Pavel Grachev confirmed that arms transfers would remain an essential element in their bilateral relations for the foreseeable future.²⁹ In December 2003, a defence cooperation accord was signed in Moscow by the Defence Ministers of Russia and China, Sergei Ivanov and Cao Guangchuan, respectively, providing for the execution of 'new and ongoing contracts worth more than US\$2 billion.'³⁰

On 1st November 2013, the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin held an official meeting with the Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission of the People's Republic of China Colonel-General Zu Hiliang. The meeting was held to discuss matters related to military-technical cooperation between the two countries.³¹

MAJOR PROGRAMMES OF RUSSIAN ARMS SALES TO CHINA

The weapons and technology transfer from Russia to China became a veritable cascade in the years after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Russian arms sales to China reportedly totalled nearly US\$2 billion in 1992.³² There was some break in 1993, but after that the arms trade re-activated.³³ Beijing increased its military budget by 13.5 per cent in 1993 specifically for the purpose of purchasing arms from Russia.³⁴ From 1992 to 1996, the total volume of sales from Russia to China amounted to US\$4.493 billion (constant 1995 US dollars).³⁵ This made China by far the most significant importer of Russian arms, accounting for 26 per cent of all sales from 1992 to 1994.³⁶ In 1995, Beijing bought from Moscow arms worth US\$626 million. The year 1996 started with a US\$2 billion contract to co-produce the Sukhoi Su-27 in China. In 1996, Russia delivered to China arms and ammunition worth US\$728 million,³⁷

accounting for 42 per cent of all Russian arms exports. From 1995 to 1999, Russia's arms trade with China accounted for more than US\$3.3 billion.³⁸ About 70 per cent of Russia's foreign arms sales went to China in 2000.³⁹

In 2001, China decided to increase its defence spending by 17.7 percent.⁴⁰ It is estimated that the real figure is at least three times as high, which would put China almost on a par with Japan's US\$45 billion.⁴¹ Russian Premier Mikhail Kasyanov's Shanghai meeting with his Chinese counterpart Zhu Rongji on 22nd August 2002 resulted in an agreement to increase Russian arms deliveries. Diplomatic sources expected China to purchase 10-20 per cent more weapons.⁴² According to Russian government sources, China bought 30-50 per cent of Russian military exports in 2001-2002.⁴³ In 2003, China accounted for 50 per cent of all Russian arms and combat-hardware exports,⁴⁴ when the official Chinese defence budget stood at US\$17 billion.⁴⁵

On the other hand, Moscow annually earned more than US\$1 billion, while selling its weapons to China in 2001-2002; this made up for almost 20 per cent of the entire Russian-Chinese trade turnover.⁴⁶

Between 1992 and 2006, the total value of Russian arms exports to China amounted to approximately US\$26 billion worth of military equipment and weapons⁴⁷ (at constant 1990 prices), accounting for more than 90 per cent of China's arms imports during this period.⁴⁸ Between 1995 and 2005, Russia's arms sales to China accounted for approximately 37 per cent of its total arms exports.⁴⁹ In its annual submissions to the *UN Register of Conventional Arms*, Moscow has reported exporting 104 combat aircraft, five attack helicopters, six warships, and 431 missiles and missile launchers to China between 1992 and 2001.⁵⁰ According to the *UN Register of Conventional Arms*, Russian exports to China between 2001 and 2007 totalled 3,857 missiles and missile launchers, nine warships and 120 aircraft.⁵¹ These sales helped make Russia the

world's largest arms supplier to Asian countries between 1998 and 2005, well ahead of the United States.⁵² In 2009, China's share in Russia's worldwide arms sales was 18 percent.⁵³ From 2001 to 2010, Russia sold more than US\$16 billion worth of arms to China, with yearly sales peaking at US\$2.7 billion, accounting for nearly 40 per cent of all major Russian arms sales, which include Su-27 and Su-30 fighter jets, *Kilo*-class diesel submarines and air defence systems.⁵⁴

The value of new contracts signed in 2012 exceeded US\$2.3 billion.⁵⁵ On 25th March 2013, China Central Television News Agency and People's Daily report announced⁵⁶ that a US\$3.5 billion deal was signed between Russian and China. Moscow had reportedly agreed to supply 24 Sukhoi Su-35⁵⁷ fighters (with deliveries expected to start in 2015⁵⁸) and four *Amur*-class conventional submarines to China.⁵⁹ The four submarines will be jointly designed and built by both countries, with two of them to be built in Russia and the other two in China.⁶⁰ The prospective order for *Amur*-class submarines⁶¹, estimated to be worth about US\$2 billion, also suggests that the PLA navy is dissatisfied with the latest versions of its home-grown *Song* and *Yuan* class conventional submarines.⁶²

Thus, between 1999 and 2014, the total value of Russian arms exports to China amounted to approximately US\$32.1 billion.⁶³

Some observers have characterised the Chinese approach towards purchasing Russian military equipment as 'buyers at a fire sale'.⁶⁴ Russian arms merchants have introduced Chinese military leaders to a variety of hardware and technology that could greatly improve existing PLA (People's Liberation Army) capabilities. As a result, China has succeeded in getting many Russian-made weapons and combat hardware as well as technologies, and has negotiated deals involving a large amount of non-cash compensation, i.e., barter, to Russia.⁶⁵

Russia is assisting China with the

modernisation of the ground forces, air forces and navy as well as transferring some military technologies. Russia-China military-technical cooperation includes purchase of military equipment and its production under licence in China, technology transfer, exchange of visits by high-level defence officials of the two countries and training of Chinese defence personnel in Russia.

RUSSIAN ARMS SALES TO PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY

By the end of the 1980s, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) felt the need to modernise its tank fleet. Accordingly, in 1992 China agreed to purchase roughly 50 T-72 MBTs (Main Battle Tanks) and 70 BMP-3⁶⁶ armoured infantry fighting vehicles (AIFVs)⁶⁷ at a cost of approximately US\$250 million.⁶⁸ The tanks were delivered at the end of 1993. The transfer involved the latest model of the heavily-armoured and relatively modern T-72 family – an improved version of the T-72M1.⁶⁹ China took delivery of 50 T-80s in the Russo-Chinese border region of Primorskii Krai towards the end of 1993.⁷⁰ In 1993, China was reported to have made a bulk order of 200 T-80U main battle tanks. China received the delivery in 1996.⁷¹ In 1993, 1,200 AT-II sniper anti-tank missiles were ordered by China and received in 1995 for use in T-80U tanks.⁷²

In 1992, China ordered from Russia 4 S-300 PMU/SA-10C SAM (surface-to-air missile) systems,⁷³ which were received between 1993 and 1997. In October 1992, the PLA became the first export customer to receive the Russian S-300 SAM (NATO designation SA-10B).⁷⁴ China sought a handful of launchers and 100 S-300 air defence missiles for testing purposes,⁷⁵ which were delivered to it in 1993.⁷⁶ In 1992-1993, the PLA received 3 complexes of S-300. In 1994, Russia sold China six more S-300 air defence systems with around 100 missiles.⁷⁷

In 1995, China purchased upper-stage rocket engines, violating the Missile Technology

Control Regime that Russia had pledged to accept. These purchases did not go through the official channels. The Russian Ministry of Defence sold the engines directly without notifying NPO Energomash, the company that produced them. In 1996, reports that Moscow had sold the R-36M/SS-18 'Satan' ICBM (Intercontinental Ballistic Missile) to China met with denials from Deputy Foreign Minister Alexandr Panov. However, he did admit that 'non-state elements might have sold the missile.'⁷⁸

Between 1993 and 1997, China also received 144 5V55R (S-300P)/SA-10 Grumble SAMs. In 1997-1998, China was given approximately 255 9M330/SA-15 Gauntlet missiles. During President Yeltsin's April 1996 visit other purchases such as tanks, tank fire control systems and BTR-80 armoured personnel carriers (APCs) were discussed.⁷⁹

Russia sold eight regiments of the S-300 PMU-1 (SA-20 Gargoyle) missile system for China's air defence in 2000.⁸⁰ The S-300 could also be used to conduct research on a vertical-missile-launching system for ship-to-air missiles, in support of plans for the projected carrier force.⁸¹ China received 27 Antey Tor-M1⁸² self-propelled short-range SAM system,⁸³ and the 2S6M Tunguska combined gun/SAM system.⁸⁴ Russia also signed a contract with China for a licence for manufacturing 155-mm Krasnopol guided artillery shells.⁸⁵

In 2001, Russia and China reportedly signed a US\$400 million contract to supply another four regiments of the more modern S-300 PMU-2.⁸⁶ Between 2000 and 2005, Russia also gave 4 SA-300 PMU SAM systems and missiles to China.⁸⁷ In the last week of March 2010, Russia delivered 15 additional batteries⁸⁸ of S-300 PMU-1 (SA-20 Gargoyle) SAMs (dubbed 'The Favourite' by Russians) to China, making good on an about US\$1.80-\$2.25 billion deal signed in the mid-2000s.⁸⁹ If taking additional spare and practice missiles purchased from Russia into account, the total number of missiles received by the PLA has amounted

well above 1,000.⁹⁰

Russia is also sending S-400 surface-to-air missile systems to China. The SAM system is expected to arrive in 2018 in accordance with a 2014 agreement.⁹¹

RUSSIAN ARMS SALES TO PLA AIR FORCE

In October 1990 the first significant Chinese post-détente military purchase was made from the then Soviet Union and consisted of 24 Mil Mi-17/Mi-8M/‘Hip-H’ transport helicopters,⁹² which the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) received in 1990-1991. In 1991, an order was made for the supply of 288 Vypel R-73/AA-11 ‘Archer’ air-to-air missiles (AAMs) from the Soviet Union, which were received by China in 1991-1992. In the same period, the latter also received 96 Vypel R-60/AA-8 ‘Aphid’ air-to-air missiles.⁹³

In 1992, the Russian government announced that it was selling Beijing US\$1.8 billion worth of Sukhoi Su-27/‘Flanker’ fighters, Ilyushin Il-76/‘Candid’ transport aircraft and other weapons for air defence purposes.⁹⁴ Russia struck three separate deals with China for the provision of the Su-27⁹⁵ to the latter: 26 in 1992, 24 in 1995, and 72 in 1997, along with a licencing and coproduction arrangement.⁹⁶ Accordingly, 26 Su-27 Flanker fighters, including two Su-27UB trainer versions, for US\$1 billion, were delivered to China in 1992.⁹⁷ Additional shipments were held up by a dispute over China’s desire to pay for two-thirds of the cost through barter. After Liu Huaqing’s visit to Russia in December 1995,⁹⁸ the way was finally cleared for delivery of 24 Su-27s (plus two twin-seat trainers).⁹⁹

China ordered 16 Su-27SKs¹⁰⁰ and six Su-27UBKs¹⁰¹ in 1995 in a deal worth about US\$710 million. In 1996, 22 Su-27 Flanker B aircraft as a part of the second batch arrived in China¹⁰² to coincide with Yeltsin’s visit to Beijing on 25th April 1996.¹⁰³ In reporting to the United Nations, both Russia and China confirmed that the transfer of 22 aircraft took place in 1996.¹⁰⁴

Yeltsin agreed to transfer a third batch of Su-27 fighters. The third batch of Su-27s was almost certainly linked directly to the licencing agreement, perhaps serving as a further inducement by Moscow to transfer the required technology.¹⁰⁵ China is reported to have got 72 Su-27 (plus six trainers) by the end of 1997.¹⁰⁶

China acquired 53 Su-27SK and 16 Su-27UBK fighters from Russia before signing an agreement in 1998 to licence manufacture the plane as the Shenyang J-11 in China.¹⁰⁷ Sukhoi Su-27 accounted for nearly two-thirds of Russia’s weapons exports to China over the 1998-2000 period.¹⁰⁸ By the end of 2003, China had 300 Su-27s in operation. Russia’s Su-27SM¹⁰⁹ fighter upgrade is being boosted by a parallel project to modify China’s Su-27s.¹¹⁰ Technocomplex has confirmed that around 100 upgrade kits have been delivered to China’s PLAAF for use with its Su-27SKs and licence-built Shenyang J-11s.¹¹¹

The Sukhoi Su-27 deal was followed in 1992 by a contract for 100 Klimov RD-33 aircraft engines, which Russia uses to power its Mikoyan MiG-29/‘Fulcrum’ fighter and China will employ to upgrade its export-oriented Super F-7 fighter.¹¹²

In 1993, China received one Ilyushin Il-28/‘Type 27’/‘Beagle’ from Russia.¹¹³ In July 1994, China’s State Council approved an additional US\$5 billion worth of armaments imports from Russia including an unspecified number of Su-30MKK¹¹⁴ and Sukhoi Su-35/‘Flanker-E’ (formerly Su-27M) fighters.¹¹⁵ Russia, however, apparently refused to sell the advanced Su-35 but offered the Su-27 and Sukhoi Su-30/‘Flanker-C’ aircraft as an alternative.¹¹⁶

In addition to these fighter aircraft, Moscow has apparently offered the supersonic Tupolev Tu-22M/‘Backfire’ bomber to replace China’s obsolete H-6 bomber force.¹¹⁷ Following President Yeltsin’s April 1996 visit China reportedly ordered 118 sets of missile systems and four Tupolev Tu-26/‘Backfire’ long-range bombers.¹¹⁸

The Shenyang Aircraft Company (SAC) concluded a deal with the Russian company Phazotron to purchase 150 to 200 *Zhuk* (Beetle) multi-mode radars.¹¹⁹ These would primarily equip China's new F-8II fighter, but also equip the new Chengdu J-10 (J-9) fighter, a classified programme.¹²⁰

Between 1992 and 1996, China also received from Russia six Ilyushin Il-76 long-range transport aircraft¹²¹ – the likes of which it did not possess earlier, as well as four Tu-22M3 '*Backfire*' bomber.¹²² China has at least 10 Ilyushin Il-76MD together with facilities to service them.¹²³ There were some reports that China has also apparently agreed to buy an unspecified number of Beriev A-50 Shmel (bumble bee)/Mainstay, the Russian airborne warning and control system (AWACS) aircraft based on the Ilyushin Il-76 transport.¹²⁴

The PLAAF also purchased from Russia the Kh-55/AS-15 'Kent'/RKV-500 air-launched cruise missile, which is capable of being launched by the PLAAF's B-6D bomber.¹²⁵ A Kh-55/AS-15 production unit was delivered to Shanghai in 1995 and appears to have been used to produce a similar weapon for China.¹²⁶

Summing up, the current deliveries of defence materiel to China include anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems, combat aircraft, transport aircraft, helicopters, tank technology and electronics. Among these, aircraft exports are historically the most important, totalling 3,000 units over more than four decades. As a result, by the end of 1995, the Chinese air-force inventory included 132 Tu-16/H-6s, 480 Il-28/H-5s, 400 MiG-17F/J-5s, 3,000 MiG-19/J-67s, 100 MiG-19 naval variant/Q-5s, 500 MiG-21/J-7s, 100 Ye-142/J-8s, 72 Su-27s, 30 Il-14s, 10 Il-18s, 10 Il-76s, 28 Mi-17s and 30 Mi-8s,¹²⁷ and 45 Su-30K flankers.¹²⁸ China acquired 76 Su-27SK fighters from Russia between 1992 and December 2008.¹²⁹

Between 1995 and 1996, Russia gave China 30 Mi-17 helicopters. In 1996-1997, China was given approximately 144 R-27/AA-10 'Alamo' AAMs and approximately 96 AA-

8 'Aphid' AAMs. The imported Russian R-27/AA-10 'Alamo', R-73/AA-11 'Archer' and R-77/AA-12 'Adder' AAMs are primarily used with the imported Russian built Su-27SK/J-11A and Su-30MKK/MK3 'Flankers'.¹³⁰

At the time of Russian Vice-Premier Ilya Klebanov's visit to China in August 1999, an agreement was signed to supply China 40 Su-30MKK multipurpose fighters,¹³¹ with the X-31A supersonic anti-ship missile integrated into its on-board weapons system.¹³² The total cost of this contract was expected to be US\$1.4 billion.¹³³ Russia is said to have expressed its agreement in principle to transfer technology to China for licenced production of 200 Su-30MKK aircraft.¹³⁴ The Russian press commented that 'China is becoming the most important market for Russian high-tech weapons.'¹³⁵

Between 2000 and 2005, Russia delivered to China 60 Su-30MKK multi-purpose aircraft.¹³⁶ The first Su-30 aircraft was delivered to China in 2000. In 2001, another contract (signed in 1999) for delivery of several dozen (up to 40) Su-30MKK fighters was carried out. China signed with Russia a new contract on this model of aircraft in 2001.¹³⁷

On 22nd January 2003, an agreement was reached between the two countries for the delivery of five Tupolev Tu-204-120 airliners to China.¹³⁸ The price of Tu-204-120 jet-liners fitted with two Rolls Royce engines is estimated at US\$28-35 million.¹³⁹ By 2004, China procured from Russia 283 Flanker series aircraft.¹⁴⁰

In September 2005, China agreed to buy 38 aircraft, which consist of Ilyushin Il-76 transport aircraft and Il-78 refuelling planes, for a total of about US\$1.5 billion.¹⁴¹ Early in 2009, Russia signed a military contract for the delivery of more than 100 engines for the Chinese J-10 fighter.¹⁴²

In 2011, Russia signed a US\$500 million deal with China for the transfer of 123 AL-31FN jet aircraft engines¹⁴³ (for use in the Su-30, and the local clone, the J11 and Chinese

designed J-10).¹⁴⁴

In November 2013, the Russian Helicopters (Rosvertol) delivered four more Mil Mi-171E multipurpose helicopters to China under a 2012 contract for the delivery of 52 Mi-171E helicopters to China's Poly Technologies. Counting this delivery, China has received a total of 32 helicopters. The remaining units are expected to be delivered in 2014. The cost of one such helicopter in its basic configuration is estimated at US\$10-12 million.¹⁴⁵

In the last week of October 2016, Chinese and Russian officials jointly announced that Russia would deliver the first batch of four advanced Su-35 fighters to Beijing in December 2016. The \$2 billion deal signed in November 2015,¹⁴⁶ for 24 jets is expected to be completed in three years.¹⁴⁷

The significance of all these purchases is underlined by the PLA's recent shift from a defensive strategic doctrine to one that emphasises taking the offensive.¹⁴⁸

RUSSIAN ARMS SALES TO PLA NAVY

Russia-China military-technical cooperation in the naval field started in 1991 with the purchase of two Russian Kamov Ka-27 (NATO reporting name: 'Helix-A') anti-submarine warfare (ASW) helicopters.¹⁴⁹ In February 1994, the Nizhny Novgorod Mashzavod plant signed a contract with the PLA Navy (PLAN) to supply three shipborne 77-millimetre automatic artillery systems. In March 1995, Chinese specialists were trained at Mashzavod plant to use these guns which were to be delivered by the end of the year.¹⁵⁰

The PLAN purchased four *Kilo*-class diesel submarines¹⁵¹ from Russia, which cost US\$1 billion.¹⁵² The first submarine produced in Nizhny Novgorod was already delivered to China in February 1995, and the second was reportedly sent to St. Petersburg for sea trials in June 1995.¹⁵³ It was reported in March 1995 that Beijing struck a new deal with Moscow for the purchase of six more submarines.¹⁵⁴

In 1994, the PLA Navy ordered two Project 877EKM *Kilo*-class submarines from Russia, which were delivered in 1995. In 1996, the PLA Navy became the first foreign customer for the improved Project 636 *Varshavyanka*¹⁵⁵ *Kilo*-class submarines with two boats of this variant ordered from Russia. These boats were delivered in 1997 and 1998.¹⁵⁶

With the acquisition of the Russian-built *Minsk* in 1998, China gained its first aircraft carrier – but it is not operational. It is a tourist attraction docked in Shenzhen. It was sold by Russia to South Korea as scrap metal in 1995, then to China for conversion into a floating amusement park. It is quite possible, of course, that China's navy and defence industry officials are studying the design of the *Minsk*.¹⁵⁷

In November 1997, the US\$3 billion deal (revising an agreement previously concluded during the late December 1996 visit to Moscow by the then Chinese Premier Li Peng¹⁵⁸) was struck for China to purchase the two Russian *Sovremenny*-class destroyers (Project 956EM)¹⁵⁹. This deal includes associated weapon and electronic fits, such as four SDS-N-7 Shtil missile systems (Space launch vehicle) and approximately 50 SS-N-22 Sunburn/P-80 anti-ship missiles, four SA-N-7 Shtil missile systems, three M-80E Moskit (SS-N-22 Sunburn) missiles,¹⁶⁰ and approximately 132 SA-N-7 Gadfly missiles.¹⁶¹ The first destroyer was delivered to China in February 2000, and the second in 2000-2001.¹⁶²

In May 2000, China acquired SS-N-22 launchers and missiles¹⁶³ (specifically, the export version 3M-80E Moskit (SS-N-22 Sunburn)) with a 1999–2000 purchase of two *Sovremenny* destroyers from Russia.¹⁶⁴ The Russians say that China funded the development of the SS-N-22 version for the PLAN, which has the designation 3M-80MBE, and this version differs from earlier versions mainly in having increased range (now beyond 220 km; 240 km has been quoted). These new missiles will be first installed on-board the second pair of *Sovremenny*-class destroyers.

A total of 500 SS-N-22 AShMs were ordered by China for the four Russian-built *Sovremenny*-class destroyers. With the exception of the first 20, these are the 3M-80MBE variant. China has stockpiled roughly 15 SS-N-22 missiles per launch tube (each destroyer having a total of eight launchers in two quadruple configurations). All versions of the SS-N-22 have a cruise altitude of 15 feet above sea level.

In January 2002, the two countries clinched yet another US\$1.4 billion contract to build another two Project 956EM destroyers.¹⁶⁵ The contract also included the sale of Rif anti-aircraft complexes worth US\$600 million.¹⁶⁶

In August 1999, Hong Kong press published reports of a deal regarding the sale of two typhoon-class nuclear-powered submarines valued at US\$1.0 billion between Russia and China.¹⁶⁷

Deck-based Kamov Ka-28 Helix helicopters, essential for a carrier strike group's anti-submarine warfare defence, have also been sold. Russia agreed to give 10 Ka-28 Helix helicopters between 1997 and 1999.¹⁶⁸ Two were delivered in 1997.¹⁶⁹ In 1998, the Chinese Navy acquired eight Ka-28s (five ASW and three search & rescue) equipped with the cutting-edge Izumrud ('Emerald') search system. The helicopters also assisted in targeting the on-board supersonic anti-ship SS-N-22 Sunburn missiles. Russia was supposed to give to China Ka-31 AEW (airborne early warning) helicopters by the end of 2000. In addition, nine Ka-28 helicopters were ordered by China, for delivery by end of 2009.¹⁷⁰ The shipment of the first three of nine Ka-28 helicopters was delivered to China in October 2009.¹⁷¹

On 3rd May 2002, Russia's arms export monopoly Rosoboronexport signed a contract, to the tune of US\$1.5-1.6 billion, with the Chinese defence ministry for building until 2005 eight diesel submarines under the Project Mk 636 for China,¹⁷² and the Russian submarines will be equipped with an up-to-date Club-S anti-

ship missile system having a long firing range, which is unparalleled in the world.¹⁷³

In 2002, contracts stipulating the delivery of two ship-based S-300F Rif anti-aircraft missile systems for advanced Type 052B destroyers were signed.¹⁷⁴ In January 2003, China's defence ministry and Russia's Rosoboronexport clinched a US\$1 billion deal regarding the shipment to the Chinese navy of 24 Su-30MKK multi-role naval fighters from the KnAAPO plant in Komsomolsk-on-Amur.¹⁷⁵

TRANSFER OF RUSSIAN MILITARY TECHNOLOGY TO CHINA

The Russia-China joint statement issued at the time of President Yeltsin's visit to Beijing in April 1996 did make a special mention of their military-technical cooperation. The two sides pledged to 'further strengthen their cooperation in military technology'.¹⁷⁶ From the beginning, China has preferred to purchase technology and production licences rather than buying equipment off the shelf.¹⁷⁷ China has not altogether jettisoned the 'self-reliance' principle, and it is determined not to again become dependent on a foreign supplier for its military strength. Accordingly, what China primarily sought on the market was not 'off-the-shelf' weaponry, but access to the technology that would allow Chinese industry to produce modern weapons locally.¹⁷⁸

Russian technologies make up for 30 per cent of the entire Russian-Chinese trade turnover. Beijing strives to increase this proportion to 70 per cent, spending just 30 per cent on ready-made weapons.¹⁷⁹ This matches China's strategic line, i.e., relying on its own potential.¹⁸⁰ This is probably partly because of budget restrictions and partly because of the fear of the potential political consequences of over-dependence on any one supplier.

In 1995, China agreed to pay about US\$1.4 billion for the technology and licences to manufacture the Su-27.¹⁸¹ In 1996, Russia and China inked a US\$2.5 billion deal to manufacture

200 Su-27SK Flanker B fighter aircraft, including assembly from kits, under licence at a plant in Shenyang.¹⁸² Their Chinese designation is Shenyang J-11 (Jianji-11 or Jian-11).¹⁸³ Between 1998 and 2005, the Chinese manufactured over a hundred Su-27SK warplanes under Russian licence, using many Russian parts in the assembly process.¹⁸⁴ Russia's readiness to sell the technology and rights for the licenced manufacture of the Su-27 fighter reduced the Chinese fear of dependence and increased the indigenous expertise in defence production.¹⁸⁵

China's first two locally assembled Su-27 fighter aircraft made their first flights in December 1998.¹⁸⁶ About 15 Su-27s were planned to be assembled annually from 2002,¹⁸⁷ and a total of 200 by 2012.¹⁸⁸ Using in-flight air refuelling kits obtained from Russia, five B-6 bombers have been converted into aerial refuelling tankers in an effort to extend the range of Chinese aircraft to cover much of the western Pacific, allowing them, in the words of one Pentagon intelligence report, 'to perform some long-range escort, air-to-air, and ground attack missions over the South China Sea or elsewhere in the region'.¹⁸⁹

In February 1999, it was reported that China had acquired, with the Russian Defence Ministry's support, the licence to produce MiG-31,¹⁹⁰ which are also being produced in Shenyang.¹⁹¹

During his visit to China in August 1999, Russian Vice-Premier Ilya Klebanov was reported to have said that the Russian delegation had taken to Beijing a number of 'very serious new proposals, including proposals for military-technical cooperation'.¹⁹²

China has reportedly received information on the RT-23/SS-24 'Scalpel'¹⁹³ and RT-2PM Topol/RS-12M Topol/SS-25¹⁹⁴ 'Sickle' ICBMs.¹⁹⁵ In 1998-1999, China received from Russia/Ukraine technology for the Dong Feng 31/'East Wind' ICBMs, which were displayed for the first time at the military parade in October 1999.¹⁹⁶

In May 2008, licenced production of the Mil Mi-17 started in China with production being led by Mil Moscow Helicopter Plant JSC and the Sichuan Lantian Helicopter Company Limited in Chengdu, Sichuan province. The plant had built 20 helicopters in 2008, using Russian Ulan-Ude-supplied kits. The production is expected to reach 80 helicopters per year eventually. The variants to be built by Lantian will include Mi-171, Mi-17V5, and Mi-17V7 (multi-purpose helicopter).

China's NORINCO defence company was able to assimilate series production of the Russian Infantry Fighting Vehicle (IVF), the BMP-1 in 1994-96 without an agreement to purchase the licence simply by technology transfer through unofficial sources, and is now supplying it to the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁹⁷

In order to strengthen the relationship between the two countries, meetings of the bilateral commission on military-technical cooperation took place in December 2008 and November 2009.¹⁹⁸

Thanks to the Russian connection, China can conceivably, through reverse engineering, leapfrog over obsolete intermediate technologies,¹⁹⁹ perhaps developing state-of-the-art military capabilities comparable to those of the United States in a decade or less.²⁰⁰ In the not-too-distant future, China may well be producing sophisticated weapon systems domestically.

DECLINE IN RUSSIAN ARMS SALES TO CHINA

For almost two decades after the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, China accounted for between one-fourth and one-half of Russia's foreign military sales, with Beijing buying more military products from Russia than from all other countries combined. During the 1990s, the value of these purchases ranged anywhere up to about one billion dollars per year. During the mid-2000s, this figure sometimes rose above two billion dollars per annum. These sales helped

make Russia the largest seller of major conventional weapons to Asian countries between 1998 and 2005, ahead of the United States.

However, the period between 2004 and 2012 saw a precipitous fall in Chinese purchases of Russian military equipment and technologies. After orders peaked at more than US\$2 billion a year early in the 1990s, Chinese arms deals with Russia shrank to almost nothing in 2006.²⁰¹ Russia informally banned the sale of advanced weapons to China in 2004, noting concerns over the replication of Russian technology.²⁰²

In 2005, China accounted for 60 percent of total Russian arms exports,²⁰³ and this had slumped to 18 per cent in 2008 and continued dropping to 10-15 per cent in next few years.²⁰⁴ In other words, Russia's arms exports to China dropped by 62 per cent in 2008. As of 2008, there were no outstanding Chinese orders with Russia for big-ticket military items.²⁰⁵ For the time being, the two countries simply execute the previously signed contracts, the sum of which totalled about US\$1.8 billion in 2008.²⁰⁶ Sales dipped to about US\$1 billion a year in 2009.²⁰⁷ In 2009, China bought only a few combat helicopters from Russia, as well as some advanced engines that could be used to power military as well as civilian vehicles. Chinese share of Russian arms exports fell to around 10 percent by the early 2010s.²⁰⁸

However, since 2012, military cooperation has been increasing, reflecting a resolution of differences between the two states.²⁰⁹

PROBLEMS AND LIMITS OF RUSSIAN ARMS SALES TO CHINA

The Chinese firms' expertise at reverse engineering foreign technology is well known. For example, the Chinese built Shenyang J-11B fighter plane is functionally identical to the Russian Sukhoi Su-27. Russia granted Beijing the Sukhoi Su-27 design in 1995 with the latter agreeing to purchase 200 kits and produce it under local licence.²¹⁰ In 2004, after building 100 planes, the Chinese cancelled the contract

for the remaining fighters, claiming they no longer met Chinese requirements.²¹¹ Soon after, the knock off J-11B began appearing for sale on international markets.²¹² Somewhere between 120 and 130 J-11B have been built by China.²¹³ Russia has officially notified China of the fact that the production of J-11 jet fighters, which copy Russia's Su-27SK aircraft, violates international agreements. Moscow promised to launch legal proceedings to protect its intellectual property.²¹⁴

Chinese manufacturers are producing either more completely indigenous advanced weapons systems or more defence technologies, sub-systems, and other essential components that they can insert directly into foreign-made systems. China now competes with Russia in lucrative international arms markets by offering Russian knock-offs at bargain prices.²¹⁵

IMPLICATIONS

As shown by China's recent military purchases, its air, sea, and amphibious forces are being outfitted with a wide array of state-of-the-art weapon systems from Russia that will enable them to deliver a punch far beyond China's borders. These systems will begin to provide some of the capabilities needed to fight the type of conflict that Chinese strategic planners envision as most likely in the future – short, limited wars using high-technology equipment on the periphery of China.

No doubt, there do exist deep-seated and historical apprehensions in the Russian mind regarding China. There are those who believe that by selling arms to China, Russia is 'feeding the tiger'.²¹⁶ Opponents of arms deliveries to China argue that the latter is Russia's strategic enemy, which is capable of attempting different forms of northward expansion, including economic and demographic expansion and realisation of China's historical territorial claims.²¹⁷ There are also fears in Moscow that arming the Chinese armed forces could pose a long-term threat to Russia if there was a deterioration in ties between the two countries

that share a 4,300-km (2,600-mile) -long border.

The accretion to the capability of Chinese armed forces is mainly seen by the media in the context of Chinese ambition to dominate the South China Sea and the Taiwan Straits. Enhancement in China's military capability is particularly important in the context of its dispute with neighbouring countries over oil rich Spratly and Paracel islands. Countries like the USA and Japan apprehend that any increase in the military capability of China would add to the cost for them to provide security to the countries of the region. With its growing economic and military might, China is emerging as a challenger to the USA. China's partnership with Russia would strengthen former's position in the international arena and weaken that of the USA.²¹⁸

The growing ties between Russian and China are outlined in a report of US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, set up by the United States Congress in 2000,²¹⁹ which was made public on 20 March 2017. It notes that 'Russian arms sales to China and military-technical cooperation could have significant consequences for the United States, challenging US air superiority and posing problems for US, allied, and partner assets in the region.'²²⁰

China's military development with Russian assistance has complicated US contingency planning in East Asia and challenges the balance of power across the Taiwan Strait. Its overall trajectory is heightening concern in Washington, Tokyo, Seoul, and elsewhere regarding the regional balance of power over time, and tilling the soil for an arms race – particularly in the absence of greater transparency. A strengthening of Russian-Chinese defence links, perhaps within an SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) framework, might lead their neighbours to seek balance by moving even closer to the USA.

According to the almost unanimous opinion of military experts, by 2025, or even earlier, China will have all the necessary battle

capabilities for invading Taiwan. Even now China's front line aviation has 400 fourth-generation modern combat planes – more than Russia does.²²¹

CONCLUSION

Just like their alliance during the 1950s, the post-Cold War Russo-Chinese techno-military cooperation also presents to the rest of the world, a unique new model of good neighbourly, mutually beneficial and cooperative relationship, based on neither confrontation nor alliance, and not being directed against any other government or region.

The Russia-China techno-military relationship has significant reserves and both countries have the objective need to further improve and deepen their strategic partnership. The two countries describe their current relationship as 'an equal, trust-based partnership aimed at strategic interaction in the 21st century.'²²² It is extremely unlikely, however, that either country would come to the other's aid during a military crisis, for instance during a Taiwan situation or escalation of unrest in Chechnya. The relationship does not nearly rise to that level of political or military partnership;²²³ indeed, their July 2001 treaty, unlike the 1950 version at the start of the Cold War, contains no security guarantees, and then-Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov stated publicly that 'No military-political obligations bind Russia and China.'²²⁴

Russia has completely changed its arms-export model. Instead of using arms as a means to ensure military and political balance in the Third World, Russia now sees the arms trade as a business. The Russian government, under Vladimir Putin, is particularly eager to secure Chinese investment to help modernise the Russian economy. In one of his pre-election (for a third presidential term) newspaper articles, he said that Russia aimed to catch the wind filling China's sails.²²⁵ The two governments have set ambitious targets for Sino-Russia trade, which is targeted to reach

US\$200 billion by 2020.²²⁶

Today, Russia and China have become closer because of selected common interests, rather than ideas. The Russo-Chinese relations have developed to a point where the two countries focus less on differences than on practical and functional cooperation. Sentimental elements are decreasing, and the two governments have begun to manage their bilateral relations in a more practical way. No matter how similarly the two countries see the world today, doctrine is not the glue that binds them; it is pragmatism pure and simple.

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