

# As a Man Is, So Is His Company

## Historical Record and Prospects of Russia's Alliances

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The article benefited from the financial support under the "Priority 2030" strategic academic leadership program of the MGIMO University. The author expresses gratitude to Irina Bolgova, Vladimir Orlov and Ivan Safranchuk for valuable comments on the draft versions of the research paper.

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2024-22-1-94-109

### **Abstract**

Amid its confrontation with the West, Moscow faces the pressing need to reexamine its approach to alliance-building. This article claims that Russia needs to rearrange its preferential ties based on economic and strategic pragmatism. Given the rising tensions, Russia currently prioritizes resilience to the Western coercion, which largely relies on financial and technological sanctions. Russia's partners that contribute to its resistance to Western sanctions get preferential treatment even though they may not meet formal alliance criteria. Thus, Moscow has to foster low-profile countersanction alignments. Meanwhile, the prospect of an armed clash with the United

States and NATO makes one think about alliances that would strengthen Russia's conventional deterrence. Formalizing defense commitments with China becomes an important prerequisite for addressing the increasingly reckless Western coercion. The traditional counterarguments against a Russia-China alliance appear obsolete now that the U.S. directly designates Russia and China as adversaries, openly expands its military presence at their borders, gears up military buildup, and mobilizes its allies. For Russia, an alliance with China would diminish reliance on the threat of nuclear retaliation and increase flexibility of its deterrence posture.

**Keywords:** Russian foreign policy, alliances, alignment, status, economic coercion, great power war, CSTO, China, NATO.

Back in the 1960s, a pioneer of strategic studies, George Liska, wrote: "It is impossible to speak of international relations without referring to alliances; the two often merge in all but name" (Liska, 1962, p. 3). Since the end of the Cold War, the debate regarding alliances has concentrated almost exclusively on the U.S.-led network of military ties without due attention to the alignments of other powers. This distorted perspective becomes especially worrisome as Russia faces the pressing need to reexamine its approach to alliance-building amid its confrontation with the West.

Russia's own record reveals the looseness of the notion of alliance. The traditional approach defines an alliance as "a promise of mutual military assistance between two or more sovereign states" (Wolfers, 1968, p. 268). However, armed backing is neither the only nor sometimes the main contribution expected from allies. Many asymmetric alliances rely primarily on the expressions of political loyalty and deference rather than practical assistance.

Given the rising tensions, Russia prioritizes resilience to the Western coercion, which to a large degree relies on financial and technological sanctions. Russia's partners that contribute to its resistance to the sanctions deserve preferential treatment as allies, even without meeting the formal criteria. Meanwhile, the prospect of an armed clash with the United States makes one think about alliances that would strengthen

Russia's conventional deterrence. This article poses the need of alliance-building for Moscow in view of its preceding military commitments.

### **HOW IT ALL STARTED**

The dictum, attributed to Tsar Alexander III, asserts that Russia's only allies are its army and navy (Romanov, 2010, p. 75). However, it is hardly consistent with historical facts. For centuries, Russian rulers engaged in complex diplomatic maneuvering, forming both temporary coalitions and long-term alliances. Alexander III himself initiated a Franco-Russian convention that envisaged mutual assistance in case of war with Germany (Military Convention, 1952, pp. 281-282).

Throughout the 1930s, the Soviet Union worked hard to create a broad European coalition against the Nazi. In World War II, it fought alongside Western powers. Moscow strived to preserve this alliance even after the war, retaining the mutual defense treaties with Britain and France until 1955, long after the inauguration of NATO (Decree, 1955a, 1955b). Subsequently, the Soviet Union built a network of alliances with people's democracies and socialist-leaning countries, emerging as a major provider of security guarantees.

After the Cold War, the foreign policy of the Russian Federation took shape amid liberal illusions of "perpetual peace" that decried age-old security concerns and therefore traditional alliances. Nevertheless, from the very beginning Moscow sought to institutionalize military ties with the newly established neighboring states. These efforts culminated in the Treaty of Tashkent in 1992, signed by most post-Soviet states (except Moldova, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and the Baltic countries).

Article 4 of the document proclaimed: "If one of the Member States undergoes aggression (armed attack menacing safety, stability, territorial integrity, and sovereignty), it will be considered by the Member States as aggression (armed attack menacing to safety, stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty) against all the Member States of this Treaty" (Collective Security Treaty, 1992). Thus, the Tashkent Treaty established a formal defensive alliance. Moreover, Moscow and individual parties to this document also concluded separate agreements

containing the promises of military assistance in the event of an attack. Thus, most post-Soviet states emerged as two times allies with Russia in both multilateral and bilateral formats.

This duality, dating back to the 1990s, revealed itself during the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020, when Yerevan turned to Moscow for support, appealing to the bilateral agreement rather than to the obligations in a multilateral format (Pashinyan, 2023). This step clearly demonstrated that post-Soviet states cared only about security guarantees from Moscow, considering a broader regional alliance a burden (Arbatov, 2012).

Meanwhile, Russia packaged defense commitments into a broader cooperation framework, which also included economic integration, a common humanitarian space, and regular political coordination (Malgin, 2005). Thus, Moscow invited its neighbors to join multiple agreements and organizations under its lead. This approach made it difficult to distinguish the significance of military ties from the overall mix of engagements.

Russia's eagerness to extend security guarantees to the post-Soviet states did not proceed from the traditional logic of alliance-building associated with the balance of power. It did not rely on alliances as a tool for aggregation of capabilities to deter opponents. *Firstly*, in the early 1990s, the Russian leadership commonly assumed that former adversaries had become strategic partners and, therefore, there was no need to defend the country from them. *Secondly*, despite the dire state of the Russian economy at the time, its internal difficulties faded against a much direr situation in the post-Soviet states that could hardly contribute to collective defense.

However, Russia's approach to alliances was not illogical. It was determined by a combination of pragmatic and status considerations. Primarily, Moscow sought to strengthen the newly formed states that faced numerous internal and external challenges. In other words, alignment served as an instrument of state-building. This policy was not an act of pure altruism. As the post-Soviet borders remained permeable, the threats from the neighborhood spilled over into Russia. Thus, by assisting its allies, Moscow reduced risks for itself.

Moreover, Moscow's leadership, solidified by its central position in regional alliances, partly compensated for its reduced global stature in comparison with the Soviet era. Therefore, it satisfied Russia's status ambitions. As a result, Moscow prioritized the multilateral format, which affirmed its ability to foster institutionalized cooperation in the post-Soviet space. Status concerns outweighed practical considerations, although bilateral formats would have maximized Russia's bargaining power vis-à-vis its allies given its material preponderance (Cha, 2016).

### **ALLIES FOR STATUS**

The processes of state formation in the post-Soviet space advanced rather rapidly. Paradoxically, Russia's successful efforts to stabilize the neighborhood made its security guarantees less attractive. Growing self-confidence prompted several states in the region to pursue their interests without Moscow's protection. Sometimes such decisions appeared premature. Illustratively, Uzbekistan forewent prolongation of the Tashkent Treaty in the late 1990s but turned back to Russia again after the uprising in Andijan in 2005 (Plugatarev, 2006).

Meanwhile, Russia's concerns over recognition of its international status increased as its hopes for an alliance with the United States vanished. The U.S.'s interventions without authorization from the UN Security Council and its efforts to expand NATO offended Moscow. They undermined its aspirations for an important role in international decision-making. The U.S. example also unveiled how the backing by allies helped it frame clearly illegitimate actions (for example, the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999) as widely hailed (Wedgwood, 1999).

Under these circumstances, Russia's desire to institutionally reinforce its position in the post-Soviet space was logical. It materialized in the creation of the Eurasian Economic Community and the Collective Security Treaty Organization in 2000-2002. Although the list of Russia's allies had decreased by that time (to Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), their regular meetings within the newly-established fora served as a platform for the expression of deference to Moscow.

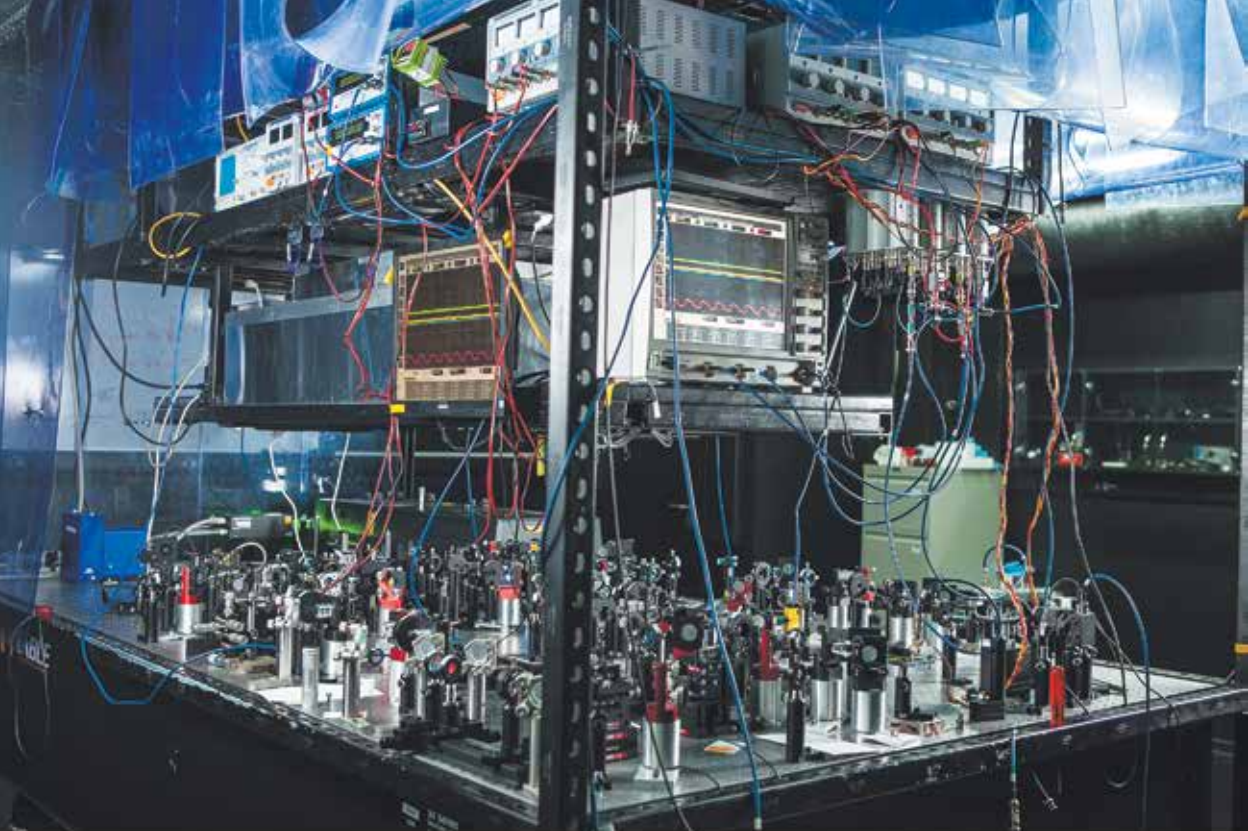
Regional institutions under Russia's auspices were not so much a counterweight to the European Union and NATO as its mimicry of the Western bodies. They confirmed Moscow's ability to pursue international cooperation in the forms perceived fashionable at the beginning of the 21st century. In terms of social identity theory, the creation of the EurAsEC and the CSTO constituted a social imitation rather than a status competition or an institutional innovation (Larson and Shevchenko, 2014).

Moreover, Russia's expectations regarding its allies were quite moderate. In exchange for security guarantees, privileged access to its market, grants and loans, Moscow did not demand participation in its military operations, or recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence, or support for the referendum in Crimea, let alone fighting side by side with Russia in a large-scale conflict. Commitments remained asymmetric, as the allies, to the contrary, counted on Russia's military assistance in their disputes and internal strives.

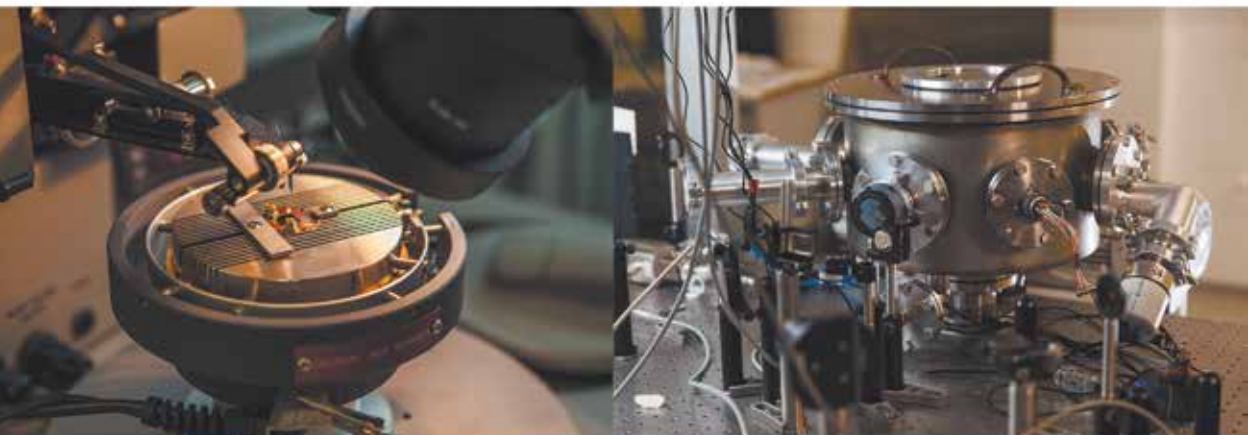
Russia's allies paid for its protection by restraining their engagement with the Western institutions and limiting NATO's presence in their territories. Unable to arrest U.S. interventionism in other parts of the world, Moscow sought to expel it from its immediate neighborhood. Once full membership in the Euro-Atlantic community proved unobtainable to Russia, it could not view the U.S. and NATO's activities in the post-Soviet space without suspicion.

However, even in this respect there was room for flexibility. The beneficiaries of Russia's security guarantees continued to maintain dialogue with NATO, and even participated in joint exercises. After 2001, Central Asian states provided territory for the deployment of Western troops and, starting from 2009, Armenia contributed to the U.S.-led campaign in Afghanistan. Moscow's allies also advanced relations with the EU, joining its various programs (TASIS, TRACECA, Eastern Partnership) and discussing free trade arrangements.

Thus, deference to Russia's leadership was not a heavy yoke. Its benefits came with few practical strains. It was enough for the allies to show no intention to join NATO, regularly attend collective summits, and refrain from insulting Russian diplomacy at the broader



**Quantum technologies** embodied in microchips and lasers have already changed our world at least once. Now they are about to change it again by controlling matter and light at the level of individual particles. **The second quantum revolution** will be new materials and ultra-secure communications, superlative accuracy in measurement and efficiency in calculation. **The Russian Quantum Center** is steadily riding on the crest of this new technological wave.



international fora (like the UN and the OSCE). These commitments remained sufficient in the game of institutional chess played through the 2000s and 2010s. When Russia and the West clashed in earnest, the competition for symbolic recognition went out of date.

### **ALIGNMENTS OF PRAGMATISTS**

As the confrontation with Moscow deepened, the United States threw off its previous ambivalence and moved ahead to weaken Russia strategically (U.S. National Security Strategy, 2022). All-out diplomatic and financial support for Kiev became the most visible embodiment of this policy, with Washington openly proclaiming Russia's military defeat in Ukraine as its primary objective (Blinken, 2023b). Nevertheless, measures to strangle Moscow economically and undermine its competitiveness play an equally significant role in the U.S. policy.

As the Western proxies fail to achieve the desired results on the battlefield, the United States has no other way but to increase technological, trade, and financial pressure on Russia. This means not only imposing new sanctions, but also eliminating gaps in the previous ones (Hood and Tauwhere, 2023). The cheapness of these measures in terms of the U.S. domestic politics brings an additional incentive to pursue them. Unlike the allocation of funds to Ukraine, they cause no disputes in Congress or public discontent.

The deepening conflict with the West requires that Russia revise its approach to alliances. Status concerns lose value not only because the struggle is assuming tougher and more tangible forms, but also because the foundations of sociality in world politics are crumbling: multilateral institutions are becoming less and less relevant, while international norms are getting marginalized under the pretext of emergency. Therefore, support in international fora is losing the value it once held.

Pragmatizing its foreign engagements becomes a top priority for Moscow. Emphasis on import substitution and boosting domestic production is inevitable amid sanctions, but hopes to achieve autarky in the 21st century are as naïve as the belief in the magic of globalization.



Since the 2000s, Russia has sought to diversify its economic ties (Putin, 2006), but the rupture with the West has propelled this trend to a new high. The structural adaptation of the Russian economy requires new markets for exports, new sources of investment and innovations, and new suppliers to saturate internal demand (Resolution, 2023).

In the struggle of attrition, true allies are not those who agree with Moscow's political rationale in words, but those who prove cooperative in addressing the above stated goals. The growth of Russian trade with a range of states from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East in 2022-2023 has disclosed an enormous potential in this regard (Vedomosti, 2023). The ties with counterparts across the post-Soviet space also require adjustment in accordance with the logic of pragmatism, even if this contradicts the formal hierarchy of alignments envisioned by their membership in regional institutions established in the previous decades.

However, the logic of countersanction alignments contains a paradox, as their value for Russia partly depends on the ability of its companions to maintain working relations with the U.S. and the EU. Amid Moscow's confrontation with the West, it is not beneficial—for at least some of them—to completely break with the West. Despite the rise of new technological and economic powerhouses in the East, Western corporations retain dominance and sometimes even monopoly in certain critical high-tech industries (RBK Trendy, 2023). For the Russian businesses access to their products remains desirable if not imperative.

Washington has repeatedly threatened secondary sanctions for bypassing restrictions, especially on dual-use goods (Blinken, 2023a). Several close Russian allies have publicly vowed to adhere to the Western restrictions (RBK, 2023). Nevertheless, the web of economic ties is so extensive that the costs of tracking and extinguishing all potential flows become prohibitive. The Iranian case provides clear evidence of this connectivity, as Tehran managed to acquire Western technologies despite a severe and enduring economic blockade (Ismay, 2022).

For all the tough rhetoric, Washington remains sensitive to the collateral damage of its economic coercion, which weakens the structural foundations of U.S. prevalence in the world economy and

harms its relations with states that profit from cooperation with Moscow. Moreover, Western companies are interested in maintaining at least an informal presence in the Russian market. So, Washington has to balance the pressure on Russia and long-term costs for itself, which leads to a selective use of sanctions.

This delicate configuration of interests is not fundamentally new. Historians show that states maintain trade relations with adversaries even during major wars (Barbieri and Levy, 1999). Nevertheless, the preservation of sensitive supply flows depends on keeping low profile and ensuring appreciable distance between interacting businesses and their respective governments. This situation dictates the logic of preferential ties directly opposite to the preceding status-seeking alliances with their emphasis on demonstrative symbolism. The success of countersanction alignments is inversely proportional to their visibility.

### **ALLIANCE AGAINST THE UNTHINKABLE**

The eagerness of Russia's counterparties to advance economic ties with Moscow relies primarily on their own self-interest. Risky business made in the shadow of potential sanctions depends on the lavish commissions. Such pragmatism entails concerns about the steadiness and durability of the emerging countersanction alignments, which presume neither the convergence of ideologies, nor unconditional trust. However, relations between states know nothing more reliable than mutual benefit. Any assurances of friendship in alliances should be commensurate with the prospects of preserving egoistic interests of the parties.

Building upon this premise, Russia demonstrates no illusions that any of its counterparts will offer armed contribution to its fight in Ukraine. Moscow clearly understands that it bears the full burden for the special military operation launched in 2022. In this regard, it seeks to optimize the architecture of its alliances for the conditions of a broader confrontation with the West, without being taken away by abstract theories of alliance-building focused primarily on security cooperation.

Nevertheless, the nature of confrontation is not a constant. The record of the 2010s and the early 2020s proves that it can markedly change within a short timeframe. So far, for all its coercion, the U.S. has repeatedly asserted its intention to avoid a direct military clash with Moscow (The U.S. Department of State, 2023). Given the catastrophic risks of a war between Russia and the West, these assurances appear logical and convincing. However, the persisting inability to achieve its goals makes the U.S. increasingly reckless and creates the risk of a gradual slide into an open armed struggle between Russia and the West.

Under this scenario, Russia will confront NATO's formidable conventional forces on the battlefield. Despite valid criticism of the U.S. and especially European armies in recent decades, the West overmatches Russia in military expenditures and sheer number of troops. Russia's main counterweight is its nuclear forces, but their impact in a hypothetical conflict is hard to estimate due to the lack of historical precedents.

Russia's reliance on its "absolute weapon" in its strategic calculations has graphically revealed itself in expert debates on the feasibility of its preventive use (see: Karaganov, 2023; Timofeev, 2023; Trenin, 2023; Lukyanov, 2023; Arbatov, Bogdanov and Stefanovich, 2023). Notwithstanding the importance of nuclear deterrence, reducing strategic deliberations to the question of when and how to strike without examining alternative ways to ensure national security appears disheartening.

Although alliances have served as a crucial instrument to compensate military disparities throughout history (Waltz, 2010), their use in this role remains practically unaccounted in the current debates in the Russian foreign policy community. Exploring the potential contribution of allies in the event of a shooting war with NATO seems desirable at least for reducing the reliance on nuclear retaliation and acquiring greater strategic flexibility.

So far, Russia can count on one ally in the case of war with the West—Belarus. The credibility of this alliance arises not only from formal agreements, but also from a common military doctrine,

operational compatibility of the armed forces, and the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus since 2023 (Putin, 2023). Nevertheless, the Belarusian contribution is unlikely to be sufficient against the challenge presented by formidable NATO forces.

Hence China constitutes the only potential ally that can bring a decisive contribution to conventional deterrence vis-à-vis the West. Firstly, Beijing possesses a rapidly strengthening military force, which puts it in the category of major military powers. Secondly, it faces threats very similar to those confronting Russia. Like Moscow, Beijing experiences growing pressure from the U.S., which elevates the risk of a direct armed conflict. A strategic defeat of Russia, coveted by the West, would leave China alone against an implacable adversary. These circumstances warrant close interdependence of Russia and China's security interests.

Nevertheless, Moscow and especially Beijing have so far vocally rejected the prospect of a formal alliance, even though their military-to-military cooperation keeps growing. Both point to the destabilizing impact of exclusive blocs on international security. Such arguments were valid in a more tranquil environment, but they become increasingly obsolete, as the U.S. directly designates Russia and China as adversaries, openly expands its military presence at their borders, gears up military buildup, and mobilizes its allies. It is difficult to continue the game of chess when the other side is demonstratively preparing for a fist fight.

Another reasoning against the formalization of an alliance proceeds from the concerns over potential entanglement in each other's outstanding disputes. Moscow has little interest in clashes over the South China Sea, while Beijing does not want to engage in squabbles across the post-Soviet space. However, they can address this entrapment problem by specifically restricting their commitments of mutual assistance to the contingency of an armed conflict with the U.S. In the 20th century, the designation of opponents by name went out of fashion, but the prospect of a major war urges states to give up political correctness.

Washington has repeatedly defined Russia and China as close teammates seeking to undermine the United States' international

standing. Nevertheless, speculations over specific conditions and prospects of their cooperation endanger risky gambles on its behalf. An explicit and binding assertion that a U.S. attack on either state will be regarded as an act of aggression against both would narrow the space for miscalculations. Therefore, an alliance treaty between Moscow and Beijing could play an important deterring role against potentially reckless moves by Washington.

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The Russian Federation has actively pursued alliance-building since its inception in 1991. For a long time, through formalizing military commitments, Moscow mostly sought subsidiary political benefits. Amid deepening confrontation with the West, Russia can no longer afford the luxury of fighting for symbolic gains, such as recognition of its global stature. It should revise its network of preferential ties based on economic and strategic pragmatism.

The return of great power rivalries revives the almost forgotten practice of defensive alliances. As Russia adheres to the vision of a multipolar world, it should not abandon the crucial tool for managing security threats in this sort of international system. Relying too much on the fear of a nuclear Armageddon leaves Russian strategy with little flexibility. A military alliance with China along with a network of behind-the-scenes countersanction coalitions would provide more room for maneuver in various scenarios of its confrontation with the West.

The prospects of alliance-building depend on the eagerness of potential allies. In this regard, the vision presented herein runs into China's reluctance to bind itself with formalized commitments. However, China's relations with the U.S. closely resemble the path trodden by Russia and the West, albeit with a time lag. With the intensification of the China-U.S. rivalry, the value of an alliance with Moscow will grow for Beijing. So before blaming Chinese obstruction, the Russian foreign policy circles need to embrace more openly the prospect of a defensive pact with a fellow major power.

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