



STATE OF THE GAME

BUILDING PACAF'S COMPETITIVE MINDSET

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THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY IS MY FRIEND

Russia and China enjoy a civil relationship for now, but what happens once China surpasses its junior partner?

Recent reports of Russian-Chinese [military activities](#) highlight the growth of Sino-Russo relations, raising concerns of a rising bilateral military threat to the United States and a world run by authoritarian powers. While concerning, the dynamics of the relationship indicate there may be reason not to oversell the arrangement.

Reasons for concern. The cooperation of Russia and China appears to be an ad-hoc balancing coalition against the power and influence of the United States.

Militarily, the countries have a well-documented history in recent years of conducting “joint operations,” which typically take the form of demonstrations or low-level exercises intended to communicate their alignment. These include joint flights over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea, combined naval activities in October 2021, and a large-scale military exercise in China involving over 10,000 troops in August 2021. Both countries are also advancing technologies with military application, such as fifth-generation fighter aircraft and [collaboration](#) on commercial aircraft.

Overall, there are areas of meaningful cooperation that indicate nascent but growing Sino-Russo relations. These activities appear to be accelerating in frequency and complexity as both nations attempt

to offset the United States’ increasing awareness of strategic competition.

Reasons for optimism. While increasing Sino-Russo cooperation is inherently concerning, the relationship still falls far short of the U.S. integration with its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific and worldwide.

There are also areas in which Chinese and Russian interests are at serious odds. China’s exploitation of Siberia’s resources draws ire, but the Chinese [competition over resources](#) in the Arctic region is even more concerning to the Russians. Russia has so far remained soft-spoken about Chinese economic advances through Central Asia and the Chinese have remained relatively quiet over Russian arms sales to Vietnam and India. However, it is possible that as the power balance grows increasingly asymmetric in favor of China, Russia’s appetite for being the junior partner in a relationship will shrink.

What could split the Chinese/Russian relationship? Sino-Russo relations are based on common interests, not shared values. Once their interests diverge, as they almost certainly will as Chinese military, economic, and technological power becomes coercive and threatening to Russia, Russia could be swayed from this strategic partnership.



PLAAF CLAIMS CHINESE AIRMEN BETTER TRAINED

At recent conference focused on operational safety and risk reduction, U.S. emphasized cooperation

In December 2021, representatives from U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Pacific Fleet, and Pacific Air Forces [met](#) virtually with China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy and Air Force delegates for the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) Working Group. The purpose of MMCA is to promote operational safety in the air and maritime domains and reduce risk between the two militaries.

PACAF delegates presented five incidents from 2020 and 2021 and also provided responses to the claims presented by the PLAAF. The U.S. incidents highlighted unsafe or unprofessional PRC activities. As usual, the Chinese side tried to make the case that Chinese operators are better trained, more knowledgeable on rules and norms, and more professional than U.S. operators. The Chinese also claimed that if U.S. vessels and aircraft were

not operating so close to Chinese territory, these incidents would not occur. Finally, the PLA made veiled sovereignty claims in areas that are not recognized by international law.

Why it matters: The U.S. will continue to operate globally and throughout the theater wherever international law allows. As the PLA expands its operations, interactions between American and Chinese air and naval forces also will increase. With this increase in interaction comes the growing risk of unsafe or unprofessional interactions that could result in miscalculation, mishaps, and military escalation. USAF Airmen may confront an operating environment where the adversary air force does not share our understanding of safe and professional behavior, putting the burden of safety and escalation control on our shoulders.

A PREVIEW: STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN 2022

As we enter the new year, PACAF needs to be postured to respond to an increasingly unpredictable operational environment. Some [make the case](#) that 2022 could be a quiet year for the U.S.-PRC relationship, primarily due to China's need to focus on a smooth Winter Olympics in February and to ensure stability leading up to the 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in the fall, where Xi Jinping is widely expected to confirm his control of the Party and the PRC for the next five years. While the PRC may show restraint this year, many factors could drive less probable but impactful outcomes.

First, if Russia renews military aggression against Ukraine in the coming months, the effects of that intervention will be unpredictable. China is likely to observe Russia's operations and the international community's response, drawing lessons for the future. If Russia has an unexpectedly hard time during the invasion or the global response is especially united, it may affect Beijing's view of the

risk of using force in resolving issues on its periphery.

Next, COVID-19 will continue to affect China's stability, especially as new variants surface. China's controversial zero-COVID policy, enforced via draconian lockdowns, may not be sustainable, especially with the lower efficacy of [Chinese vaccines](#). A particularly challenging situation could be an outbreak in Beijing during the Olympics.

Lastly, the Party Congress may not go as smoothly as Xi hopes; while there is no evidence of organized resistance to his consolidation of power, politics in the PRC are difficult to understand, and if there are surprises in the next year, he may not be able to solidify his next term of power.

Whatever the next year holds, PACAF Airmen must stand ready to deal with the unexpected with professionalism, initiative, and a competitive mindset.

