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**Proverb inspired
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Alexey D Muraviev

The rapidly evolving international threat environment presents analysts, operators and decision-makers with a multitude of short-term and long-term challenges. This new reality necessitates timely and accurate reflections on the changing international and strategic circumstances affecting Australia's and its allies' international national security and defence settings. Furthermore, it demonstrates an even greater need to adapt long-established narratives to rapidly changing realities if required.

I read with great interest a critical review of my article, 'Strategic reality check: the current state of Russia–China defence cooperation and the prospects of a deepening "near alliance"', by Matthew Sussex. His critique of my publication is evidence of an existing gap in Australian academia as well as, I suspect, policy and defence settings with respect to a comprehensive analysis of Russia's strategic and defence affairs.

The removal of the Soviet strategic threat at the turn of the 1990s, from what was then known as the Asia–Pacific geopolitical system, did not only lead to the end of systematic analysis of the Russian doctrine, strategic approach towards the region, and capabilities assessments in the context of the Australian policy and defence discourse. It led to an eventual eradication of a school of academic thought on Russian strategic affairs in Australia and the larger Asia–Pacific.

Currently, Russia-related research in Australia is driven by a small number of researchers who specialise in Russian art, history and linguistics, political economy and geopolitics. Those few with interests in the latter tend to follow an established pessimistic narrative that emerged back in the 1990s. This narrative effectively describes Russia as a declining power with no chance of regaining

some of its lost strategic ground, a country with an almost paralysed national economy, a fragile domestic political and security environment, and a shaky political regime that, above all else, is paranoid and concerned with its own survival.

Echoes of that dominant narrative are reflected in Sussex's observations of my key points, as well as his own reflections on Russia's current and future positioning in the region, and of the Chinese vector of Russia's strategic policy. Sussex's prognoses should leave the reader with no doubt that:

- Russia's regional engagement is nothing more than 'commercial and military security opportunism'; Russia's influence in the Indo-Pacific 'remains dwarfed by China and the US, and probably by India and Japan as well'
- Moscow is a convenient partner for Beijing because of an all-talk-no-action factor; 'its long on rhetoric but short on ability to affect regional power dynamics'
- there is 'a general consensus that, nuclear weapons aside, Russia is by far the junior partner in the relationship'.

In an attempt to strengthen his points, Sussex refers to views expressed by a well-respected critic of Russian policy in Asia, Bobo Lo. He goes further by referring to remarks made by Sergei Karaganov, a 'hardline commentator' who, in response to his latest publication 'On the Third Cold War' in *Russia in Global Affairs*, 'warned against selling Russia's sovereignty to China'.

In his opening remarks, Sussex refers to a well-known Russian proverb 'trust, but verify'. When it comes to the verification of presented narratives or counter narratives, the accuracy of all views becomes very important. With that in mind, let's look at some of my academic colleague's criticisms, starting with his interpretations of my points on Russia's and China's cooperation in the field of strategic deterrence.

According to Sussex, my statement that this 'aspect of deepening Russian-PRC defence cooperation can be seen as a response driven by US deployments in theatre-level ballistic missile defence elements (THAAD)¹ should be interpreted as a response to 'aggression in the form of US deployments of... THAAD in the Republic of Korea, as well as Japanese and Australian deployment of antiballistic missile systems'.²

1 Alexey D Muraviev, 'Strategic reality check: the current state of Russia-China defence cooperation and the prospects of a deepening 'near alliance'', *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies*, 2021, 3(1), p 39.

2 Matthew Sussex, 'Trust but verify'? The shaky foundations of Sino-Russian cooperation', *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies*, 2021, 3(2), p 294. [emphasis added]

The term ‘aggression’ is more likely to be associated with the country’s threat perceptions.³ The choice of appropriate terminology, including understanding the difference between risk and threat, is essential in defence analysis, as it helps to offer the end users accurate analysis of an adversary’s intent and their subsequent actions or counter-actions.

Currently, there is no evidence to suggest that either Russia or China look at the deployment of the THAAD or the antiballistic missile defence (ABM) elements across the Indo-Pacific as a direct military threat. Instead, Moscow and Beijing tend to view the THAAD/ABM dilemma as an emerging *military risk*.⁴

Another example of the need to exercise accuracy is illustrated by Sussex’s critique of my points about Russia and China sharing a common strategic agenda, among them active defence, including strategic pre-emption as a form of active defence.⁵ Sussex boldly assumes that I interpret Russia and China as ‘fundamentally defensive – or at least neutral in their respective postures’, concluding that by that statement my reflections come ‘uncomfortably close to echoing official Russian and Chinese talking points’.⁶

When it comes to understanding adversarial strategy and intent one of the main purposes of analysis is to reflect accurately on the other side’s thinking and planning. To make an informed judgement of the nature of Russian and Chinese doctrines it is pivotal to differentiate defensive/neutral strategic approaches from active defence and strategic pre-emption. A closer examination of Russian and Chinese operational doctrines demonstrates that the implementation of either active defence or strategic pre-emption presupposes a set of economic, political, and military non-kinetic and kinetic preventive or pre-emptive counter-activities, which would hardly describe them as passive defensive or neutral. By adopting an active defence/strategic pre-emption approach, by default both countries confirm their intent to undertake pre-emptive coercive action as a form of defence. Just like in the case of Karaganov’s remarks, a thorough examination of available open-source data helps to avoid making such errors of judgement. Or, as an old Russian army saying goes, ‘study [military] hardware’ (*uchite matchast’* (учите матчасть)).

With respect to Karaganov’s views noted earlier, instead of going to the source, Sussex limits his analyses to a newspaper interview. However, if one refers to

3 A military threat can be understood as imminent adversarial military capability, which is endangering one’s national security now.

4 A military risk can be understood as a longer term/emerging military challenge, which may affect one’s national security in the medium to longer-term future.

5 Muraviev, ‘Strategic reality check’, p 45.

6 Sussex, ‘Trust but verify’, p 294

Karaganov's original publication, *Russia in Global Affairs*, he describes Russia and China as 'almost allies', contrary to Sussex's interpretation that Karaganov advocated for an informal alliance based on mutual need:

Powerful China draws on more and more military and political resources of the United States. Russia is doing the same for the PRC. For China, it is a strategic pillar in the military-political sphere and a safe source of vital natural resources... China is our most vital external support base. History has brought us closer to each other. And this is a huge gain at the moment. Over the next decade it is not only necessary to deepen cooperation but to bring it to the state of an informal alliance.⁷

However, the established narrative remains strong: Russia cannot play a bigger role than that of a junior partner; its global power has diminished; and its military capability is of no strategic concern to the West. This is particularly evident in Sussex's reflections of my analysis of the current state of Russian military power, which he describes as a 'number of homilies' and glowing writing.⁸ The tone of Sussex's commentary should leave the reader with a clear impression Sussex is sceptical at best of those assessments and that there is no real reason for describing Russia's transformed military power as a modern military force with an advanced strategic nuclear arsenal.

However, in the spirit of what is supposed to be a constructive academic polemic Sussex does not offer any counter narrative to my points, even though a gradual appreciation of Russia as a formidable military power with 'global capabilities'⁹ (to quote General John E Hyten, USAF, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) is becoming a reality for the western defence and intelligence community.

A couple of examples. Back in 2017, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) released the unclassified version of its *Russian Military Power* report. In its preface, Lt Gen Vincent Stewart, Director of the DIA stated, 'Within the next decade, an even more confident and capable Russia could emerge... Our policymakers and commanders must have a complete understanding of Russia's military

7 Sergei Karaganov, 'O Tretiei Kholodnoi Voine' [On the Third Cold War], *Rossiia v Global'noi Politike*, July–August 2021, 4(110), published on 1 July 2021. О третьей холодной войне – Россия в глобальной политике (globalaffairs.ru)

8 Sussex, 'Trust but verify'.

9 'Toward integrated deterrence. A conversation with vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen John E Hyten, USAF' [embedded video] Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, *Atlantic Council*, 17 September 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/toward-integrated-deterrence-a-conversation-with-vice-chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-gen-john-e-hyten-usaf/>

capabilities, especially as US and Russian forces may increasingly encounter each other around the globe.¹⁰

In 2020, the International Institute for Strategic Studies published *Russian Military Modernisation*, which offers a comprehensive overview of the outcomes of Russian military modernisation efforts since 2009–10. In its summary, the authors of the assessment noted, ‘Today, Russia fields capable conventional armed forces, which Moscow has been willing to use operationally, as well as one of the world’s two largest strategic arsenals.’¹¹

Finally, in one of his latest public appearances, Gen Hyten, also spoke ‘glowingly’ on the current state of Russian military power:

Russia has unbelievably powerful military, and it’s also important to realise how they transformed their military in the last twenty years. I think it’s also important to realise that it’s also not an overnight surprise either.... We have to figure out how in the Pacific how to deal with China and Russia at the same time.¹²

But following the established pessimistic narrative that Moscow can only be a junior partner to Beijing does not let Sussex appreciate what the Chinese military do: that deepening security and defence cooperation with Russia helps the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to close the existing capability and operational expertise gaps.

This also leads to another shortfall in Sussex’s attempt to offer critical analysis of my work: he misses a key argument of the article, which focuses on the military-strategic aspects of Russia–China cooperation rather than attempting to address a broader set of issues that affect the current state of Moscow–Beijing bilateral relations.

There is an existing gap in understanding Russia as a re-emerged major military power as well as its relations with another major military power, China. Indeed, it is a complex relationship, which is characterised by both strategic trust – for example evolved confidence in key information, technology, and operational planning sharing and coordination – and the ongoing challenges, ranging from a lack of will to support each other’s particular geopolitical agendas to industrial espionage. In the security and defence spheres, strategic trust cannot be gained overnight. It is a long process of gradual endorsement by all relevant parties.

10 *Russian military power: building a military to support great power aspirations*, Defense Intelligence Agency, 2017. [rmp-2017.pdf \(fas.org\)](#)

11 *Russian military modernisation. An assessment*, Routledge, IISS, September 2020. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/russias-military-modernisation>

12 ‘Toward an integrated deterrence’, fn 9.

In the case of Russia and China that process has lasted over 30 years. Even established allies or close strategic partners do encounter problems; yet, political will and longer-term strategic considerations could ease some constraints in the relationship.

Russia's and China's deepening defence cooperation trajectory continues upwards. For example, since the publication of my article, the two militaries have staged a number of high-level consultations and joint activities. The two most significant were the *Sibu/Interaction 2021* operational-strategic manoeuvres, and the first joint naval deployment to western Pacific, also indirectly pressuring Japan.¹³ Held in August 2021, the *Sibu/Interaction 2021* was the second significant joint exercise to be held in China since 2005. Similar to the *Kavkaz-2020* manoeuvres,¹⁴ for the first time, elements of the Russian military were integrated in the PLA's battle setting; Russian personnel operated China-supplied equipment and armaments. A particular emphasis was given to the creation of multi-level coordination and coalition command organisational structures,¹⁵ specifically designed for joint defensive and offensive operations.

The first joint deployment of a combined naval task group (10 units) was staged in late October 2021, following the *Maritime Interaction 2021* naval exercises.¹⁶ The deployment manifested further deepening of the bilateral naval cooperation, and a possible regularisation of joint operational naval activities, similar to joint strategic bomber patrols.

The extent of Russia–China defence cooperation and its future trajectory (hence my three scenarios) requires even greater recognition now that Australia has committed itself to a new security and defence configuration, the AUKUS Pact. Although, the main objective of the pact is to contain Chinese strategic manoeuvring in the Indo-Pacific, Russia is growing concerned about the intent of the AUKUS members vis-a-vis Moscow, and the possible implications for its security in the Far East and the Arctic.¹⁷ The sceptics of Russia's capacity to be a major military-strategic influencer should be asking themselves why part of China's immediate reaction to the creation of AUKUS was an attempt to bring

13 The possibility of such activity was noted in the article. Muraviev, 'Strategic reality check', p 36.

14 Muraviev, 'Strategic reality check', p 32.

15 Aleksandr Aleksandrov, 'Na Puti k Tesnomu Vazaimodeistviu' [On road to close interaction], *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 13 August 2021, p 6.

16 Make Yeo, 'Chinese-Russian task force sails around Japan', *Defense News*, 23 October 2021. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2021/10/22/chinese-russian-task-force-sails-around-japan/>

17 Alexey D Muraviev, 'After AUKUS, Russia sees a potential threat – and an opportunity to market its own submarines', *The Conversation*, 23 September 2021. <https://theconversation.com/after-aucus-russia-sees-a-potential-threat-and-an-opportunity-to-market-its-own-submarines-168374>

the Russia power factor into the equation?¹⁸ Why would they do that if Russia, by default, is China's junior or inferior partner?

The possibility to engage in a coordinated response to the new pact – which brings together the United Kingdom and the US, two nuclear-armed states, plus Australia – may become that catalyst 'push factor', which I referred to in my third scenario (a formal Russia–China alliance).¹⁹ Perhaps, the first joint naval patrol carried out in western Pacific could be viewed as a form of such coordinated response.

Finally, I would like to note the following: a constructive debate is essential in defence and strategic studies. Scholarly and professional contributions to the ongoing national and international debate on matters of strategic significance, also through expressions of different views and opinions, offer end users a range of options to consider. But these deliberations, including critiques, should be evidence based, evidence driven and evidence supported. Also, these deliberations have to be accurate.

Intelligence and academic products in the field of national security and defence are supposed to be effective and user-friendly guiding tools, assisting their end users with better situational awareness as well as more effective strategy and policy formulation.

A debate that triggers a critique with no real evidence-based counternarrative offers little in terms of being constructive or practical. 'Verify first, then trust' should really be the right order in defence and strategic analysis. So is 'study [military] hardware'. Even proverbs could inspire that.

18 Yang Sheng, 'Nuke sub deal could make Australia 'potential war target'', *Global Times*, 16 September 2021, 04:01pm. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1234460.shtml>

19 Muraviev, 'Strategic reality check', p 44.