

China, Russia Circle Wagons in Asia-Pacific

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*The [official visit](#) by Chinese State Councilor and Defence Minister **General Li Shangfu** to Russia on April 16-19 prima facie underscored the two countries' emergent need to deepen their military trust and close coordination against the backdrop of worsening geopolitical tensions and the imperative to maintain the global strategic balance.*

The visit carries forward the pivotal decisions taken at the intensive one-on-one talks between Russian **President Vladimir Putin** and Chinese **President Xi Jinping** in Moscow through March 20-21. In a break with protocol, Gen. Li's 4-day visit was front-loaded with a "working meeting" with Putin — to quote Kremlin spokesman **Dmitry Peskov**. ([here](#) and [here](#))

Li is no stranger to Moscow, having previously held charge of Equipment Development Department of the Central Military Commission who was sanctioned by the US in 2018 for purchasing Russian weapons, including Su-35 combat aircraft and S-400 surface-to-air missile systems.

Song Zhongping, prominent Chinese military expert and TV commentator, [forecast that Li's trip would signal](#) the high level of bilateral military ties with Russia, and lead to "more mutually beneficial exchanges in many fields, including defence technologies and military exercises."

Last Wednesday, US Commerce Department announced the imposition of export controls on a dozen Chinese companies for "supporting Russia's military and defence industries." The Global Times [hit back defiantly](#) that "as China is an independent major power, so is Russia. It's our right to decide with whom we will carry out normal economic and trade cooperation. We cannot accept the US' finger-pointing or even economic coercion."

Putin said at the [meeting with Li](#) on Easter Sunday that military cooperation plays an

important role in Russia-China relations. Chinese analysts said Li's visit is also a signal jointly sent by China and Russia that their military cooperation will not be impacted by the US pressure.

Putin had [disclosed in October 2019](#) that Russia was helping China to create an early missile warning system that would drastically enhance the defensive capacity of China. Chinese observers noted that Russia was more experienced in developing and operating such a system, which is capable of identifying and sending warnings immediately after intercontinental ballistic missiles are launched.

Such cooperation demonstrates a high level of trust and requires a possible integration of Russian and Chinese systems. The system integration will be mutually beneficial; stations located in the North and West of Russia could provide China with warning data and, in turn, China could provide Russia with data collected at their Eastern and Southern stations. That is to say, the two countries could create their own global missile defence network.

These systems are among the most sophisticated and sensitive areas of defence technology. The US and Russia are the only countries which have been able to develop, build and maintain such systems. Certainly, close coordination and cooperation between Russia and China, two nuclear-armed powers, will profoundly contribute to world peace in the present circumstances by containing and deterring US hegemony.

It cannot be a coincidence that [Moscow ordered a sudden check of the forces of its Pacific Fleet](#) on April 14-18, which overlapped Li's visit. The inspection took place against the background of the aggravation of the situation around Taiwan.

Indeed, in early April, it became known that the American aircraft carrier USS Nimitz approached Taiwan; on April 11, the US began a 17-day military exercise in the Philippines involving over 12000 troops; on April 17, news appeared about the dispatch of 200 American military advisers to Taiwan.

The US Global Thunder 23 strategic exercises at Minot Air Base in North Dakota, (which is the US Air Force Global Strikes Command) began last week where a training was conducted to load cruise missiles with nuclear warhead on bombers. The images showed B-52H Stratofortress strategic bombers being equipped by the flight technical personnel of the base with AGM-86B cruise missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads on the underwing pylons!

Again, exercises of US aviation and fleet forces have been increasingly noticed in the immediate vicinity of Russian borders or in regions where Russia has geopolitical interests. On April 5, B-52 Stratofortress circled over the Korean Peninsula allegedly "in response to nuclear and missile threats from North Korea." At the same time, South Korea, the US and Japan conducted trilateral naval exercises in the waters of the Sea of Japan with the participation of aircraft carrier USS Nimitz.

Russian **Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev** recently drew attention to Japan's growing capability to conduct offensive operations, which, he said, constituted "a gross violation of one of the most important outcomes of the Second World War." Japan plans to purchase around 500 Tomahawk cruise missiles from the US, which can directly threaten most of the territory of the Russian Far East. The Mitsubishi Heavy Industries is working on developing Type 12 land-based anti-ship missiles "in order to protect the remote

islands of Japan.”

Japan is also developing hypersonic weapons designed to conduct combat operations “on remote islands,” which Russians see as options for Japan’s possible seizure of the Southern Kuriles. In 2023, Japan will have a military budget exceeding \$51 billion (on par with Russia’s), which is slated to increase to \$73 billion.

Actually, during the latest surprise inspection, the ships and submarines of Russia’s Pacific Fleet made the transition from their bases to the Japanese, Okhotsk and Bering Seas. **Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu** said, “in practice, it is necessary to work out ways to prevent the deployment of enemy forces to the operationally important area of the Pacific Ocean – the southern part of the Sea of Okhotsk and to repel its landing on the Southern Kuril Islands and Sakhalin Island.”

‘Loudly on the quiet...

Surveying the regional alignments, Yuri Lyamin, Russian military expert and Senior Fellow at the Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, a leading think tank of the military-industrial complex, [told Izvestia newspaper](#):

“Considering that we have not settled the territorial issue, Japan lays claim to our South Kuriles. In this regard, checks are very necessary. It is necessary to increase the readiness of our forces in the Far East...”

“In the context of the current situation, we need to further strengthen defence cooperation with China. In fact, an axis is being formed against Russia, North Korea and China: the USA, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and then it goes to Australia. Great Britain is also actively trying to participate... All this must be taken into account and cooperation should be established with China and North Korea, which are, one might say, our natural allies.”

In [highly significant remarks](#) at a Kremlin meeting with Shoigu on April 17 — while Li was in Moscow — Putin noted that the current priorities of Russia’s armed forces are “primarily focusing on the Ukrainian track... (but) the Pacific theatre of operations remains relevant” and it must be borne in mind that “the forces of the (Pacific) fleet in its individual components can certainly be used in conflicts in any direction.”

The next day, Shoigu told Gen. Li, “In the spirit of unbreakable friendship between the nations, peoples, and the armed forces of China and Russia, I look forward to the closest and most successful cooperation with you...” The [Russian MOD readout said](#):

“Sergei Shoigu stressed that Russia and China could stabilise the global situation and lessen the potential for conflict by coordinating their actions on the global stage. ‘It is important that our countries share the same view on the ongoing transformation of the global geopolitical landscape... The meeting we have today will, in my opinion, help to further solidify the Russia-China strategic partnership in the defence sphere and enable an open discussion of regional and global security issues.’”

Beijing and Moscow visualise that the US, having failed to “erase” Russia, is turning attention to the Asia-Pacific theatre. Suffice to say, Li’s visit shows that the reality of Russia-China defence cooperation is complicated. Russia-China military-technical cooperation has always been rather secretive, and the level of secrecy has increased as

both countries engage in more direct confrontation with the US.

The political meaning of Putin's 2019 statement on jointly developing a ballistic missile early warning system extended far beyond its technical and military significance. It demonstrated to the world that Russia and China were on the brink of a formal military alliance, which could be triggered if US pressure went too far.

In October 2020, Putin suggested the possibility of a military alliance with China. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' reaction was positive, although Beijing refrained from using the word "alliance".

A working and effective military alliance can be formed quickly if the need arises but their respective foreign policy strategies rendered such a move unlikely. However, real and imminent danger of military conflict with the US can trigger a paradigm shift.

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Featured image: "Working meeting" between President Vladimir Putin (R), visiting Chinese State Councilor & Defence Minister Gen. Li Shangfu (L) and Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, Moscow, April 16, 2023 (Source: Indian Punchline)

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