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The Eurasian security system: a preliminary framework for understanding the emerging Sino–Russian relationship

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Abstract: After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Sino–Russian relations have rapidly become a hotly debated topic within the fields of strategic studies and international relations. In this article, we propose a preliminary theoretical model for analysing the Russian–Chinese relation as a *complex security system*. By security system, we mean a system consisting of two or more elements (states) with shared and interdependent security concerns and interests. From the shared understandings of security of the elements, the system emerges with its emergent attributes and properties. After providing its theoretical and conceptual framework based on recent ideas in complex system theories, the article narrates how the Eurasian security system began to develop after the restructuring of global and Eurasian security architectures following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. During the following decades, China and Russia developed mutually homogenous sets of perceived security threats and interests, and later in the post 2014-era, these interests converged to establish the Eurasian security system.

Keywords: Russia, China, Eurasia, complexity, system theory, security system

1 Introduction

Relations between China and Russia have developed at a rapid pace during the last decade. China and Russia have increased cooperation within the domains of economy, politics and hard security to the extent that many analysts see the two states hanging on the verge of a *de jure* military alliance. Indeed, in February 2022 – just weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine – China and Russia published a joint declaration in which they claimed that their relation represented a 'no limit partnership', superior to Cold War style alliances without any 'forbidden areas of cooperation' (Joint Statement 2022). After the Russian invasion, discussions and speculations on the future outlooks of the Sino–Russian relation have further intensified.

In 2021, we published a short blog article in which we questioned if it was necessary to focus on whether a formal alliance between China and Russia was in the works (Puranen and Kukkola 2021). Instead, the puzzle we had in mind concerned the possible *systemic* connections between the conflictual 'spheres of interest' of both states: between e.g. the escalation in Ukraine, and China's frozen conflict over Taiwan. We speculated that these two conflictual regions of the Eurasian continent could be tied to each other through systemic links, through which an escalation in Eastern Europe (e.g. in the Baltic region or Ukraine) could produce surprising effects in East-Asia (e.g. in Taiwan or South-China Sea) – and vice versa.

Russia and China face surprisingly similar security environments, with a mutually shared existential threat perceived in the US. Both have to deal with comparatively analogous domestic threats in their contested regions (e.g. in Chechnya and Xinjiang), and with opposition movements challenging the legitimacy of their ruling regimes, while the US is seen as a hostile actor machinating *colour revolutions* in both. Both states are also attempting to restore their 'lost empires', with the US and its treaty allies, again, standing in the way of such restoration, and even pulling the lost imperial territories into its own sphere of interest.

With the US as their primary challenge, Russia and China are incentivised towards harmonisation of their security strategies. During peaceful times this harmonisation leads to deepening security interdependence between the states, while potential regional competition (e.g. in the Arctic or in Central Asia) is pushed aside. During an escalation in either end of the Eurasian continent that ties

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down the forces of the US on the other hand, opportunities and freedom of manoeuvre are opened at the other end – and vice versa. Besides exploiting such opening strategic gaps, China and Russia could also support each other in various creative ways.

In this article we propose a preliminary theoretical model for analysing such systemic links by approaching the Russian–Chinese relation as a *complex security system*. By security system we mean a system consisting of two or more elements (states) with shared and interdependent security concerns and interests. What separates it from alliances or other types of international security groupings is that there does not have to exist any formal treaty or institutional structure in place, nor even any apparent cooperation between the element parts. From the shared understandings of security of the elements, the system emerges with its emergent attributes and properties.

The idea in observing security systems is to search for systemic effects that might not be readily visible, obvious or self-evident. The approach thus shifts the focus of observation from individual states (or other security actors) and their strategies to the complex exchanges and relations between multiple actors. The model draws inspiration from the so-called complexity sciences and from the new generation of systems theories, as well as from recent relational approaches to international relations.

The article has both theoretical and empirical sections and progresses as follows: In Chapter 2 we briefly examine certain theoretical models that have treated similar phenomena and bear some resemblance with our model. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical model of the complex security system. Chapter 4, moving into the empirical section of the article, narrates how the Eurasian security system has developed and matured during the post-Cold-War era, and how the system and its competition with other security systems have since started to impact regional and global security dynamics.

2 Great power relations in Eurasia and beyond

Our research puzzle is, of course, not in any sense novel, as relations, interdependencies and systemic effects between (Eurasian) great powers have for long been analysed and conceptualised through a great range of interesting models and frameworks, through application of various units of observation and different levels of analysis. Our model is not aiming to compete with the established tradition, but to provide a different kind of lens for analysis.

The complex security system draws inspiration from concepts developed in the classical (Eurasian) geopolitical tradition, from cultural and civilisational models of world politics, and from regional security models, such as the regional security complex theory (RSCT) proposed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (Buzan and Wæver 2003). More importantly, the security system builds on systemic models and theories of international relations, and especially their most recent developments.

First is the tradition of geopolitical thought, which has framed the Eurasian continent through actors such as continental, maritime and air powers, and through the contestations between the Eurasian continental 'Heartland' and the surrounding coastal regions around it. The original ideas of this Eurasian geopolitical tradition have been most notably represented by Halford Mackinder (Mackinder 1904) and Nicholas John Spykman (Spykman 1944).

Importantly from the point of view of our original puzzle, the geopolitical tradition frames Eurasian power relations through a systemic outlook, in which regionally limited political actions cause ripple effects throughout the whole continent. Mackinder understood the early 20th century world as a 'closed political system', in which 'every explosion of social forces, instead of being dissipated in a surrounding circuit of unknown space and barbaric chaos, will be sharply re-echoed from the far side of the globe, and weak elements in the political and economic organism of the world will be shattered in consequence' (Mackinder 1904, p. 422). Spykman, a few decades later, saw the Eurasian continent as existing within a global system, in which 'global war, as well as global peace, means that all fronts and all areas are interrelated. No matter how remote they are from each other, success or failure in one will have an immediate and determining effect on the others.' (Spykman 1944, p. 45)

For both Mackinder and Spykman, the central dynamic was in the eternal conflict between the inner Eurasian 'Heartland' ruled by continental powers, and coastal Rimland ('The Crescent' according to Spykman) that encircled the heartland and was supported by sea powers. Spykman's ideas became very influential on the Cold War strategy of containment, echoing in George Kennan's tenet that 'any world balance of power means first and foremost a balance on the Eurasian land mass.' (Gaddis 2005, p. 37)

Our complex security system is inspired by the geopolitical tradition, especially on the way it frames the world as a complete system, in which political acts can

be 're-echoed from the far side of the globe'. Although not using the language of later systemic theories, classical geographers such as Spykman were interested in the interdependencies and systemic effects caused, if not even determined, by geography. For Spykman, 'although the European and Far Eastern regions appear as autonomous areas, they are merely parts of a single field of operation' (Spykman 1944).

The Eurasian geopolitical tradition could explain both the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and the conflict over Taiwan as casualties of the clashes between the continental Heartland powers and the sea powers of the Rimland. The complex security system, however, does not propose such geographical determinism as security systems can surpass geographical boundaries. The security system, in other words, emphasises the role of information and ideas, which brings us to the second literature connected to our model: civilisational models of international politics. Such models, which establish variously defined civilisations as foci of investigation, hold an intellectual pedigree that goes back (at least) to philosophers of history such as Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee. Perhaps the most relevant recent expression within the field of international politics is Samuel Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilisations (Huntington 2002).

Huntington's civilisational model accepts the basic realist assumption in which sovereign states are the most fundamental units of international politics. However, the actions of the states (who they ally with or who balance against etc.) cannot be explained simply through their unchanging national interests emerging from universal rationality. For Huntington, states are members of larger, culturally bound civilisations (such as the 'Western', 'Sinic' and 'Orthodox' civilisations), and their balancing behaviour follows cultural lines. States and smaller political actors, therefore, tend to gravitate towards the 'core states' of their corresponding civilisations (Huntington 2002).

Huntington envisioned world politics as developing towards competition and conflict between these civilisations, represented by their core states. The competition would manifest most visibly in local *fault line conflicts* between states or other actors from different civilisations. At macro scale, the competition would be limited to operating within the domains of politics and economics, as the core states would avoid open warfare between each other. Within Eurasia, the main contest would develop between the Western, Orthodox, Sinic and Islamic civilisations. In 1996, Huntington saw the Eastern Ukraine as existing on a fault line between Western and Orthodox civilisations, which would lead to a fault line conflict of some sort between the two civilisations (Huntington 2002).

Huntington's civilisational theory has received understandable criticism on its essentialising and dispositional nature (Jackson 2006). Subsequently, the focus of civilisational research has shifted towards constructivist approaches interested in the 'dynamics and implications associated with claims to belong to a given civilisation, and the political and social consequences of debates about what that membership means in practice' (Katzenstein 2010).

Our original research puzzle and the concept of the security system are inspired by civilisational models, especially by their approach to understand the grouping of states and their balancing behaviour through ideational factors and preferences. Security systems, however, are not tied to any cultural form or value set (whether discoursive or essential), but are in a constant evolution. Furthermore, cultural models do not explain security cooperation over cultural lines and Huntington, for example, explicitly suggested that 'intercivilizational "partnerships" [...] will not be realised' and a 'cold peace' at maximum will exist between different civilisational blocs (Huntington 2002, p. 207). What we are witnessing, instead, is the emergence and entrenching of security systems crossing cultural borders: Japan, the US, South Korea and Taiwan establish one security system, while China, Russia and perhaps Iran, establish another.

Another model similar to the security system is the RSCT proposed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. By the RSCT, Buzan and Wæver mean a group of states or other actors, which are tied together by regional security dynamics, especially by different conflicts (such as territorial disputes), and in which the relations between the actors function according to a typical neorealist logic. Such complexes emerge, since security threats tend to travel more easily over short distances and since 'security interdependence is normally patterned into regionally based clusters: security complexes.' (Buzan and Wæver 2003, p. 4)

In their book, published in 2003, Buzan and Wæver proposed that for the logic of the regional complexes to be overridden, a 'rise in levels of absolute power sufficient to enable more and more actors to ignore the constraints of distance' would be required (Buzan and Wæver 2003, p. 12). This, we argue, has indeed since happened, since China and Russia have emerged as great powers with global ambitions, and are openly challenging the hegemonic position of the US.

The complex security system proposed in this article is inspired by the RSCT, but differs from it in many respects.

Whereas the security complex is a group of actors tied together by a regional conflict, the security system is a group of actors tied together by shared understandings of threats and interests. The security systems, therefore, have system-level security interests, and are antagonistic towards each other but may have internal tensions, conflict and even limited war – as war is a political phenomenon and tool of conflict resolution.

Finally, and obviously, the security system joins the tradition of the systemic models of international relations, whose intellectual history goes back to at least the 1950s, and to the ideas of the first, 'behavioural' generation of systems theorists such as David Singer, Karl Deutsch and Morton Kaplan. The first generation was legitimately criticised by Kenneth Waltz, whose neorealist model has since its introduction become understood as the golden standard of systems theorising in international relations (Waltz 1979). Waltz's main contribution was to develop the concept of 'structure', which modifies the actions of rationally acting 'units', and his basic ideas on the interplay between the two have been adapted into other theoretical traditions of international relations ranging from neoliberalism to Wendtian constructivism (cf. Wendt 1999). The security system that we are proposing here is also building on this systemic tradition, but more specifically, on the more recent new system theory approach that has gained increasing interest among IR scholars.

3 What is an adaptive, complex security system?

New system theories draw inspiration from various sources including the so-called complexity sciences, and the concept of a complex adaptive system (Holland 1995). When applied to the study of international relations, complexity sciences aim to shift the metaphor of analysis from the Waltzian image of classical physics or rational consumer economics towards ecological systems and evolutionary biology.

At the same time, it represents a shift from positivist science in search of laws, causal relations and predictability, towards 'historical sciences' (as phrased by the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould), such as plate tectonics and evolutionary biology. Thus, according to John Lewis Gaddis, Gouldian study of international relations would not simplify the world into a few variables, but would accept its chaotic, contingent and constantly evolving nature (Gaddis 1996).

Moreover, complexity questions Waltzian conception of the international system as a 'closed system', which operates like a mechanical device, in which each spring and cogwheel has its function and can be detached for closer analysis. Such mechanical systems are static and unable to qualitatively change. (Donnelly 2019). A true systemic approach, however, would adopt a holistic approach and study the system and it parts as a whole (Braumoeller 2012).

Complexity theory approaches systems as open, that is, they exchange material, energy, and information with other systems. This allows them to change and evolve (Bousquet and Curtis 2011, p. 47). In a complex system, the units and their interaction are intertwined to such a degree that they cannot be separated, and produce surprising effects as a result of their contingency and the prevailing context (Hanén 2017). Accordingly, the principle of self-organisation is an important part of complex systems. It explains how autonomous interaction of individual elements produces order without authority. Self-organisation helps to study how systems are created without resorting to reductionism (Scartozzi 2018).

Another important concept is non-linearity, which means that systemic inputs do not match outputs, and that causality within complex systems is not linear. Thus, the system does not evolve in a linear fashion. Small changes in one part or level of the system can cause disproportionate effects in the other, often described as 'the butterfly effect' (Bousquet and Curtis 2011). Openness and non-linearity notwithstanding, complexity is not about researching chaos: chaos theory is more interested in how order produces chaos, whereas complexity sciences are interested in the order emerging from the seeming chaos (Cederman 2010, p. 138).

In complex systems, the systems and their parts exist in a constantly evolving interdependent relationship, in themselves consisting of overlapping systems. The systems, furthermore, are self-organising and adaptative; not only are the parts of the system changing, but a qualitative change of the whole system (a 'phase shift') is possible. Such change can be unpredictable.

Finally, complexity emphasises emergence. Emergence refers to 'a process by which a system of interacting subunits acquires qualitatively new properties that cannot be understood as the simple addition of their individual contributions' (Santa Fe Institute, n.d.). As globalisation has advanced and as integration and interdependence have gained momentum, emergent phenomena have increased in the global system.

Complex adaptive systems direct IR to study how systems have emerged and how they might develop

instead of offering analytical models to be tested through positivist methods. Complex systems are allowed to have a historical nature, and geography, technology, culture and non-linear interaction between elements are inherent parts of complex systems. Systems, therefore, do not have to be universal or eternal, but can and do change with the passage of time.

The complex systems approach fits well with IR's Practice Theory and Relationalism (Jackson and Nexon 2019). By observing the actions and interactions of actors and of the positions these create and reinforce, we are able to empirically study the creation of, for example, shared understanding of security and alignment of interests as an emergent phenomenon (Bueger and Gadinger 2015). From this perspective, positions are the elements of systems, or sites (agents) 'constituted by dynamic social ties' (Jackson and Nexon 2019, p. 588). Thus, we argue that relations are the constant internal exchange (practice) of information, material and energy of the complex system's elements. However, this is guided by, but not the same as, shared rules which are de-reificated, contested and reificated through that same exchange (Evers 2020). Complex security systems are not just rules, norms or institutions.

Thus, security systems are not something given or determined but are created and recreated through practice. Practice produces dispositions that act as grammar for future actions (Pouliot 2008). These dispositions do not preclude change because non-linearity will produce unseen effects that, if sufficiently impactful or repeated, can change the established grammar.

3.1 The complex security system

Based on a synthesis of ideas presented above, we propose that the complex security system is an open and adaptive, complex system. It is based on the notion that the international system is not an anarchy, but a collection of complex, overlapping systems that are formed by the interactions of human and natural elements (Donnelly 2012). These systems change over time and are deeply historical and unique in their composition. They have not always existed and globalisation has accelerated their global development (Orsini et al. 2020, p. 1012). Complex security systems are one of these systems, admittedly one of the most important, as in the age of nuclear weapons security, threats, violence and war can change the destiny of the human race.

Complex security systems are based on interaction between dissimilar elements, mainly politically organised societies, i.e. states. These societies have unique attributes and are systems in themselves. Interaction between the elements and power relations between them may lead to a shared understanding of security and interdependence of interests. The shared understanding of security is the property of the system and includes objects of value and threats to them – including internal and external – and proper responses. Security is not ontologically sectoral (Albert and Buzan 2011). Security is a constantly evolving phenomenon based on individual human reflection that can become shared through the interaction of meta-agents over multiple subsystems.

The interaction between elements produces a shared understanding of security that permeates all information exchanged inside the system. This information shapes the position and relations between the elements. The resulting positions and relations are systemic properties. Thus, an open and complex system is born, and this system begins to affect its elements and their relations as they adapt to their positions and rules of interaction (Donnelly 2019; Pan 2020). The system is not based on any single national or strategic culture, but is a synthesis of multiple views developed through interaction (on strategic culture cf. Katzenstein 1996).

The security interests held by the elements (i.e. mainly states) reflect the positions they hold in the security system, although, as the elements are systems in themselves, the interests are not predetermined and can and will change. Moreover, the relations between the elements are highly interdependent and thus changes in them vibrate throughout the system. A common understanding of security interests is an adhesive element in the system, but this does not mean that the interests are similar or share the same goal.

The elements of security systems have agency in as much as they are collections of human beings. They are meta-agents (Scartozzi 2018) and have autonomy in accordance with their systemic positions and relations (Jackson and Nexon 1999). Owing to the agency of elements and their unlikeness and sub-systemic properties, they make the complex security systems non-linear and emergent. Moreover, as interests and rationality are not universal and eternal but historical and contextual, security systems can become unstable. Regional security systems can change rapidly and in indeterministic ways. There is no equilibrium in an open and complex system, only a state of appearance (and resilience to change) that produces a semblance of the system remaining stable (Orsini et al. 2012, p. 1011).

The position of elements in the systems differs according to how much of different material, energy and information they have or are part of transferring. Those with more

material, energy and information draw those with less towards themselves. This process is not unidirectional as the weaker elements can draw material, energy and information from the more powerful ones. It is more similar to a symbiosis where all participants benefit, although the larger ones will maintain their relative advantage through this process. Positions and relations *inside* the system condition interactions so that the stronger elements do not necessarily exhaust the weaker ones.

Moreover, as the complex security system is only one of overlapping systems, the elements are interconnected in a multi-systemic way. Thus, no one element (i.e. a great power) controls the system or dominates it. Powerful elements are as much intertwined into the system as the weaker ones. There is, therefore, no absolute authority but self-organisation based on non-linear interactions (Bousquet and Curtis 2011, p. 47).

Since the complex security system is an open and complex system, it does not have a purpose or function in the traditional systemic theoretical sense. Its essence is to tie a group of elements together through a shared understanding of security. Resultantly, the relations inside complex security systems are manifold. The change of relationships between some elements changes the relationships between other elements (Chaudoin et al. 2015). Relations form the basis for the shared understanding of security. It is mainly based on geographical proximity modified by technology. Those elements one 'hop' away have the greatest effect on the understanding of security of an element. A mere geographical proximity is not the only variable. Some events might resonate all through the system because relations between elements are not equal or qualitatively similar.

The complex security system is not deterministic and allows competition and even war between its elements. These are emergent phenomena. Moreover, security is not a single entity but includes many different aspects (Buzan and Wæver 2003) and thus it is quite possible that the elements have some diverging interests. War can also be a function of enforcing positions and relations inside the system (Bull 2002, pp. 180–183).

A security complex's function requires the creation of borders against other competing security systems. However, these borders are porous. Geography and technology are the defining characteristics in determining the spatial borders of the complex security system. Since the elements 'enfold' (Pan 2020) the security system into themselves, the borders of elements (states) are representatives of different systems. On the borders of the system, the interaction of elements, shared understanding of security and commonality of interests weaken. This results in tensions in the exchange of material, energy and information.

Since security cannot be achieved until all possible elements (states) in the world share the same understanding, or are devoid of energy, material and information, the complex security system expands until it is met with resistance from other systems. When a system encounters another system or an element not yet belonging to a competing system, it tries to assimilate it through whatever means deemed proper by its shared understanding of security. Assimilation might include, for example, conquest, alliance, common institutions, cultural exchange, exchange of elites or economic transactions. Assimilation penetrates inside other systems in ways similar to a mycelium, and competes with other systems in the areas not belonging to any system.

Security systems' need to expand is not based on the policies of any one element, but is a characteristic of the system. It is mainly conditioned by geography and technology. In this sense, a complex security system is organic or 'biological' in nature (Bertalanffy 1969). The global system provides the context that determines the fitness of a particular complex security system (Scartozzi 2018). Security systems evolve (cf. Gough et al. 2008) because the higher level (regional or international) system incentivises them to, and survive and conquer others because they respond more efficiently to the problems the international system pose to the security systems.

This 'biological' nature of the complex security system and its multiple non-linear and emergent internal interactions explain why and how geographical crises travel from one part of the system to another. The system dispositions its elements, states and other actors, to react, internally or externally, to threats to and opportunities of other elements of the system. This does not only mean alliances or military support. It might mean, for example, expeditionary operations, active measures, counterinsurgency, diplomatic actions or economic blockades, which have apparently nothing to do with the situation faced by the other element.

Regional security systems can change rapidly and in indeterministic ways, as there is no equilibrium in an open and complex system (Orsini et al. 2020, p. 1011). Competition does, of course, affect the stability of the system and may lead to its destabilisation or disintegration. Therefore, the maturity of the system is expressed by its system of governance and lack of internal conflict. Similar to the understanding of security, these properties are not directly traceable to any one element. They are emergent phenomena, and are the result of non-linear relations between the elements. This means that the characteristics

of complex security systems and their development constitute an empirical question.

4 The emergence of the Eurasian security system

With the theoretical model of the security system presented above, we propose to analyse the current state of relations between China and Russia as a Eurasian security system. The Eurasian security system began to develop after the restructuring of the global and Eurasian security architectures following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. During the following decades, China and Russia developed (at their own pace) mutually homogenous sets of security threats and interests, and later, after 2014, these interests converged to establish the Eurasian security system.

The set of shared threats and converging interests that establishes a security system can vary broadly, and the actual identification of this set poses an empirical challenge. With the Eurasian system, the following core set of four threats and interest can be observed: *First*, the US as the primary and potentially existential security threat. *Second*, domestic threats emerging from contested territories (Chechnya, Xinjiang, Tibet) as well as from domestic ideological opposition. *Third*, the 'lost empire' and the project of its restoration: Russia has its Russkiy mir (Russian World) and the concept of near-abroad, while China aims to regain the territories it claims in the South and East China Seas, and most pressingly, in Taiwan. Furthermore, for both Russia and China, parts of the lost empire (Ukraine for Russia, Taiwan for China) represent an ideologically dangerous democratic alternative. *Fourth*, concerns on information and cyber security.

The US, for both China and Russia, represents a meta-threat, which is interlinked with all of the above. Within the domain of domestic threats, the US is seen as a menacing actor, pushing *colour revolutions* and penetrating the information domains of both states. The US is also seen as pulling the lost imperial territories into the security systems centred around it, and ready for the outright use of military force or, at minimum, to provide both material and informational military aid for supporting the autonomies of these territories.

This shared set of threats and interests was not fully in place in 1991, but was slowly brewing at its own pace in both countries during the first two decades of the post-Cold-War era. Below we narrate how these threats and interests have evolved in both states and how they finally converged to establish the Eurasian security system sometime around 2014.

4.1 The Chinese security environment 1991–2014

The end of the Cold War in 1991 caused a tectonic shift in Chinese regional security architecture. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US rapidly replaced the Soviets as China's most urgent security challenge. The disintegration of the Soviet Union coincided with the Gulf War, in which the US demonstrated not only its incredible new military capabilities, but also its increasing willingness for the use of the military option in entrenching its liberal 'new world order' (Cheng 2011; Doshi 2021).

The possibility of a US intervention into the Chinese sphere of interest became more acute as the most important piece of China's 'lost empire', Taiwan, underwent democratisation during the late 1980s. A *de jure* independence of Taiwan emerged as an enduring topic in the newly liberated Taiwanese domestic political discussions. In China, the US was seen as a comprehensive threat with serious military and ideological dimensions: besides its mighty military capabilities, the US was seen as clandestinely promoting its liberal values through 'peaceful evolution', not only within Taiwan but in the Chinese mainland as well (Doshi 2021).

Chinese leaders during the first decades of post-Cold-War era (Jiang Zemin 1989–2002 and Hu Jintao 2002–2012) attempted to manage this threat environment through the 'low-profile' grand strategy, with which China did not challenge the US openly, but focussed on developing its economy and its diplomatic relations with the world at large (Doshi 2021). With the new military strategic guideline adopted in 1993 (高技术条件下的局部战争; Eng., local war under conditions of high technology), Chinese military planners recalibrated the focus of China's military strategy from a massive land war with Russia towards a localised maritime conflict with the US (Jiang 1993; Fravel 2019, pp. 182–216). All in all, the low-profile strategy was opportunely supported by the fact that the strategic focus of the US was drawn into wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which allowed China a 'strategic window of opportunity' for developing its capabilities largely undisturbed.

The Chinese domestic threat environment remained manageable throughout the first two post-Cold-War decades. Major political opposition had been effectively suppressed after the Tiananmen massacre in 1989, and China's rapid economic growth had created a *de facto*

'societal contract', in which the Chinese population has largely accepted the ruling position of the Communist Party of China (CCP) as long as its material living conditions continued to progress (Cunningham et al. 2020). Domestic threats were on the rise during the early 2000's, however: 2008 and 2009 saw massive riots and in both Tibet and Xinjiang, and in 2013 and 2014, terrorist attacks by Uyghur separatists were conducted in Beijing and Kunming (Elliot 2018; Greitens et al. 2020).

The rise of Xi Jinping as the Communist Party general secretary in 2012 coincides with the tightening domestic security environment, and marks the beginning of an era of a more assertive China. For Xi, the Communist Party's position was being seriously threatened by both domestic and foreign factors, and without comprehensive disciplinary actions, China could face a collapse not unlike the one faced by the Soviet Union. Xi, therefore, has placed national security at the foreground of China's political agenda in all aspects (see e.g. Wuthnow 2017). Xi's total securitisation can be seen as China's 9/11 moment, with the establishment of the National Security Committee in 2014 and the signing of National Security (2015), Anti-Terrorism (2015) and National Intelligence laws (2017) as Chinese Patriot acts.

At the same time, Xi has adopted a more assertive foreign policy line, with which China seems to be openly challenging the hegemonic position of the US. Immediately after coming into power, Xi launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to establish a counterbalancing group against the US through geo-economic interdependencies. Geo-economical advance has been supported by an increased use of grey-zone influence activities all around the world (Charon and Jeangène Vilmer 2021). Regionally, regaining the lost empire was also put on China's agenda with an increased focus on Taiwan and on the contested maritime territories in the South and East China seas.

Overall, Xi's grand strategic focus has secured China's main, global-level challenge with the US as its principal object of attention, while competition with regional actors, especially with Russia, has taken a back seat. Instead, for Xi, Russia is increasingly seen as a strategic asset to be tapped into as the competition with the US intensifies.

4.2 The Russian security environment 1991–2014

The end of the Soviet Union created a state of flux in Russian security thinking. The US became, for a short time, a partner instead of an enemy. Internal threats, poverty, corruption and ethnic tensions became more important than great power rivalry. From the First Chechen War (1994–1996) onwards, the further fragmentation of the Russian Federation has been one of the primary national security threats in the minds of Russian political leaders (Haas 2001).

This concentration on internal threats was short lived, however. The US' and NATO's involvement in the Yugoslavian wars of the 1990s created animosity between the West and Russia that has lasted to this day. In Russian security perception, the US, again, became a great power rival, bent on the destruction or at least weakening of Russia. From the Russian point of view, the US fermented *colour revolutions* in post-Soviet countries and penetrated Russia's sphere of interests by establishing a military presence in Central Asia in the early 2000s. The threat posed by the US fluctuated until about 2011–2012, after which, for multiple reasons, the relations between the two great powers undertook a turn for the worse (Jackson 2002; Jonsson, 2019).

When the victorious Second Chechen War and strengthening of the Russian state had, at least temporarily, negated the threat of Russia's disintegration in the mid-2000s, a new internal threat was devised. This was the political opposition against Vladimir Putin's nationalistic and authoritarian vision for the future of Russia. During the 2010s this opposition was demonised and externalised as a 'fifth column', i.e. something alien and supported by malevolent external forces (Nikitina 2014).

After acute internal threats had been pacified, the Kremlin started to worry about its lost empire. Propagandists and ideologists, and eventually even Vladimir Putin himself, started to demand 'the gathering of Russian lands' (Putin 2021). The deepening relationship of Georgia, Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries towards the EU and NATO was seen by Putin and his coterie as a threat to Russia and its neo-imperialist ambitions. Russia perceived both the EU and NATO as the US' tools in the ever-continuing great power struggle (Mankoff 2012; Kanet and Piet 2014). This was one of the reasons which led to wars between Georgia and Russia in 2008, and Ukraine and Russia in 2014 and again in 2022.

After the demonstrations of 2011–2012 against Putin and his United Russia party, the Internet, and more precisely all information not controlled by the Kremlin, became a critical national security threat. The issue of technological and psychological information security threats had been brought up by ex-KGB security officers already in the 1990s, but now, as the power of the FSB had

increased exponentially, their worldview began to affect strategic decision making. The Russian national segment of the Internet and the drive towards digital sovereignty are symptoms of this process (Soldatov and Borogan 2015).

Confronted by internal and external threats and being obviously weaker than its main competitor, Russia strived during the 2000s to develop a satisfactory long-term strategy by which to maintain its status as a great power. The Kremlin chose to create an authoritarian, militaristic and patriotic political system, maintain strategic nuclear parity, recreate strong conventional armed forces and destabilise its apparent adversaries through so-called active measures (Pynnöniemi 2018; Renz 2018). Most interestingly, it sought 'asymmetric answers' – cheap, effective and indirect methods – to negate the power of its main adversary (Kukkola 2020).

4.3 Sino–Russian interactions 1991–2014

Before 2014, Russia–China relations had evolved through pragmatic economic cooperation in some, and moderate competition in other domains. From the point of view of China, Russia was especially seen as an irreplaceable source of military technology as China's post-Cold-War military reforms were greatly supported by Russian deliveries of Kilo submarines, Su-27 fighters and Sovremenny destroyers among other systems (Lewis and Xue 2006, pp. 231–237; Lim 2014, pp. 73–80).

China also saw Russia as an important source of natural resources, especially oil and gas, and conversely, provided Russia with much needed investments. Besides economic cooperation, both states opposed Western interventions in Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan out of general opposition to the US' policies, but overall their political cooperation remained more or less *ad hoc*. Direct military cooperation between Russia and China beyond arms sales was mainly limited to a few demonstrative exercises, and China's economic expansion into Central Asia was seen by many as a potential source of conflict with Russia (Haas 2019).

Russia, meanwhile, tried half-heartedly to manage the post-Soviet space through the Collective Security Treaty, established in 1992. The treaty was updated to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2002 on the initiative of Russia, and now includes Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The CSTO's tasks consists of promoting regional stabilisation, addressing non-traditional threats such as terrorism, separatism and extremism, and providing security guarantees to its members in the event of a conventional war. After the 2008 financial crisis, Russia began to develop economic relations with post-Soviet countries through customs union and eventually by creating the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in 2014 (Deyermond 2018; Donaldson and Nadkarini 2019, pp. 179–180).

The CSTO and EEU projects are related to Russia's so-called pivots to the East, which have occurred at least thrice so far: in 2009, 2012 and 2014. These pivots have been more reactions to events than voluntary choices. As isolationist Eurasian approaches have proved to be politically and economically unviable, Russia has increasingly concentrated on China. China's economic and military rise was still viewed suspiciously by the elite during Putin's first term, but during Medvedev's term (2008–2012), voicing the idea that China poses a military threat became a taboo (Kurth 2018).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), established in 2001, is an integral part of Russia's strategy towards China. Russia began to resist the US' presence in Central Asia by mobilising the support of the SCO from 2005 onwards, and by 2014 had managed to facilitate the removal of US forces from ex-Soviet Central Asian countries. Russia's fears of the US' influence were at least partly legitimate as the US' declared policy was to promote 'freedom through reform' in Central Asia. On the other hand, Russia may have promoted the institutionalisation of the SCO and the enlargement of its membership pool to counter China. Initially, the SCO had a security emphasis on combating terrorism, separatism and extremism but its agenda has grown to include information security and more importantly economics, which is China's priority. Consequently, Russian efforts to use the organisation as a political tool have been constrained and eclipsed by the ever-increasing Chinese influence in Central Asia (Donaldson and Nadkarni 2019).

The Arab Spring highlighted the power of social media and heightened the tensions between the 'interventionist' and 'democratising' West and the 'sovereignty-respecting' Russia and China. In 2009, the SCO adopted an information security agreement that defined the protection of information resources and critically important infrastructure as belonging to the state interest. The threats described in the agreement are connected to the idea of the interstate struggle and information superiority (ШОС 2009). The SCO affirmed its commitments to the 2009 Agreement in the 2017 Astana declaration. Accordingly, Russia and China tried unsuccessfully to push through a model of state-centred Internet governance in International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and UN in the 2010s. Their views were in stark contrast to the multilateral model promoted by the US (Tikk and Kerttunen 2018).

4.4 The security system 2014–2022

The turning point in Russia–China relations arrived in 2014. As Russia was unable to stop the apparently ongoing enlargement of NATO and EU, it eventually resorted to the use of force in Ukraine. Political isolation and economic sanctions following the annexation of Crimea forced Russia to seek more comprehensive cooperation with China. Xi Jinping's China, at the same time, had decided to shift its grand strategic focus from regional competition to the global level challenge of the US, thus welcoming the Russian pivot with open arms (Kirchbergeret al. 2022).

After 2014, the interactions between China and Russia intensified and a shared understanding of security reified (Thomas 2020). The Eurasian security system matured, and the positions of the states began to affect their practices. Smaller Caucasian and Central Asian states were drawn into the security system and their agency was being ordered by their position in the system. Interdependencies and relations between Eurasian states strengthened, and systemic logic began to affect Eurasia's internal and external relationships.

A distinct example of a shared understanding of security is the way in which Russia and China synchronised their views on information security through an agreement that was signed in 2015. The agreement was clearly based on the idea that there was a need to preserve information sovereignty and imprint a decisive, nationally assertive channel of influence to win the struggle for dominance in information space, and it is evident that such an action has as its basis the notion that some actors had attempted to gain dominance over Russian and Chinese interests in the information sphere. Also, the multiple agreements signed between the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), CSTO and SCO in late 2010s reflect a like-minded and negotiated approach to information security. Terrorism, separatism and extremism fuelled by external influence are mentioned as persistent threats in these documents (Kukkola 2020).

In the military domain, military cooperation between China and Russia intensified rapidly since 2014. Russian arms sales to China decreased from the top year of 2005 (to some degree due to Russian hesitancy) but gained a new momentum after the Crimean annexation. In military exercises, the 'Joint sea' exercises (Морское взаимодействие, 海上联合), initiated in 2012, became annual events, which have been organised alternating between the spheres of interest of both countries. For example, the Joint Sea 2016 was organised at the South-China Sea whereas the Joint Sea 2017 took place in the Baltic Sea. Although still demonstrative in essence, the complexity of the exercises has increased. In addition to exercises, China and Russia are arguably developing joint capabilities in early warning systems, demonstrating a high level of strategic trust (Weitz 2021; Carlson 2022). Military exercises increase the exchange of military strategic ideas and doctrinal innovations and thus deepen the shared understanding of security. Moreover, they institutionalise military cooperation and create mechanisms for projecting power against other security systems.

The emerging security system has driven China and Russia to support each other in their corresponding spheres of interest. Whereas China was subtly critical of Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, its support for Russian interference and later a full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been clearly visible. (On China's reaction to Russo-Georgian war of 2008, see Turner 2011.) Besides Ukraine, China has shown support for Alexander Lukashenko's regime in Belarus, and its recent sanctions against Lithuania can be seen as an attempt to undermine the unity of the Euro-Atlantic system (Jakóbowski and Kłysiński 2021; Andrijauskas 2022). On the other end of the continent, since 2019, China and Russia have conducted joint air and sea patrols around the Sea of Japan (Carlson 2022; Sheldon-Duplaix 2022). Thus, the Eurasian security system facilitates the projection of seemingly geographically bound issues from one end of Eurasia to another.

Outside of their direct spheres of interest, China's attitude towards Russia's military interventions in Syria, Libya and Africa has turned from neutrality to indirect support, while Russia has become at least rhetorically supportive towards China's economic expansion in Africa (Ramani 2021). This can be explained as being related to the competition between security systems. The security systems compete not only on the geographical borders but also on the grey areas between systems. They also try to influence the internal relations of other systems.

Traditionally, it has been argued that China and Russia are two regions having contradictory interests (Central Asia and the Arctic), but the emergence of the security system has moderated the effect of these interests in a way that has, to an extent, harmonised them. In Central Asia, regional competition has been brushed to the background with the 'division of labour', in which China concentrates on developing the economy while Russia takes care of security in the region (Šćepanović 2022). Furthermore, the withdrawal of the US-led coalition from the Middle East and Central Asia in the 2020s has created a situation that further drives Russia and China to coordinate their security and economic interests in order

to avoid confrontation. This, at least for the time being, strengthens the internal relationships of the Eurasian security system.

In the Arctic on the other hand, the Eurasian security system has mitigated the potential conflict of Russia and China in developing and exploiting natural resources. In addition to economic cooperation, China and Russia have increased cooperation in Arctic scientific research, including projects with military applications, such as under-ice acoustics (Jüris 2021). As the Eurasian security system develops and as security issues become incommensurable and polarised, the Arctic could become an 'Eurasian issue' with multilateral instruments losing their viability. This will not necessarily lead to conflict, as the Arctic is an area that requires significant amounts of resources to maintain human presence or do combat. It could however have unforeseen effects in other geographical locations where security systems collide.

4.5 Possible systems effects of the Eurasian system

The development of the Eurasian security system has not been linear or in any way determined. Russia's pivots to the East have been made out of necessity and China's and Russia's interests might have collided severely on many occasions. Cooperation up until 2014 was fitful, and there were latent geopolitical tensions between the states concerning, for example, the Arctic and Russia's Far East. Eventually, the Eurasian security system emerged out of multiple interrelated relationships and the consolidation of a particular shared understanding of security. This has increased tensions in both ends of Eurasia and in all domains, as competing security systems confront each other at the borders of Eurasia. Competition intensifies especially with the Eurasian and the Euro-Atlantic system, the Indian system and the Amero-Pacific system.

The visible effects of the complex Eurasian security system can be manifold. Further development of the Eurasian system will lead to the fragmentation of the globalised world as more and more issues are tied to the security system (energy, space, cyber and information). Also, security issues become even more intertwined. The free movement of energy, material and information between security systems decreases and becomes politicised, whereas the movement of information within the systems intensifies. Globalisation and localisation are replaced by regionalisation. For example, ICT industries might fragment into ecosystems tightly tied to their security systems.

As China–Russia relations become more intertwined and the shared understanding of security develops, security institutions and informal arrangements are likely to increase. Since every security system is inherently different, this would not mean the exact duplication of Western institutions such as NATO. Eurasian security interaction will have its own character and effects. Internal conflict resolution might differ significantly from what has been observed, for example, in post-Cold-War Western Europe. So-called anti-terrorism operations, small border conflicts and even *coup d'états* might be quite legitimate ways of resolving internal security issues. Their escalation will, however, be controlled by the power relationships of the security system.

At the same time, the positions of smaller Eurasian states will become more restrictive as the China–Russia relationship develops. They will share the system's security understanding and practice policies that are increasingly *Eurasian*. Moreover, the ability of other security systems to influence these states will be inhibited. This process might produce subsystem spasms such as the failed revolution in Belarus in 2020 and Kazakhstan's riots in January 2022.

The war in Ukraine is likely to intensify the Eurasian security system's competition with other security systems. Pressure to resolve China's disputes with India, Taiwan, Japan etc. grows if Russia succeeds in achieving its objectives through military means, as the appeal for the use of military power increases. We might have seen indications of this in China's reactions to US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. Conversely, if Russia fails and is critically weakened, China might be forced to balance the threat towards the Eurasian security system by diverting Western interests towards Asia and the Pacific.

On the other hand, the war in Ukraine marks an important fork of history, which could transform the Eurasian security system itself. The systemic model presented here draws its inspiration from 'historical sciences', which do not attempt to forecast future events. Since the Eurasian security system is an open and complex system, its development cannot be precisely predicted, and there are no single causes that can be used to develop linear scenarios. However, it is possible to offer some future trajectories from a theoretical viewpoint: reinforcement, unravelling and imperial overstretch of the Eurasian security system.

If security systems, once 'born', tend to expand and grow more rigid internally as time passes, then we might expect a reinforcing of the Eurasian security system. Defence cooperation could develop further, and China and Russia could coordinate their actions more consistently.

Eventually even formal security guarantees could be offered. Empowered, the security system can expand further, while smaller Caucasian and Central Asian states are drawn into the system; were this to happen, the sovereignty of these nations would be greatly diminished, and they would succeed in retaining their agency only as elements of the system.

However, it is also possible that the Eurasian security system unravels, and China and Russia go their own ways. Political, cultural, economic, technological or environmental issues might interact in unexpected ways and erode the shared understandings of security. Since states are systems in themselves, their internal dynamics might destabilise the Eurasian system. The fall of Putin's or Xi's regime would affect the whole system. It is also possible that the consolidation of the Eurasian system peaked on the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and we are entering an era of a slower disintegration of the system.

Finally, it is also possible for a security system to overstretch itself. The concept of 'imperial overstretch', developed by Paul Kennedy, is typically connected to great powers or empires, whose economic base is no longer sufficient to support their military expansion (Kennedy 1987). The Eurasian security system might endure such a fate while confronting another security system, and 'bleed to death' in trying to overcome it. During the confrontation, one or multiple states of the system might exhaust themselves, collapse and pull the rest of the system into the abyss.

5 Conclusions

The article has provided a preliminary probing of the theoretical construct of the complex security system. The model proposes to shift the focus of observation from individual states to the complex exchanges and relations between them; in the case of the Eurasian system, to observe the China–Russia relation as a systemic whole. The model does not seek causation or attempt to predict future developments, but is interested in evolutionary and non-linear processes.

Although differing from structural systemic models inspired by Waltz's original ideas, the security system is not competing with other theoretical explanations, but rather joins the ongoing discussion and provides a different kind of lens for observing and analysing relations between Eurasian great powers.

It is, for example, worth researching why the threat of international terrorism has failed to create a global complex security system and, more interestingly, whether there can ever be such a convergence of threats and interests that only one security system covers the whole Earth, excluding military conquest, total cultural domination or an alien threat from space. Or are we indefinitely locked into a competition between complex security systems, expanding and contracting their territorial reach on the face of the Earth?

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