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*Defense College*

## NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

### STRATEGIC TRENDS

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#### CHINA

##### **A trouble shared is a trouble halved**

Moscow's move to develop closer ties with China as a countermeasure to offset the economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the US and EU for annexing Crimea and backing separatists in Eastern Ukraine, doesn't seem to be paying dividends.

The old rivalry between Moscow and Beijing has yet again re-emerged as a result of China's decision not to invite Russia to be part of a proposed anti-terror alliance in Central Asia, a striking omission given that both countries, for the last 15 years, have been involved in a major treaty group in Central Asia known as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,

The new alliance would focus on sharing intelligence and coordinating monitoring and military efforts among China and Central Asian governments. Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan have expressed interest, and early talks have been proposed with other republics as well.

The initiative follows China's recent \$70 million grant to Afghanistan to help with anti-terror efforts, as well as broader Chinese commercial diplomacy in the region, notably involving Xi Jinping's "One Belt, One Road" infrastructure initiative, designed to link up Europe and China overland through Central Asia.

Possible terrorist activity from local Islamist groups is a source of growing concern for China and what makes its efforts at diplomacy and alliance-building in Central Asia especially notable is that they come at a time when Beijing is starting to throw its weight in the world stage. Earlier this year, China finalized arrangements to establish its first overseas military base, a naval station in Djibouti – where the United States and Japan, among others, are already present.

These developments follow a massive shakeup in the People's Liberation Army, which involves trimming land forces and giving the armed forces a more explicit role to protect Chinese national interests around the world, rather than purely on national defence.

The proposed alliance raises the possibility of two different scenarios. On the one hand it could provide an opportunity for the United States to cooperate with Russia, if it considers Chinese efforts more suspect than the Russian ones in the region, while on the other hand it could bring China and the United States together in a joint effort to sidetrack Russia's policy in Central Asia.

Ultimately, though, Russia, China and the United States, as much as they distrust each other, are in the same boat as far as the threat from Islamic terrorism is concerned and none of the three would benefit from squaring off in Central Asia. As the proverb says: a trouble shared is a trouble halved.

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