



The University of Tehran Press

Journal of Iran and Central Eurasia Studies

Online ISSN: 2645-6060

Home Page: <https://jices.ut.ac.ir>

Relations between China and Russia Following the Outbreak of the Ukraine War in 2022

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ARTICLE INFO

Article type:
Research Article

Article History:
Received 12 February 2025
Revised 02 March 2025
Accepted 03 March 2025
Published Online 03 March 2025

Keywords:
Russia,
Strategic Relations,
Ukraine Conflict,
World Order,
China.

ABSTRACT

The onset of the Ukraine war on February 24, 2022, has had significant implications for various actors, including the People's Republic of China. China and Russia are considered two major global powers, and the effects stemming from their bilateral relations and interactions extend far beyond the borders of the two countries, influencing global developments and equations. The Ukraine crisis has led to a noteworthy shift in global power dynamics and has notably strengthened cooperation between China and Russia. This relationship has evolved into a durable strategic partnership, although it has yet to develop into a complete military alliance. Nevertheless, the Ukraine war has elevated Moscow and Beijing's relationship to that of strategic cooperation. Today, China and Russia are regarded as strategic partners, with their relations and collaborations spanning various fields. The Ukraine conflict has also presented new opportunities for Chinese investment in Russia, particularly in the energy and infrastructure sectors. The main question of the article is what factors have caused China and Russia to grow closer to each other, especially after the Ukraine crisis in 2022? In response to the above question, applying Strategic Relation as the conceptual framework, this hypothesis is presented that factors such as complementary economies, geopolitical complementarity, the idea of multipolarity of world order, the shared perception of Washington's threats, personal relationships and ideological similarities between Russia and China and opposition to U.S. unilateralism have led to a significant strengthening of relations between Beijing and Moscow, despite some existing differences.

Cite this article: Samoudi, A. (2025). Relations between China and Russia Following the Outbreak of the Ukraine War in 2022. *Journal of Iran and Central Eurasia Studies*, 7 (2), 147-162. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22059/jices.2025.390410.1084>



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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22059/jices.2025.390410.1084>

Publisher: University of Tehran Press.

1. Introduction

The People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation uphold a strategic and multifaceted partnership characterized by extensive military, diplomatic, and economic ties. While the modern China-Russia relationship began following the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, their history includes periods of cooperation, rivalry, crises, and a border conflict in the 1960s. Many analysts attribute the current vibrancy of their relationship to 2014, when the U.S., European Union (EU), and other nations responded to Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine with sanctions, prompting Moscow to enhance its connections with China and other countries. The year 2021 commemorated the 20th anniversary of the China-Russia Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, and since then, the relationship between the two nations has seemingly transcended traditional boundaries of cooperation. However, an analysis of key statements and press releases from meetings between Xi and Putin since February 2022 reveals that the development of their 'no limits' partnership has experienced both highs and lows, particularly in the wake of the Ukraine war (Saxena, 2024).

The onset of the Ukraine war on February 24, 2022, has had significant repercussions for various actors, including China. China's carefully crafted narratives regarding peaceful rise, the Belt and Road Initiative, a community with a shared future, and multipolarity, as well as its efforts to gain an advantage over the United States, the European Union, and other actors, have faced substantial challenges. The Ukraine crisis has influenced China's nuanced narratives, particularly those emphasizing non-intervention, respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and peaceful ascent. Notably, the Ukraine crisis occurred immediately after the conclusion of the Beijing Olympics, which Vladimir Putin attended on February 4, 2022. In the joint statement issued during this visit, Xi Jinping and Putin emphasized that there are no limits to their cooperation. On June 16, 2022, Xi had a phone conversation with Putin, during which both sides reaffirmed their support for each other's core interests concerning sovereignty and security, as well as their shared concerns and the deepening of strategic coordination. These developments have led to speculation that China was aware of Russia's impending invasion of Ukraine, although Beijing denies this. Following the Ukraine crisis, economic cooperation between China and Russia, particularly in the energy sector, has become the backbone of their relationship, significantly transforming global energy markets. Russia has emerged as China's main energy supplier, with daily oil exports reaching unprecedented levels. This cooperation offers mutual benefits: China acquires energy resources at discounted prices, while Russia maintains its critical export revenues despite Western sanctions. The shift in bilateral trade has extended beyond energy markets. Chinese firms have systematically replaced Western companies in the Russian market, often purchasing assets at discounted rates and gaining dominant positions in previously competitive sectors. China's diplomatic strategy regarding Ukraine entails maintaining formal neutrality through peace proposals and public statements while implicitly supporting Russia. This approach enables China to present itself as a potential mediator while effectively safeguarding Russian interests. The military dimensions of China-Russia cooperation concerning Ukraine demonstrate that both parties are acting with precision and deliberation. While direct arms sales from China are not publicly acknowledged, exports of dual-use technologies have increased through complex intermediary networks. This paper will not only highlight the factors contributing to the increasing convergence between China and Russia but will also address the limitations that these two countries face despite their growing economic, political, and military cooperation.

2. Literature Review

R. Simbar and S. Hosseini (2017) analyze the factors shaping the convergence and conflict

between Russia and China in the post-Cold War era in their article, "Examining the Factors Influencing the Convergence and Conflict between Russia and China in the Post-Cold War Era." Employing the theoretical framework of convergence and divergence, they investigate the underlying causes driving both cooperation and discord between the two states. Their analysis highlights how shifting geopolitical dynamics and mutual strategic interests foster convergence, while historical mistrust and competing ambitions contribute to divergence. Similarly, Eugene Rumer (2017) identifies Russia's domestic regime and policies as pivotal factors influencing its strained relations with the West and its strategic partnership with China. He argues that the continuation of Russia's current domestic policies underpins the stability of Sino-Russian relations. Furthermore, Rumer posits that U.S. attempts to weaken Russia or disrupt its partnership with China, with the broader aim of undermining China, are likely to fail due to the resilience of the bilateral relationship. In a more recent study, Rumer (2024) in his article titled "Taiwan and the Limits of the Russia-China Friendship" argues that China's measured response to Russia's war against Ukraine—structured to maximize benefits while minimizing the risk from U.S. sanctions—may serve as a prototype for Moscow's assistance to Beijing in the event of a conflict over Taiwan. He suggests that such assistance would likely involve the supply of oil and gas, some military hardware, and non-kinetic military support. Additionally, Rumer posits that Russia would seek to leverage the situation to maximize its own gains while mitigating potential risks.

Safari and M. Radgoudarzi (2021) expand on the role of rising powers in shaping the international system in their article, "Sino-Russian Cooperation: An Analysis from Power Transition Theory." They argue that Russia and China, as two prominent challengers of Western dominance, particularly U.S. hegemony, share common interests in restructuring the global order. However, they note that Russia's more revisionist stance presents greater challenges to the liberal order compared to China's more cautious approach. In this context, China has supported Russia's actions in defying Western dominance, reinforcing their strategic partnership. Despite the growing cooperation between Russia and China, Hillman (2020) identifies structural barriers that constrain the deepening of their relationship. He argues that internal factors within both countries, such as Russia's economic vulnerabilities and weak infrastructure, limit the potential for greater economic integration. Additionally, he highlights Putin's concerns regarding the potential risks of increased economic dependence on China, which further complicate efforts to strengthen bilateral ties.

Hugo von Essen (2024), in his article titled "Future Scenarios of Russia-China Relations: Not Great, Not Terrible?" highlights the significant implications of the growing inequality in Russia-China relations for both Moscow and Beijing. He argues that for Russia, the trajectory of this relationship could determine the long-term survival of its economy, the success of its war against Ukraine and Europe, or the potential collapse of its military, economy, or regime. For China, the evolution of its partnership with Russia represents a critical factor in achieving its long-term ambitions of rivalling, surpassing, and replacing the United States as the global hegemon. Von Essen emphasizes that this objective is closely linked to China's relations with the West and its broader aim of transforming the liberal world order.

3. Conceptual Framework: Strategic Relations

In recent years, particularly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many experts and analysts have characterized the relationship between China and Russia as strategic. A significant number of studies conducted on Moscow and Beijing's relations emphasize the strategic dimension of this partnership, often describing it using terms such as "strategic relationship" and "strategic partnership." However, an important issue remains the ambiguity surrounding the concept of a strategic relationship. The term "strategic

relationship" is relatively new and has been widely used since the 1990s. As noted, there is no clear and universally accepted definition for this term, and politicians and political analysts have employed it to refer to relationships between states as well as between states and supranational political organizations such as the European Union.

Robert Jervis considers the term "strategic relationship" to be quite ambiguous, as it is used in various ways. In contrast, a "strategic partnership" is a more defined or limited concept that encompasses closer and more robust relationships compared to the broader notion of a strategic relationship. Homeira Moshirzadeh also describes the term "relationship" in "strategic relationship" as neutral, capable of carrying either positive, negative, or strategic connotations. Thus, if the intention behind the term "strategic relations" is to convey a cooperative essence, the term "strategic partnership" is more precise (Abdi et al., 2020:11, 12). John Wendt considers that the intensity of strategic relations influences their nature, asserting that the stronger these relations are, the more robust the cooperative element becomes while the competitive element diminishes. Strategic relations can manifest in political, military, or economic domains and may be bilateral or multilateral. Furthermore, Dalbir Ahlawat posits that strategic relations are a broad concept under which countries can engage in cooperation across political, social, cultural, economic, and other domains (Abdi et al., 2020: 13, 14).

In summary, the characteristics of strategic relations are as follows:

1. Existence of Cooperation and Extensive Exchanges: Strategic relations involve cooperation and exchanges across all three domains—economics, politics, and defense/security—or at least within some of these areas.
2. Durability of Cooperation: There is an expectation for the sustainability of these cooperation's in the long term, indicating a commitment from both parties to maintain their relationship.
3. Assessment of Significant Benefits: Both sides perceive substantial and crucial benefits from maintaining these relations, or they assess severe and intolerable losses if the relationship were to deteriorate.

Therefore, we can define a strategic relationship as follows:

A strategic relationship is a spectrum of long-term cooperative levels across any combination of the domains of economics, politics, defense, and security between two political entities in such a way that both parties assign high importance to it, and the perceived benefits are significant and pivotal or the projected losses from the disruption of the relationship are extremely high and intolerable. Consequently, both parties strive to maintain this relationship, setting aside or deprioritizing potential disagreements and competitions (Sajjadpour& Khalili, 2018 : 6).

4. Methodology

The research is qualitative in nature and adopts a deductive approach. It will utilize a combination of descriptive and analytical methods based on the subject matter and research questions. Material collection will be conducted using a documentary method, drawing from books, articles, reports, and websites.

5. Factors Influencing the Convergence of Russia and China

Much has been said and written about China and Russia's 'no limits partnership', which was first announced by Xi and Putin in the Joint Statement of their February 2022 meeting on the sidelines of the Beijing Winter Olympics. As per the statement, the friendship between the two States "has no limits, [and] there are no "forbidden" areas of cooperation" (Saxena, 2024). Some researchers believe that several international components significantly influence

the close relations between Moscow and Beijing. Both countries are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and are recognized as major powers. More importantly, China and Russia share a common strategic objective: to ensure a balance of power among major countries and to prevent the formation of a unipolar international system. Establishing a balance against the pressures exerted by the West, led by the United States, and promoting a multipolar system are among the key external factors driving the development of relations between these two nations. Since the end of the Cold War, Moscow and Beijing have successfully expanded their bilateral relations—from a constructive partnership in 1993 to a Strategic Partnership of Cooperation in 1996, and further to a Comprehensive Deepening Strategic Partnership in 2010. In 2019, the leaders of China and Russia declared their goal to establish a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era," emphasizing a "high degree of political trust" and "comprehensive cooperation." These developments exemplify the increasing cooperation between Moscow and Beijing.

The Ukraine crisis in 2014 not only altered the dynamics of Russia's relations with the West but also deepened cooperation between Moscow and Beijing. Following the implementation of Western sanctions against Russia, Moscow made a significant pivot towards China, culminating in various agreements, including a \$400 billion gas export deal to China. In an effort to mitigate the adverse effects of Western sanctions, Russia has redirected its economic orientation towards Asia. For China, the Ukraine crisis presented a unique opportunity to access Russia's natural resources, particularly natural gas, while also facilitating contracts in infrastructure projects and creating new markets for Chinese cooperation (Zakizadeh, et al, 2020: 144).

Several factors have contributed to the increasing convergence of China and Russia in recent years. First, they have complementary economies. In general, China's economy is in need of raw materials, particularly energy, while Russia, as one of the largest holders of these resources, holds significant importance for China. Conversely, Russia's economy requires industrial and electronic equipment, machinery, technology, and investment—all of which are provided by China as a dynamic and sizable economy. This situation, especially following the Ukraine conflict and the imposition of Western sanctions on Russia, has led to a rapid expansion of economic and trade cooperation between the two nations. Another key factor is geopolitical complementarity. For China, despite its extensive global presence, the Asia-Pacific region is the most critical geopolitical landscape, where it perceives its interests to be under threat from its primary rival, the United States. Among various territorial disputes with neighboring countries, Taiwan stands out as China's most significant national security concern and the focal point of its conflict with the U.S. There is a notable parallel between China's role in the Asia-Pacific and Russia's role in Europe. Although over 70% of Russia's territory lies in Asia, Europe remains its most vital arena, as the greatest threats to the Russian state have historically originated from there. Currently, Ukraine serves as the central point in Russia's confrontation with the West, particularly with the United States, which leads the Western coalition. China and Russia's preoccupation with their respective geopolitical priorities in Asia and Europe makes for a perfect match—they reinforce rather than get in each other's way in their pursuit of their objectives. In both theaters, their primary adversary is the United States (Rumer, 2024: 4)

Third, in the context of growing geopolitical instability, the idea of multipolarity is gaining recognition as a significant global trend. Russia and China have promptly positioned themselves as important actors in this developing world framework and are actively working together to establish a coalition aimed at countering Western dominance. On the surface, their partnership seems intuitive, as two ascending powers collaborate to confront the existing order (Frase, 2024). Officials from China and Russia see themselves as allies in their attempts to confront the

U.S.-dominated global system. In a phone conversation with Putin on December 30, 2022, Xi emphasized that "in a changing and turbulent international environment, it is essential for China and Russia to stay committed to their initial goal of cooperation, maintain a strategic focus, strengthen strategic coordination," and "continue to serve as each other's development opportunity and global partner" (Barrios and Bowen, 2023).

Russian and Chinese political elites share common ideas and views about the world order. Both are critical of the unipolar system based on Western hegemony, particularly that of the United States. Their support for multilateralism rather than unilateralism, and for a multipolar or multi-centric order instead of a unipolar one, is emphasized by the political elites and leaders of both countries (Shapouri, 2025). Both China and Russia have sought to adopt a unified and common policy in response to rules set by the West and implemented in international forums. They criticize U.S. economic policies, arguing that poor management by the U.S. has exacerbated economic crises (Simbar and Hosseini, 2017: 88).

Numerous scholars categorize the China as a "revisionist" entity endeavoring to modify specific elements of the existing international order, potentially with the ultimate objective of displacing it over an extended timeframe. Officials from the PRC frequently articulate China's conceptualization of global governance as predicated on the doctrines of state sovereignty and non-interference in internal matters, juxtaposing this perspective with the current paradigm, which they assert has subjugated these doctrines to the imperatives of human rights and interventionism. Policymakers in Russia contend that the existing global framework overlooks the status and sovereignty of major powers beyond the United States, simultaneously denying these entities what Russian officials consider legitimate spheres of influence. Consequently, Russian leadership strives to counteract what they perceive as excessive U.S. unipolar dominance, while simultaneously seeking to reaffirm to the United States Russia's stature as a great power and its integral role within the international system (Barrios and Bowen, 2023).

Some of the shared approaches and concerns of China and Russia regarding the international order include opposition to NATO's eastward expansion, resistance to color revolutions, Russia's emphasis on the "One China principle" and opposition to any form of Taiwanese independence, advocacy for inclusive and non-exclusive security systems, apprehensions about Cold War-like thinking and zero-sum mentality, China's support for security guarantees requested by Russia from the West, concerns about the militarization of space, and concerns over the deployment of U.S. missile defense systems in various region (Shapouri, 2025).

The shared perception of threat is augmented by a mutual sentiment of grievance directed towards Washington. China and Russia possess aspirations characteristic of great powers, seek acknowledgment of their status, and frequently articulate their dissatisfaction regarding the United States' reluctance to grant such recognition. A principal and persistent grievance articulated by Moscow since the conclusion of the Cold War pertains to the perceived hegemony of the United States, which is viewed as a denial of its great-power aspirations and entitlements. The apprehension regarding U.S. hegemony constitutes a significant concern for China, as its leadership asserts that the United States endeavors to inhibit its developmental trajectory (Rumer, 2024: 5).

According to many Western policymakers and observers, despite their willingness to collaborate on various issues, both Russia and China harbor serious doubts about the intentions of the United States and the West. Russians claim that they have paid substantial costs to bring an end to the Cold War. They feel that, in return for their sacrifices, they expected the West to treat them fairly, but instead, they have only received superficial responses. This perception leads them to compare the Western attitude towards Russia to that

of victorious powers toward France after Napoleon's defeat. The Russians believe that despite their cooperation, the West has consistently pursued a strategy of encirclement and isolation since the mid-1990s. The behavior of the West, particularly the U.S., is viewed by Russians as lacking respect and recognition. Similarly, China's view of the West, specifically the U.S., is predominantly negative. Chinese leaders assert that Washington seeks to limit their country's peaceful development. They see themselves as victims of American containment policies, considering these strategies to be detrimental on international, regional, and domestic levels. As such, China identifies the U.S. as the primary barrier to achieving its national objectives. This shared skepticism and perceived victimization contribute to strengthening the partnership between Russia and China as they navigate the complexities of global geopolitics in a context they view as hostile (Rouhi Dehboneh and Rahbari, 2023: 186-187).

One significant factor influencing Russia-China relations is the personal relationship between Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, and Xi Jinping, the President of China. Their close partnership has developed over the years, with the two leaders meeting at least 43 times since Xi took office in 2013. This frequent interaction has allowed them to cultivate a robust working relationship, which is crucial for the diplomatic and strategic alignment of their nations. In addition to their personal rapport, there are ideological similarities between the political elites of both countries. Both Russian and Chinese leaders perceive liberal democracy as a threat to their political stability and societal order. This shared perspective fosters mutual understanding and cooperation. For instance, shortly after beginning his fifth term in May 2024, Putin chose China as his first international travel destination, underscoring the importance he places on the Russia-China relationship. The convergence of personal relationships and ideological similarities not only strengthens bilateral ties but also helps both leaders present a united front against perceived Western hegemony. This alignment is critical in the context of their broader geopolitical strategies and the pursuit of their national interests (Shapouri, 2025).

6. China's Views on the Ukraine War

Since the onset of the Ukraine crisis in February 2022, China has consistently sought to maintain a balanced and neutral stance regarding the conflict. On one hand, Beijing supports Moscow's narrative that NATO's eastward expansion has heightened Russia's insecurity, ultimately leading to the country's military intervention in Ukraine. However, despite this rhetorical support, China has not provided substantial military aid to Russia and has selectively adhered to Western sanctions against it. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Wang Yi, China's Foreign Minister, spoke with Sergey Lavrov, his Russian counterpart, highlighting the specific historical context of the Ukrainian issue and Russia's legitimate security concerns. He articulated China's view of moving away from a Cold War mentality and called for a balanced, effective, and sustainable security mechanism in Europe through dialogue and negotiation. The security concerns and demands of Russia have been reiterated multiple times in the statements of Chinese officials. For instance, Zhao Lijian, the spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has attributed the conflict in Ukraine to the hegemonic policies of the United States: "The Ukraine issue has revealed what the US would do in pursuit of hegemony and bullying. But the list of US' practices of the same nature goes on. Holding on to the Cold War mentality, the US is obsessed with drawing ideological lines when forming closed and exclusive cliques and stoking opposition and confrontation. The real agenda is to prolong US' hegemony and power politics (Zhao, 2022). In summary, while China demonstrates a degree of support for Russia's viewpoints, it also carefully navigates its position to avoid being directly implicated in the military aspects of the conflict, emphasizing dialogue and negotiation as pathways to stability in the region

China's stance towards Russia's actions in Ukraine was first illustrated by its role in the February 25 resolution of the UN Security Council, which called for an immediate cessation of Russia's military operations in Ukraine and the withdrawal of all forces. In this context, China was the only permanent member of the Security Council to abstain from voting, signaling a nuanced approach. The Chinese representative warned against actions that might close the door on potential diplomatic solutions and emphasized that the crisis in Ukraine did not arise overnight, underscoring that the security of one country should not come at the expense of others. On March 2, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution demanding that Russia "immediately, completely, and unconditionally withdraw all its military forces" from Ukrainian territory. China again abstained from this vote. On March 3, 2022 the UN Human Rights Council condemned Russia for its aggression toward Ukraine and called for immediate withdrawal, with China abstaining from this resolution as well. During a March 16 2022 session at the International Court of Justice regarding Ukraine's claims against Russia concerning genocide allegations, a majority of the judges voted in favor of stopping Russia's military operations. However, Chinese and Russian judges voted against this decision. Additionally, on April 7, 2022 China voted against the General Assembly resolution suspending Russia from the UN Human Rights Council (Noroozi and Sour, 2023: 100).

In February 2023, China unveiled its '12-Point Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis', and even though the position paper highlights the importance of resuming peace talks, assisting civilians and prisoners of war, and keeping international supply chains resilient, its main crux lies in its clauses on defending Russia's position. The Ukraine war has placed China in a complex situation. On one hand, Russia is an important strategic partner for China; on the other hand, Russia's invasion of Ukraine directly challenges the "principles of sovereignty" and "territorial integrity", which hold significant value for China. China's approach mirrors its previous responses to Russia's military actions in Georgia (2008) and Crimea (2014). In these instances, China has acted selectively by complying with some of the sanctions imposed on Russia to avoid potential repercussions from the United States. This strategy reflects China's broader geopolitical calculations. China's policies towards Ukraine can be seen as a function of its strategic competition with the U.S. In this light, Beijing adopts a framing of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," which guides its interaction with both Russia and the West.

7. Impact of the Ukraine War on China-Russia Relations

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Moscow and Beijing consistently sought to improve their bilateral relations and enhance cooperation across economic, political, and military domains. In the late 1990s, the two nations found common ground on the concept of "multipolarity" as proposed by Russian Prime Minister "Yevgeny Primakov". Both countries opposed the imposition of specific political values through "color revolutions", condemned the NATO expansion, criticized the U.S.'s preemptive war strategy, and viewed U.S. military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan as violations of the UN Charter. In recent years, Russia has sought to leverage its cooperation with China to counter the potential formation of a China-Russia bloc, aiming to press the West to recalibrate its policies toward Russia. The "Moscow-Beijing axis" can serve to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions against Russia. The relationship between the two nations, which declined during the Soviet era, was revived in the 1990s and evolved into a strategic partnership under Putin starting in 2000 (Ashrafi and Sheikholeslami, 2023: 11).

By 2012, an informal alliance between Russia and China began to take shape, and after 2014, the leaders of both countries described their bilateral relations as reaching the best level in history. In 2019, they elevated their relations to the highest level of partnership within

China's diplomatic framework. The joint statement issued by President Xi Jinping of China and President Vladimir Putin on February 4, 2022, coincided with the prelude to the Beijing Olympics games. This statement emphasized that there were "no limits" to their friendship and cooperation, underscoring an emerging partnership predicated on shared interests. It highlighted a cooperation strategy across various domains, including military and technological development. On May 16, 2024, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping set a new record by concluding their 43rd meeting, marking the 75-year anniversary of China-Russia diplomatic relations. The meeting witnessed affirmation of the 'comprehensive partnership' and 'strategic cooperation' between the two sides and a reiteration of their mutual contempt for "closed-door military and political alliances" led by the West (Saxena, 2024).

The dynamics of relations between Beijing and Moscow operate on three interrelated levels: bilateral, regional, and international. Together, these relationships reflect a shared effort by both nations to enhance their ties, align their interests, and address common threats. The formation of institutions and collaborations, particularly within frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS, has enabled both nations to voice shared positions on regional and global issues. These frameworks facilitate collaboration on security, economy, and political matters, showcasing a united front in various regional affairs. In the context of great power dynamics—namely, the United States, Russia, and China—Russia perceives the U.S. and the international order dominated by American influence as the primary threats. While there is an acknowledged asymmetry between Russia and China, Beijing is not seen as an immediate or medium-term threat compared to Washington (Ashrafi and Sheikholeslami, 2023: 12). This mutual understanding has driven both nations to pursue a strategic alliance to counteract perceived threats from the U.S. By aligning their interests and adopting a cooperative stance, China and Russia aim to establish a balance of power that diminishes American influence in the region and in global affairs.

Economic Cooperation Between Beijing and Moscow

Until the late 1990s, the political relations between the two countries were still in their early stages, with both sides working to resolve border disputes and reach security agreements. As a result, the economic relationship, including energy exchanges, was at a low level. However, with the rise of Putin and his dual foreign policy approach that focused on both the East and the West, broader cooperation between Beijing and Moscow became possible (Sajjadpourand Khalili, 2018: 14). In the past decade, economic relations between China and Russia have continuously expanded, with Beijing emerging as Moscow's largest trading partner. Following the imposition of Western sanctions against Russia, Western companies completely severed their ties with the country, leading to a significant decline in trade between Russia and the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union in 2022. In contrast, trade between China and Russia reached a record high of \$190 billion in 2022, marking a 30% increase compared to the previous year (Samoudi, 2024, 116). In 2023, Sino-Russian trade turnover reached a new record of \$240 billion, up more than 64 percent since 2021. And it is of course true that China has refused to join both in Western-led sanctions and in international condemnations of Russia. Close consideration of this state of affairs reveals that Sino-Russian relations are in fact unintentionally boosted by U.S. actions (Hedlund, 2024).

China and Russia's trade continued to thrive despite escalating Western sanctions, reaching a record high in 2024. According to data from China's General Administration of Customs, bilateral trade between the nations increased by 1.9% in value, totaling US\$244.8 billion last year. China's exports to Russia climbed to US\$115.5 billion, a 4.1% year-on-year increase, while imports from Russia remained relatively stable at US\$129.3 billion. This growth in

trade was largely fueled by Russia's rising demand for Chinese products, particularly in electronics, transportation vehicles—especially cars—and chemicals, which all saw significant gains during the first 11 months of 2024 (SCMP, 2024).

China became a net oil importer for the first time in 1993, and due to its high economic growth, it has developed an increasing demand for oil and other forms of energy. Conversely, Russia not only stands as the largest energy exporter in the world but also possesses the most abundant natural gas reserves and the second-largest oil reserves globally (Sajjadpour & Khalili, 2018: 10). With the outbreak of the Ukraine war and the decision of many foreign companies to exit Russia, some Chinese companies have also expressed hesitance regarding the continuation of their operations in the country. Sinopec, one of China's state-owned energy companies, has joint investments with Rosneft and holds a 10% stake in Sibur, the largest petrochemical producer in Russia. Additionally, Sinopec operates an oil and gas production facility in the Volga-Ural oil region in collaboration with Rosneft, as well as a petrochemical plant in Eastern Siberia in partnership with Sibur (Noroozi and Sour, 2023: 105).

On February 28, 2022, just four days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Gazprom, the Russian gas company, announced that it had signed a contract for the design and construction of the "Power of Siberia 2" gas pipeline. The goal of this project is to transfer 50 billion cubic meters of Russian gas to China. Previously, on February 4, 2022, "Rosneft" had entered into an agreement with "China National Petroleum Corporation" (CNPC) to supply 100 million tons of oil to China via Kazakhstan over a period of ten years (Samoudi, 2024: 117).

Military Cooperation Between Russia and China

Military relations between China and Russia have significantly strengthened in recent years. China is currently developing its military capabilities and has become the fourth largest arms exporter in the world. Chinese weapons are now considered more advanced, and Russia has shown a keen interest in Chinese drones. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, arms sales became a crucial component of trade between Russia and China. In the 1990s, sales of Russian weapons constituted 25% or more of the total value of trade between the two nations. In recent years, however, this has decreased to about 3% of total trade.

Arms sales to China have been a cornerstone of the Russia-China relationship, helping to sustain Russia's defense industry during the challenging 1990s. Over time, these sales have significantly influenced their partnership, with both the volume and sophistication of military equipment supplied to China increasing. In April 2024, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken remarked in Rome that "China is currently the main contributor to Russia's defense industrial base. We observe China providing machine tools, semiconductors, and other dual-use items that have assisted Russia in rebuilding its defense industry, which sanctions and export controls had severely undermined" (Rumer, 2024:9). Between 2018 and 2022, Russia was the most significant source of military supplies for China, accounting for 83% of China's total arms imports, with a 77% share in 2016 to 2020. Following Russia, France held an 8.1% share, while Ukraine accounted for 5.6%. During the same period, China received 18% of Russia's total arms exports, making it the second-largest recipient of Russian weapons after India. Additionally, arms exports from Russia to China increased by 49% compared to the previous five-year period (Samoudi, 2024: 118).

China is offering extensive and increasingly significant material support to Russia in its war efforts and defense sector. This assistance encompasses sensitive technologies, navigation systems for helicopters, components for drones, parts for fighter jets, radar and optics, jamming equipment, excavators for trench construction, as well as electronics, microchips, machinery, vehicles, and a variety of essential metals and chemicals for the defense industry. Additionally, China supplies various other components and dual-use goods, categorized as

"omni"-use items (von Essen, 2024: 5). Military cooperation between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia is substantial, involving exchanges, joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and collaborative development of weapon systems (see Figure 1). In November 2021, the two nations signed a Road Map for Military Cooperation for 2021-2025 to streamline their collaboration in this area. They engage in combined military exercises to enhance interoperability and strengthen defense sector cooperation, including joint arms development. Russia has aimed to boost its involvement in military drills with the PRC, spanning strategic and tactical levels, as well as naval exercises and air patrols in the Asia-Pacific region. These exercises are seen as a way for Russia to foster interoperability with PRC forces and to assert its presence in the region. Notably, in August 2023, a joint flotilla from China and Russia conducted a maritime patrol near Alaska (Barrios and Bowen, 2023).

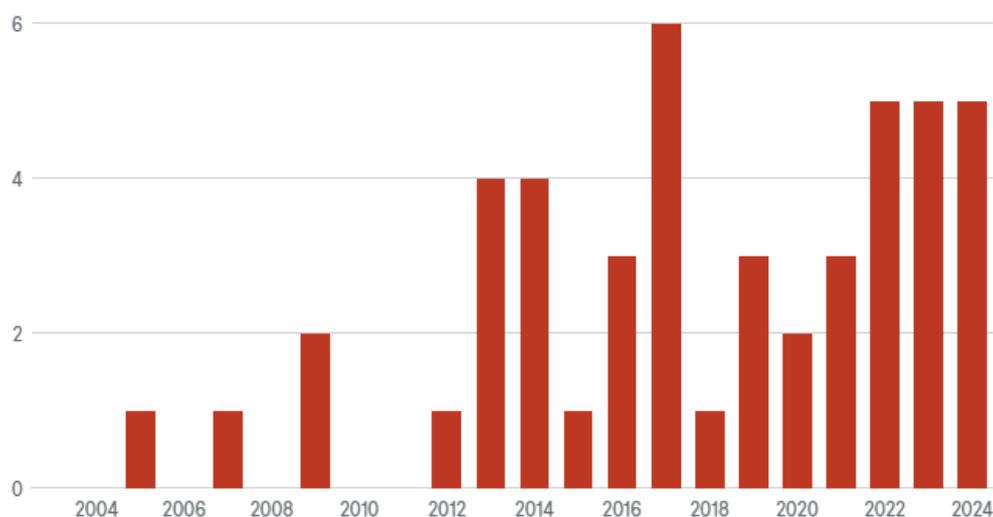


Fig. 1. Number of Bilateral military Exercise
(Source: Fong and Merrow, 2024)

In the short term, China benefits from Russia's sanctions-induced distress through access to cheaper commodities. However, the prolonged continuation of the war disrupts global supply chains, including the crucial supply of grain and fertilizers on which China heavily relies. Ultimately, the relationship between China and Russia, which dates back four centuries, has not always been amicable. During the Cold War, the two nations experienced periods of conflict and competition over territory and ideological matters. Regarding their positions on the war in Ukraine, it is important to note that China and Russia do not share a monolithic view. Trust between Moscow and Beijing has its limitations, as China perceives Russia as the junior partner in their bilateral relationship, whose declining influence can be leveraged to China's advantage. Accordingly, China prefers to abstain or use other diplomatic maneuvers over exercising its veto power in international forums.

8. Obstacles and Limitations in Russia-China Relations

Despite grand declarations of partnership, the dynamics between China and Russia remain somewhat cautious, influenced in part by historical tensions. Putin's characterization of Russia and China as 'brothers forever' tends to overlook significant events in their past, such as the Treaty of Peking (1860), the Soviet invasion of Xinjiang (1934), and the nuclear posturing during the Sino-Soviet split, all of which reflect 'breaks' in their historical relationship (Fraser, 2024). Several obstacles and limitations in Russia-China relations persist. Here are the key challenges affecting their relationship: Historical Distrust. A lingering degree

of historical distrust exists between the two countries. This distrust is rooted in past conflicts and territorial disputes, impacting their interactions. One of the main challenges for Russia is the apprehension regarding China's growing influence and power. Russia is the only country that retains control over territories that were once part of the "Qing Dynasty", which the Chinese refer to as having been acquired through unfair treaties. Consequently, there are ongoing concerns, particularly in Russia, about the possibility of China seeking to reclaim these territories in the future. Specific fears, such as the resurgence of expansionist sentiments among "Mongolian Chinese", amplify Russia's anxieties. Russian analysts often caution about the implications of a strong and assertive China in the region. Russia recognizes the importance of avoiding "one-sided economic dependency" on China. The desire to maintain a "balanced partnership" discourages excessive reliance on China, as it could undermine Russia's agency in the relationship. Russia aims to promote a "friendly balance" with China by fostering relations with other countries, including Turkey, Iran, India, Pakistan, ASEAN nations, the Arab world, both North and South Korea, and even Japan. This strategy reflects Russia's intention to diversify its partnerships and prevent any potential dominance by China in its foreign policy landscape (Shapouri, 2025)

Another significant and somewhat latent challenge in China-Russia relations is the territorial dispute over border regions, particularly in Manchuria. This disagreement has the potential to serve as a "smoldering fire," which could affect the dynamics between the two nations in the future. Despite this unresolved issue, Russia and China conducted joint military exercises in Eastern Siberia in 2012, a move that reflected Russia's decision to break free from its forced isolation by the West following the Ukraine crisis (Dehshiri and Saadabadi, 2019: 332). A critical point of contention between the two countries is how to transition to a new international order. Although Russian and Chinese political elites share similar critical views regarding the existing international system, they adopt different approaches towards articulating these views and achieving a new order. The Chinese fundamentally seek to reform the current international order rather than overthrow it entirely.

They tend to express their criticisms and expectations through various innovative proposals aimed at suggesting improvements to the existing system while keeping its core structure intact. In contrast, the Russian perspective on the international order is more revolutionary. China can be characterized as a "revisionist power" that is intricately integrated into the current international order. While it engages deeply with international institutions, its objective is to instigate changes within the existing institutional framework rather than to overthrow it entirely. In the post-Cold War era, China has generally accepted liberal international regimes and gradually assumed a more active role within organizations such as the United Nations. For instance, in the arena of international security regimes, China has shifted from being a passive participant to an important player in nuclear non-proliferation efforts, reflecting its growing commitment to maintaining certain aspects of the current order (Shariatinia, 2024).

China's strong ties to the existing order, along with the dominant powers that uphold it, have made fundamental changes costly for the nation. This interconnectedness and inherent vulnerability contribute significantly to Beijing's desire to sustain stability within the current international system. Moreover, China's emphasis on free trade and its efforts to reduce tariffs highlight its commitment to economic liberalism, which, in some aspects, can even be deemed more liberal than that of the United States (Noori, 2021). Thus, China stands to benefit from the existing order, and it does not feel the need for a subversive approach; rather, it views such tactics as contrary to its interests. For example, Li Keqiang, the Premier of China, stated in May 2013 that 'mutual dependence is a defining feature of the relationships between governments in the era of globalization. China has benefited from and advocates for

the existing international order and is ready to cooperate with India and other countries to reform this system.' Li Keqiang also mentioned in an interview with the editor of the Financial Times in April 2015 that 'China's goal in establishing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank is not to reinvent the wheel, but to create a complement to the current international financial system. From the very beginning, China has been deeply involved in creating the post-war international order. Therefore, Beijing has benefited from the current international order for both its peace and development, and it is not seeking to dismantle that order' (Wang, 2022: 134). Conversely, Russia perceives the weakening and potential dismantling of the current order as a viable strategy to escape the intense pressures imposed by the West. For instance, at the Valdai Discussion Club meeting in October 2022, Putin explicitly stated that the main conflict in the Ukraine crisis is over the global order. He criticized Western dominance, saying that Russia's goal is to build a new world, and the Ukraine war should be viewed as an event that will determine the principles of the new global order (Putin, 2022) This contrasting outlook illustrates the fundamentally different aspirations between the two countries: while China seeks to reform and adapt the current order to better fit its needs, Russia views the status quo as a challenge that needs to be overcome in order to assert its influence and address its security concerns in a changing geopolitical landscape (Shapouri, 2025).

Another significant aspect of the relationship between China and Russia is their competition in Central Asia. Before the Ukraine crisis of 2022, Russia was not considered a reliable partner for China's energy needs. However, the geopolitical tensions following Russia's confrontation with the West brought about a change in this dynamic. The crisis increased the urgency for Russia to strengthen its ties with China as it faced isolation from Western markets. In this context, China began to significantly ramp up its energy purchases from Russia, solidifying their economic relationship. However, this development also facilitated a deeper economic engagement of China in Central Asian countries, allowing these nations to assert greater political independence from Russian influence. In this evolving landscape, Russia senses a geopolitical rivalry emerging with China.

Conclusion

Russia and China represent two ascendant global powers that, in recent years, have identified a perceived threat emanating from the unilateral and interventionist strategies and policies implemented by the United States. This perception has catalyzed a convergence between the two nations, fostering enhanced political, military, and economic collaboration within both regional and international contexts. Since the onset of the Ukraine crisis in February 2022, China has persistently endeavored to maintain a position characterized by balance and neutrality regarding the conflict. On one hand, Beijing endorses Moscow's assertion that the eastward expansion of NATO has exacerbated Russia's sense of insecurity, ultimately precipitating its military incursion into Ukraine. China posits that the United States has been instrumental in fostering tensions for an extended period while neglecting Russia's apprehensions through its advocacy for NATO expansion. During the initial phases of Russia's military offensive, it was posited that if any figure aside from Putin were to possess the capacity to terminate the conflict in Ukraine, it would be Chinese President Xi Jinping.

China views its relationship with Moscow as extending beyond the Cold War model of military and political alliances. Instead, Beijing is committed to fostering a new framework for international relations grounded in non-alignment, which does not target any third country. Despite recent developments, China remains open to cooperating with Russia, supporting each other on core interests related to sovereignty and security, and maintaining normal trade relations even following Russia's removal from the SWIFT financial system. Although China

and Russia have strengthened their ties and increased military collaboration after the Ukraine crisis, they have not formalized a defense treaty. Despite leaders from both nations describing their relationship as having "no limits," there exists no formal alliance; instead, their partnership is characterized by pragmatic mutual benefit.

The current situation in Russia, particularly due to Western sanctions, has created significant opportunities for China to enhance its presence in Russian markets and, in turn, acquire raw materials, including energy resources, on more favorable terms and at greater discounts. The relations between China and Russia, especially after the Ukraine crisis in February 2022, have been elevated to a strategic level for several reasons, such as their opposition to Western policies, including efforts to expand NATO eastward, the close ties between the leaders of both countries, the complementary nature of their economies, and their disagreement with America's unilateral policies. However, despite the potential for cooperation between the two nations, there are also constraints. While Russian leaders generally maintain a positive view of China, some elites express concerns about the implications of China's rise, particularly regarding the territories in the Far East. Moreover, despite their aligned perspectives on the world order, the two countries differ in their approaches to transitioning to a new international framework. China advocates for reform and evolution, whereas Russia is more inclined toward revolutionary and subversive strategies.

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