

# Beyond the Putin-Xi Relationship: China, Russia, and Great Power Politics

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By Alexander Korolev

On February 4, 2022, the opening day of the Winter Olympics in Beijing and only 20 days before Russia invaded Ukraine, China and Russia declared a “no limits” partnership that “surpasses an alliance.” This new upgrade of the bilateral relationship has been commonly accredited to the role of Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin or, more precisely, their special friendship. Indeed, the two leaders often describe each other as “best friends” and are believed to have a close personal relationship. Therefore, the so-called no limits partnership is actually the one between Putin and Xi.

Emphasizing the role of authoritarian leaders in shaping their countries’ foreign policy is analytically justifiable. In highly centralized authoritarian political systems, such as China and Russia, channels for open policy deliberations are limited, and the impact of experts and the public on foreign policy is less significant. Moreover, in the case of China-Russia relations, significant advancements in terms of strategic alignment happened after Xi assumed control of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012.

However, a more careful analysis reveals that while the Putin-Xi friendship is important, it mostly oils the wheels of a relationship driven by longer-term structural trends. Those trends are unlikely to be reversed any time soon. China-Russia strategic alignment is likely to stay, and Russia’s war in Ukraine is unlikely to cause it to unravel.

## The Putin-Xi Bromance and China-Russia Cooperation

From the moment Xi became CCP general secretary in 2012, China-Russia relations displayed a new upward trend. Being of roughly the same age, Putin and Xi have long been seen as friends with a level of trust higher than what had been the norm between the two countries. According to some observers, “Putin has more trust in Xi than in any Chinese leader before him and any current Western leader” and the “sincerity that Putin feels in Xi has helped the Kremlin to adjust many policies towards China.”

Xi selected Russia as the destination of his first foreign trip after assuming the presidency and became the first foreign leader to visit the Russian military command center in Moscow. He emphasized at the time that “strong China-Russia relations not only answer to our interests but also serve as an important, reliable guarantee of an international strategic balance and peace.” Putin, in turn, stated that China and Russia were “natural partners and natural allies,” using the word “ally” that Moscow had previously eschewed with respect to China.

Putin and Xi have met with each other more than 40 times since 2012, and their words of greeting have evolved from “dear president” to “dear friend” and later to “my old friend.”

During the 2014 phase of the Ukraine crisis, when Russia annexed Crimea and established separatist governments in Ukraine’s Donbas region, Putin-Xi relations did not waver. Not only did the Ukraine crisis of 2014 not shake the base of the China-Russia strategic partnership but, in fact, it pushed it to the next level. When Russia faced isolation and sanctions, Xi consistently demonstrated his personal support for Putin.

The two leaders met six times during 2014 – in Sochi, Shanghai, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Dushanbe, the BRICS in Fortaleza, the G-20 in Brisbane, and APEC in Beijing. At each meeting, Xi did not eschew displaying a good relationship with Putin. What's more, Chinese soldiers marched in Moscow during the Victory Parade on May 9, 2015, when many Western leaders turned down Russia's invitation to join in because of Ukraine. By pointedly sitting beside Putin in Red Square during the parade, Xi made clear to the world that China emphatically does not bow to Western pressure on Russia.

The Putin-Xi bromance appears to be more than symbolic. During Xi's tenure, the portfolio of China-Russia cooperation has progressed both quantitatively and qualitatively. In 2015, the Chinese navy made its first historic visit to the Russian port of Novorossiysk, after which the geographic scope of regular joint military exercises increased. In May 2015, the Russian and Chinese navies conducted their first joint naval exercises in the heart of NATO – the Mediterranean. A year later, the China-Russia "Joint Sea-2016" naval exercise became the first major drill of its kind involving China and a second country in the South China Sea after a Hague-based international tribunal overruled China's claims to the waters.

The increasing operational complexity of these joint exercises has laid the foundation for potential simultaneous joint military actions in multiple theaters of operation. This is believed to enable China and Russia to draw the attention and capabilities of the United States and its allies to a specific region, reducing their ability to react to, for example, Chinese actions in the Pacific or Russia's in western Eurasia. Indeed, as some recent congressional reports specified, the U.S. might struggle to win a war against China or Russia if forced to fight on two or more fronts simultaneously. Moscow and Beijing also started to emphasize that their positions on most international issues are "similar or identical" or lack "any problems that cannot be solved."

In May 2016, China and Russia launched a new annual joint military exercise – "Airspace Security" – which became the first China-Russia computer-simulated missile defense exercise. Three years later, in October 2019, Putin announced that Russia was actively helping China to create a missile attack early warning radar system, which would fundamentally enhance China's defense capability. Russia sharing such early warning capabilities with China was considered unprecedented for China-Russia relations from both the historical and military-technical standpoints, and thus represented a significant leap in terms of bilateral trust. By most indicators, Putin and Xi managed to mitigate, if not eliminate, the existing psychological and political barriers to closer cooperation.

Xi's government also appeared more sensitive and responsive to the sore points of bilateral economic cooperation, namely Russia's fears of becoming little more than an energy appendage to China. While continuing to advance energy cooperation with Russia, Xi demonstrated a willingness to double down on cooperation in engineering, manufacturing, and finance – areas prioritized by Putin.

In this context, agreements on the joint design and production of a wide-body civil aircraft and a large military helicopter were signed. The central banks of Russia and China also agreed to carry out a foreign-exchange swap worth 150 billion renminbi. Remarkably, of the multiple cooperation agreements signed during Xi's symbolic visit to Moscow in 2015, only 24 percent were related to natural resources. The areas of finance, banking, and investment stood out, accounting for 38 percent of all agreements, followed by R&D and high tech (21 percent) and transport and infrastructure (10 percent); the remaining 7 percent were related to media and information security. This composition demonstrates an attempt to transform the energy-dominated pattern of economic cooperation.

To enhance bilateral trust, Xi and Putin even started to reshape the collective consciousness of the Russians and Chinese to revise negative historical memories that kept haunting bilateral relations. As a method, they chose fostering a historical common ground on an issue that is more significant than those causing disagreements. Thus, China and Russia began to construct a new joint historical narrative about their participation in World War II – in the form of the Great Patriotic War (June 22, 1941 to May 9, 1945) for Russia and the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (July 7, 1937 to September 9, 1945) for China.

To achieve that goal, Putin and Xi signed a 2014 declaration that stated that the two countries “will organize joint events to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the victory over German fascism and Japanese militarism ... And will continue to vigorously oppose any attempts to falsify the history.” The emphasis on their joint role in WWII and the resistance against any revisionism that diminishes Russia’s and China’s contributions to a victory of global importance became a part of subsequent bilateral formal statements.

Both Putin and Xi sent special greetings to multiple regular conferences, workshops, exhibitions, and media events commemorating the joint China-Russia historical mission in WWII and emphasizing its importance for the development of contemporary China-Russia relations. In one such greeting, Putin emphasized that “the peoples of our countries... fighting shoulder to shoulder... contributed decisively to victory over the enemy” and that “Russians will never forget the courage and heroism of our Chinese brothers-in-arms who gave their lives for our common victory.”

Xi, in turn, declared that “joint celebrations of victory in memory of the heroic combatants, the finest sons of Russia and China who fell for justice, light, and freedom, is of the absolute highest importance.” He also talked about the need to “strengthen the traditional friendship between the peoples of Russia and China, bound by the blood spilled for victory.”

The effort to comprehensively boost China-Russia relations is undeniably associated with Putin and Xi. That said, writing off the consolidating China-Russia alignment as personally dependent on the two leaders, however powerful, is a form of analytical reductionism. A closer look at the case of China-Russia relations reveals that the main causes of increased bilateral alignment operate at the international-systemic level. Xi’s tenure and Putin’s return for his third presidency coincided with shifts in the global power balance. This does not make Putin and Xi irrelevant but places them in the role of facilitators and materializers of the international structure’s dispositional pressures.

### **Structural Shifts in Great Power Politics**

There are strong international-systemic factors that drive China-Russia alignment and compel China not to turn its back on Moscow. Graham Allison’s well-known research on power transitions (shifts of the global balance of power in which a rising power catches up with or surpasses the dominant great power) suggests that out of 16 studied power transitions, only four were peaceful.

In the contemporary international system, a power transition is happening between China and the United States. According to the World Bank, in 1991, the United States’ total GNP of \$6.2 trillion was more than 16 times that of China (\$383 billion). However, by 2013, just as Xi came to power in China, the country’s GNP reached more than half of that of the U.S. (\$9.6 trillion vs. \$16.8 trillion). By 2019, it had become almost 70 percent (\$14.3 trillion vs. \$21.4 trillion). Thus, the current great power structure resembles the one that existed during the Cold War, when the Soviet Union’s GNP reached its peak of roughly 60 percent of the U.S. total in 1975.

These structural shifts determine the horizons of probable actions for great powers, regardless of who oversees foreign policy. They also intensify great power rivalry. Relevant research demonstrates that an established superpower (the United States, in this case) represents the greatest threat to states that are on the cusp of becoming superpowers (i.e. China). China started to be perceived by the U.S. as more aggressive and nationalistic, which required a balancing response. In turn, U.S. foreign policy projects such as the Obama era “pivot to Asia” and the current “free and open Indo-Pacific” were both viewed in Beijing as security threats and attempts to contain China.

In January 2012 (10 months before Xi assumed office), Washington adopted new strategic guidelines that identified China as a threat in the Asia-Pacific and introduced the new Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC) that required increasing the deployment of U.S. naval capabilities to the Asia-Pacific. In December 2017, the U.S. National Security Strategy explicitly identified China as the primary competitor that drives Washington’s defense decisions and military resource allocation.

The United States’ Third Offset Strategy – a defense innovation initiative to counteract strategic technological advantages by U.S. adversaries – is another of Washington’s measures to deal with the China challenge. It explicitly targeted China and included steps to engage Beijing in direct military-technical competition. Likewise, the AUKUS (Australia-U.K.-U.S.) alliance is aimed at tackling a growing threat from an “arc of autocracy” led by China. AUKUS plans to push back against China’s assertiveness by enabling regular visits of U.S. and U.K. nuclear-powered submarines to Australia’s east coast, and eventually equipping Australia with its own nuclear submarines.

Meanwhile, Chinese strategists increasingly view the United States the same way the U.S. views China – as a major national security threat and the primary focus of defense policy. Chinese military experts recommended that Beijing build strategic balancing capabilities in nuclear, space, and air deterrence, “even if this leads to an intense arms race.” Some high-ranking Chinese officials said that the U.S. is China’s greatest national security threat – a perception that is widely shared in China’s defense and security establishment. The COVID-19 global pandemic was also reported to have further undermined already shaky China-U.S. relations.

In this context, Xi has every reason to preserve its strategic alignment with Russia, which, given Russia’s anti-U.S. foreign policy orientation, military and geopolitical characteristics, permanent seat in the U.N. Security Council, and authoritarian political regime, presents the most effective way to counterbalance against U.S. power.

The United States explicitly identifying *both* China and Russia as major strategic threats further contributes to the consolidation of China-Russia alignment. China is given a primary place in the U.S. defense strategy, whereas Russia is dubbed as a “revitalized malign actor” that must be contained through sanctions. Confrontation with both China and Russia results in a convergence of the two countries’ views of the U.S. as their greatest security threat. It also suggests a lack of questioning within Washington’s strategic establishment if adopting a hostile attitude toward both China and Russia makes strategic sense. In the context of the evolving global power balance, the simultaneous deterioration of China-U.S. and Russia-U.S. relations generates an external compulsion that removes any remaining political barriers to closer China-Russia alignment.

### **The Ambivalent Impact of the Ukraine War**

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is stress-testing the China-Russia partnership. Beijing has not explicitly distanced itself from Russia, nor has it condemned Moscow or

pressed it to stop the war (as various world leaders have requested). Instead, Xi continued to cooperate with Putin and strengthened ties with increased trade and energy transactions. At the same time, the continuing bilateral military exercises and joint air patrols over the Western Pacific, especially a recent incident of Chinese and Russian warplanes together entering the South Korean air defense zone from the Sea of Japan, suggest that China is not distancing itself from Russia when it comes to strategic cooperation.

The war in Ukraine has not significantly altered the megatrends of great power politics. Beijing's recognition that it is on a long-term collision course with the United States has only strengthened. On top of de facto economic sanctions against China, enforced through such measures as restricting the export of semiconductor technologies to China and pressuring partners to ban the Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE from getting involved in building their 5G network infrastructure, the U.S. continues to back Taiwan with arms sales and high-profile visits by top U.S. officials. These measures make China reluctant to distance itself from Russia.

Ten days after Russia invaded Ukraine, former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo traveled to Taipei and urged Washington to "take necessary and long-overdue steps to do the right and obvious thing" – to recognize "free and independent" Taiwan. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan on August 2, 2022 (five months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine), despite Beijing's vehement criticism and the staging of live-fire exercises off Taiwan's coast, further chilled China-U.S. relations. For Beijing, very few things are more irritating than foreign actors brandishing Taiwan's de facto independence.

Another factor that lends stability to the Putin-Xi friendship and contributes to China's unwillingness to openly criticize Putin's invasion of Ukraine is Western hypocrisy in not making much noise about India's friendship with Russia. Like China, India never condemned Russia and, through its purchases of Russian crude oil, is also supporting Moscow. In March 2022 (one month after Russia's invasion) the president of the Federation of India Export Organizations, A. Sakthivel, publicly announced that India was preparing a rupee-ruble trade arrangement with Russia that will allow India-Russia trade to continue despite Western sanctions against Russia.

There have only been mild attempts to criticize New Delhi, and they have been delivered with nowhere near as much pressure and hostile rhetoric as those targeting China. Moreover, the Quad – the security grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States – has accepted India's position on Ukraine by highlighting that "each country has a bilateral relationship," which is why "no one has ever accused India of supporting what is going on in Ukraine."

From Beijing's perspective, this behavior confirms that the U.S. criticism of China is not about its position on the war in Ukraine. It is about using the war to contain China. Even though Washington has not admitted it, experts believe that the United States' relationship with India – including through the security network of the Quad – is "clearly a response to the rise of China." In such an environment, Beijing has been reluctant to condemn Russia over Ukraine or risk undermining its strategic alignment with Moscow otherwise.

This reluctance has only grown since October 27, 2022. On that day, the Biden administration unveiled a new defense strategy that effectively put the U.S. military into Cold War mode with both China and Russia. The new strategy outlines the U.S. plan to confront the two nuclear peers (China and Russia) with a historic multi-year build-up of modernized weaponry, enhanced foreign alliances, and comprehensive overhauls of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

As a result of these developments, the power balance within the international system that is conducive to China-Russia alignment is buttressed by China and Russia's shared perception that the U.S. jeopardizes their geopolitical interests as well as civilizational identities and domestic political regimes.

In this context, the war in Ukraine and its consequences may result in further consolidation of China-Russia alignment despite predictions of the opposite. A popular argument suggests that because Russia is much weaker than China, any alliance between the two will be disproportional and will look like a "union of unequals," which is not in Russia's interests. In the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, this power imbalance is believed to be on the rise because Russia has shown itself to be weak on the battlefield. Therefore, the theory goes, not only will Russia grow dissatisfied with China-Russia alignment, but such an alignment becomes less useful for China.

However, the actual implications of the Ukraine war for China-Russia relations might be exactly the opposite. Military failures of great powers in their wars with smaller states do not undermine great powers' attractiveness as strategic allies. The United States' unsuccessful war in Vietnam and military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan did not significantly reduce its value as an ally. Similarly, the Soviet Union's failures in Afghanistan and Russia's poor military performance in Chechnya in the late 1990s and early 2000s did not have a dramatic impact on Russia's alignment arrangements. In all those cases, a great power (the U.S. and USSR/Russia) performed poorly and failed to secure a quick victory despite fighting with a much weaker rival. Nevertheless, those failures did not significantly affect their alignment relationships with other countries.

Moreover, a weaker Russia may be bad news for Moscow but not necessarily for China-Russia alignment. Historical evidence suggests that relative weakness does not have immediate implications for alliance formation. In fact, most military alliances are asymmetrical. All U.S. allies are disproportionately weaker than Washington. Nevertheless, they are very useful for U.S. global influence, and these weaker allies appear unwilling to withdraw from the alliance.

On the other hand, Russia has already started considering China as not only a target market for its weapons and energy resources but also a source of critical equipment and technologies. This trend has only been consolidated in the context of the war in Ukraine. Barred from access to Western technologies, Moscow has rushed to extend its cooperation with Asia, willing to sell its energy at discounted prices. Further primitivization of Russia's economy because of the sanctions will make Russia more dependent on and, hence, more willing to align with China. China might naturally take advantage of that situation, simultaneously using more complex and less traceable schemes in bilateral transactions with Russia so as not to be caught violating the Western sanctions.

### **Looking Ahead**

China-Russia alignment has progressed significantly since Xi took office in 2012. His personal relationship with Putin has facilitated many transactions between the two countries that have over the years deepened and broadened the alignment. While it is not a formal military alliance and may not become such, and research on alliances informs us that sometimes alignments may change or even unravel due to various factors, the odds appear to be in favor of continuation or further consolidation of China-Russia strategic alignment.

Both Putin and Xi are expected to remain in power for the foreseeable future – this means that at least at the leadership level there are no new obstacles to closer cooperation between Russia and China. Most importantly, the international systemic trends that are conducive to

China-Russia alignment have become more pronounced and have not been shaken by the Ukraine war. A weaker Russia does not mean a Russia that is reluctant to align with China or a Russia that is less valuable to China.

Beijing and Moscow's shared great power hostility toward U.S. hegemony in global politics suppresses the most likely centrifugal forces that could fling the two countries apart. The simultaneous deterioration of China-U.S. and Russia-U.S. relations after Russia's invasion of Ukraine prevents the Ukraine war from becoming a factor that might undermine China-Russia alignment. While a formal alliance may not be in the works, the alignment is likely to stay.

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