

Sino-Russian Relations, From Where – To Where

Mats Engman, Zack Nhan,
and Tove Jalmerud

Asia Paper
January 2024



Institute for Security &
Development Policy

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V. Finnbodavägen 2, Stockholm-Nacka, Sweden
www.isdp.eu

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Printed in Lithuania

ISBN: 978-91-88551-48-1

Distributed in Europe by:

Institute for Security and Development Policy

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Executive Summary

Since 1949, relations between Soviet Union/Russia and China have been oscillating between formal military alliance and military border clashes. In the early phases the cooperation was beneficial for both nations. China, emerging from decades of war with a devastated economy and international isolation, needed both economic and military support and the Soviet Union as the leader of the socialist block in the world, saw an alliance with China as both natural and strategically convenient.

However, with the death of Stalin relations became strained. Khrushchev's "de-Stalinization process" and his policy of "peaceful coexistence" with the West and a promise to President Eisenhower to stop a project to help China develop nuclear weapons, infuriated Mao. Sino-Soviet economic cooperation and trade almost came to a halt amid the ideological competition between the two countries.

The period of heightened animosity was replaced by an era of détente in the 1970s and when Mikhail Gorbachev (a reformist) became the new leader, he found a like-minded political partner in the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (also a reformist).

In the post-Cold War period, the United States inherited the mantle as the main political and military long-term threat to China as well as Russia. Ever since, the relationship has been more about cooperation, common interests, and respect than conflict and disagreement. With Putin and Xi, this cordial and respectful relation has reached a strategic level ("the no-limit friendship").

On the military front, the relationship has evolved from selling and buying of weapons to a comprehensive cooperation involving training,

exercises and expanded into military cooperation in technological research and development in emerging technologies.

From the historic timeline we have identified some important drivers. The relationship seems to strongly correlate with external factors and events and the personalities and political ambitions of the respective leaders do matter. The overall relationship has been strengthened during the last 30 years, but several asymmetries exist that are likely to increase. The war in Ukraine will have a profound impact for instance. Further, Russia and China are currently united by a kind of shared ideology centered on opposition to the Western-dominated world order and both Presidents acknowledge and foster the importance of culture and history as decisive political factors.

Looking ahead, we believe that for the next five to ten years we will see a continuation of the current trajectory, which points in the direction of a comprehensive relationship centered on at least three shared perceptions of global geopolitical developments.

First, a joint perception of a heightened “threat” from the U.S. and Western democratic nations being more about liberal values than military power. Second, a shared perception that the democratic world is inevitably in decline and the “East is rising” and third, a perception that the policies pursued overall have been successful. All of this is underpinned by a strong alignment and perception related to the importance of culture and history.

The growing asymmetry in the relation where China is the stronger “big brother” and Russia the weaker part may cause disharmony, but is unlikely to derail the relationship, which can be summarized as “not always in agreement, but never against”.

1. Introduction

The Cold War ended with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the breakup of the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the main geopolitical competition was between the United States and the Soviet Union, with China often supporting the Soviet Union. The Cold War was both an existential struggle and a global competition between two different political systems. Many in the West held hopes for a future, after the Cold War, where this global geopolitical competition belonged to the past, and many nations drastically downsized their military capabilities. The United Nations managed to agree on several resolutions addressing challenges to world peace and stability. But, during the last 5-10 years we have witnessed an increasing geopolitical competition between the United States and liberal democracies on the one hand and China and Russia on the other hand. The ongoing war in Ukraine is a terrifying example of this competition. Is this the beginning of a period of a new global "Cold War", this time being fought more over values, ideologies, and influence and less about direct existential threats? The future trajectory of the relationship and cooperation between Russia and China will have a significant impact on global developments. Can history help us to understand the dynamics in the relationship between Russia and China and give us some indications for the future?

This paper aims to describe, in general terms, the development of relations between the Soviet Union/Russia and China, from 1949 to 2017 and in some more detail the recent development from 2017 until today (October 2023). Furthermore, it tries to explain changes to the relationship and outlines a potential future direction in the relationship. One of our main conclusions is that even though there are significant asymmetries in the Russia-China relationship, they are likely to continue fostering the relationship with the overall objective of trying to adjust

the current global governance system, to be more aligned with Russian and Chinese strategic objectives. This common policy will continue to create severe challenges in relation to the United States, the European Union, and other democracies.

2. A Timeline of Sino-Soviet and Sino-Russia Relations (1949–2023)

2.1 Sino-Soviet Relations (1949–1991): A Relationship of Two Extremes

1950–1959: Formal Military Alliance

In the early 1950s, the relationship between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was characterized by close cooperation through the establishment of a formal alliance, known as the 30-year Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance on February 14, 1950. The Sino-Soviet alliance was dubbed by Mao Zedong as “leaning to one side” and was primarily motivated by complementary strategic considerations from both sides.¹ The treaty cemented the USSR as the leader of the worldwide communist movement and laid the groundwork for Sino-Soviet cooperation in the policy domains of economics, security, and foreign policy. One of the main goals of the alliance was to ensure robust mutual military assistance between China and the Soviet Union in the event of a potential military strike by a resurging militaristic Japan and its allies—specifically the United States.²

1 Marxists Internet Archive, “Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship – In Commemoration of the Twenty-eighth Anniversary of the Communist Party of China, June, 30, 1949,” Marxists Internet Archive, 2004, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4_65.htm.

2 Andrew Radin, Andrew Scobell, Elina Treyger, J.D. Williams, Logan Ma, Howard J. Shatz, Sean M. Ziegler, Eugeniu Han and Clint Reach, *China-Russia Cooperation: Determining Factors, Future Trajectories, Implications for the United States* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3067.html; Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, “The Cold War In Asia,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 6-7 (1995/1996): 7, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/CWIHP_Bulletin_6-7.pdf.

As the PRC was emerging from decades of war with a devastated economy and international isolation, the agreement with the Soviet Union also included credits and construction equipment. Regarding the United States as the main adversary to the recently established PRC, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—in dire need of military and economic support—saw the USSR as a potential powerful patron.³ On the other hand, as the leader of the socialist block in the world, the USSR saw its alliance with China as natural and as strategically convenient. The Soviet leadership was afraid that Japan would reemerge as a military threat to Soviet interests in the Far East, and the Sino-Soviet alliance would help deter a potential military attack by Japan. The alliance with China also guaranteed continued access to the China Far East Railway and the port of Dalian.⁴

During this period of close Sino-Soviet relations, the Soviet Union started investing heavily in China, which led to significant growth in bilateral trade and many Chinese students started to travel to universities in Soviet Union for higher studies and technical training.⁵ The PRC imported military equipment and heavy machinery from its ‘bigger brother’, while the USSR imported raw materials and agricultural products from its neighbor to the south. On the military front, Moscow sent Soviet military advisers to China, while Chinese military personnel underwent advanced training in the Soviet Union.⁶ With Soviet technical assistance, China would go on to start developing its nuclear capability.⁷

3 Hong Zhou, Jun Zhang, and Min Zhang, “Soviet Aid to China”, in *Foreign Aid in China*, 57-106 (Germany: Springer Berlin, Heidelberg, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-44273-9>.

4 Radin, Scobell, Treyger, Williams, Ma, Shatz, Ziegler, Han and Reach, *China-Russia Cooperation: Determining Factors, Future Trajectories, Implications for the United States*.

5 Rosemary Quesed, *Sino-Russian Relations: A Short History* (London: Routledge, 2005), 17.

6 Tao Chen and Jan Zofka, “The Economy of the Sino-Soviet Alliance.: Die Ökonomie der sino-sowjetischen Allianz,” *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte / Economic History Yearbook* 63, no. 2 (2022): 575-610, <https://doi.org/10.1515/jbwg-2022-0020>.

7 Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia, “Between Aid and Restriction: Changing Soviet Policies toward China’s Nuclear Weapons Program: 1954–1960,” *Nuclear Proliferation International History Project*

China's alliance with the Soviet Union was no doubt a political and economic success for both the two communist countries. Yet, underlying tension and mutual suspicion continued to plague the Sino-Soviet relationship, despite the two countries sharing a fraternal bond through ideological and political alignment.⁸ Aware of the asymmetric nature of the bilateral relationship between an economically and militarily stronger Soviet Union and a weaker post-civil war communist China, Chairman Mao's show of respect for and acceptance of Joseph Stalin as the more experienced and battle-hardened leader of the two, played a major role in keeping mutual discontent at bay—no matter whether it was driven by genuine or merely tactical reasons.⁹

The 1960s: Sino-Soviet Split

Following the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, the relationship between China and the Soviet Union soon became increasingly strained due to the emergence of rifts on several contagious fronts. Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Party Congress in 1956 and the ensuing de-Stalinization process was intensely disliked by Mao, who not only disagreed with the new Soviet political line but also saw it as a threat to his own rule and to the "revolutionary" line of the Chinese Communist Party. The initially friendly relationship between Nikita Khrushchev – the new leader of the Soviet Union – and Mao Zedong was soon replaced by mutual dislike and condemnation.¹⁰

Working Paper, vol. 2, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/soviet_policies_twrds_chinas_nuclear_weapons_prgm_-_ver_2.pdf.

- 8 Peter S. H. Tang, "Sino-Soviet Tensions," *Current History* 45, no. 266 (1963): 223-299, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45310995>.
- 9 Radin, Scobell, Treyger, Williams, Ma, Shatz, Ziegler, Han and Reach, *China-Russia Cooperation: Determining Factors, Future Trajectories, Implications for the United States*; Sergei N. Goncharov, John Wilson Lewis, and Litai Xue, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).
- 10 Deborah A. Kaple, "Soviet Advisors in China in the 1950s," in *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945–1963*, Odd Arne Westad (ed.) (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Centre Press, 1998).

Khrushchev's 'de-Stalinization' meant, among other things to rebuke Stalin's one-man rule and personality cult, which he wanted to replace with collective leadership.¹¹ Internationally, Khrushchev embraced the notion of "peaceful coexistence" with the West,¹² and when he visited the U.S. in 1959 and held talks with President Eisenhower at Camp David, he promised Eisenhower to stop a project to help China develop nuclear weapons.¹³ This infuriated Mao who became increasingly worried about what he perceived as Khrushchev's revisionist policies. He publicly rejected the Soviet Union's policy of peaceful coexistence with the West, accusing Moscow of abandoning the global socialist revolution. Khrushchev responded by frequently equating Mao and Stalin. The deteriorating relationship locked the two allied countries in a global competition for ideological leadership among socialist states and for the patronage of the newly independent states that were created in the wake of decolonization in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴

Sino-Soviet economic cooperation and trade almost came to a halt amid the ideological competition between the two countries. The Soviet credits to China had run out by 1957, and no new ones were arriving. Still, a new trade agreement was concluded in April 1958. The Russians wanted to integrate the Chinese economy into the Soviet bloc by having China join the Soviet-led socialist economic system in Eastern Europe—the Council for Economic and Mutual Assistance (CEMA)—

11 Jörg Baberowski, "Nikita Khrushchev and De-Stalinization in the Soviet Union 1953–1964", in *The Cambridge History of Communism*, Norman Naimark, Silvio Pons and Sophie Quinn-Judge (eds.), pp. 113-138 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

12 Nikita S. Khrushchev, "On Peaceful Coexistence," *Foreign Affairs* 38, no. 1 (1959): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20029395>.

13 Robert C. Tucker, "The Politics of Soviet De-Stalinization," *World Politics* 9, no. 4 (1957): 550-578, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009424>.

14 Britannica, Third World, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/money/topic/Third-World>; Priscilla Roberts, Steven I. Levine, Péter Vámos, Deborah Kaple, Jeremy Friedman, Douglas A. Stifoer, and Lorenz Lüthi, "FORUM: Mao, Khrushchev, and China's Split with the USSR Perspectives on The Sino-Soviet Split," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 12, no. 1 (2010): 120–160, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26923063>.

and sign long-term trade agreements with other communist countries.¹⁵ But Mao had other plans for China's economic industrialization, and the launch of the Great Leap Forward in 1958—China's most ambitious economic campaign—meant a blatant rejection of the Soviet Union's economic model. Ignoring the warning from Soviet technical advisors, the campaign ended disastrously. The industrial output failed to match expectations, and the drop in agriculture led to the **Great Chinese Famine** between 1959 and 1961, which caused at least 30 million deaths.¹⁶ Mao blamed the economic failures during the period of the disastrous "Great Leap Forward" on Khrushchev and the Soviet Union, accusing Soviet advisors of acting in bad faith.¹⁷

On the personal level, the mutual distrust and antagonization between Mao and Khrushchev reached an all-time high. In 1959, Mao openly expressed his disapproval of Khrushchev, accusing the Soviet leader of pursuing a revisionist agenda. This provoked a strong rebuttal from Khrushchev, who compared Mao with Stalin. This rapidly deteriorating Sino-Soviet relationship would eventually culminate in Khrushchev in 1960 ordering all Soviet economic advisors to leave China. The withdrawal of Soviet advisors led to the antagonism between the two communist countries increasing to unseen hostility levels from 1960 onward.¹⁸ The effects of the collapse of the Sino-Soviet alliance were manifold. For instance, previously unresolved territorial disputes began 'to heat up'. Several instances of military stand-offs and small-scale warfare erupted along their shared border. Meanwhile, on the international stage, the

15 Oleg Hoeffding, "Sino-Soviet Economic Relations, 1959-1962," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 349 (1963): 94–105, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1035700>; William E. Butler, "A Communist Common Market?" *World Affairs* 126, no. 1 (1963): 40–44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20670274>.

16 Felix Wemheuer, "Dealing with Responsibility for the Great Leap Famine in the People's Republic of China," *The China Quarterly* 201 (2010): 176–194, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20749353>.

17 Jian Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

18 Mikhail Klochko, "The Sino-Soviet Split: The Withdrawal of the Specialists," *International Journal* 26, no. 3 (1971): 556–566, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40201404>.

Soviet Union and China began a competition for military and ideological influence over countries belonging to the “Third World”.¹⁹

1969: Nuclear Brinkmanship

Khrushchev’s removal from power in 1964 brought some cooling in the relationship, but no sustainable changes to the overall trajectory of the Sino-Soviet relationship. Trade dropped and after Beijing rejected an invitation to the 22nd Party Congress, the inter-party relations were finally cut in 1966. Additionally, the adoption of the Brezhnev Doctrine by the Soviet Union in 1968—which served to justify Soviet (military) interventions in socialist countries—and the subsequent Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in the same year alarmed China.

The Vietnam War again manifested the deep differences between the Soviet Union and China. Initially, both countries were coordinated in their military support of the Vietnamese communist party. However, as the war expanded to include the U.S.,²⁰ it became increasingly clear that the Soviet Union was seeking to strengthen its relationship with the newly established socialist government in Vietnam at the cost of China.²¹

Border disputes also flared up into full-blown two-front military conflicts. The most severe incidents occurred on March 2 and again on March 15, 1969, when Soviet and Chinese troops of sizeable masses clashed at Damansky/Zhenbao Island. Soviet armed forces also invaded

19 Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469623771_friedman.

20 Henry S. Albinski, “Chinese and Soviet Policies in the Vietnam Crisis,” *The Australian Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (1968): 65–74, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20634182>.

21 Johan Van de Ven, “Without an end in sight: Competition between the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union during the Vietnam War and its implications for the wider relationship,” *Asiadémica: revista universitaria de estudios sobre Asia Oriental* 5, no. 1 (2015): 50–59, <https://www.raco.cat/index.php/asiademica/article/download/287738/375821>.

Yumin County in Xinjiang on August 13, 1969.²² As a result of the border conflicts in 1969, tension rose significantly and the 2500-mile Sino-Soviet border became heavily militarized. Both countries began amassing troops along the border. The Soviets also deployed tactical nuclear missiles as well as long-range and intermediate strategic nuclear weapons, putting Beijing within its range.²³ China responded by launching a nationwide preparation for an all-out war with the Soviet Union and placing the nation's armed forces (including its nuclear strike force) on "full alert" in 1969.²⁴ The two sides engaged in an undeclared border war that lasted for several months in 1969 before a ceasefire was reached. Fortunately, a nuclear war between the two socialist countries did not erupt but simmering tensions along the border continued throughout the 1970s, resulting in smaller periodic clashes.²⁵ These border clashes still have significance, particularly in Chinese security thinking, where securing its external borders is a key objective for the regime in Beijing.

The 1970s: Triangular Diplomacy

The Sino-Soviet split shattered the perception of a monolithic communist bloc in the West, opening a second front in the Cold War. Amid escalating tension between China and the Soviet Union, both countries began to reassess their respective geostrategic positions. The second phase of the Cold War saw a period of détente, with China and the Soviet Union

22 Miles M. Yu, "The 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts as a Key Turning Point of the Cold War," *Hoover Institution*, December 13, 2022, <https://www.hoover.org/research/1969-sino-soviet-border-conflicts-key-turning-point-cold-war>.

23 John L. Gaddis, "Detente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations From Nixon to Reagan. By Raymond L. Garthoff. (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1985. Pp. xviii 1147. \$39.95, cloth; \$16.95, paper.)," *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 1 (1986): 365–366, doi: 10.2307/1957156.

24 Thomas W. Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes," *The American Political Science Review* 66, no. 4 (1972): 1175–1202, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_memoranda/RM6171.html; John W. Lewis, and Litai Xue, *Imagined Enemies: China Prepares for Uncertain War* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006): 63–72.

25 Radin, Scobell, Treyger, Williams, Ma, Shatz, Ziegler, Han, and Reach, *China-Russia Cooperation: Determining Factors, Future Trajectories, Implications for the United States*.

seeking rapprochement with the United States.²⁶ Meanwhile, the Nixon Administration began to pursue what is now known as *Triangular diplomacy*.²⁷

The United States and the Soviet Union were seeking détente based on reciprocity and peaceful coexistence. Both countries had attained parity in the number of nuclear warheads, but the Soviet Union retained an advantage in intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) over the United States. Hence, arms control negotiation (known as Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, or SALT) became the foundation for improved U.S.-Soviet relations—eventually paving way for the subsequent creation of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 1975.²⁸

Meanwhile, the Sino-U.S. rapprochement was motivated by overlapping geopolitical interests, specifically the desire to balance against the Soviet Union. Henry Kissinger—the then U.S. Secretary of State—made secret visits to China, laying the groundwork for Nixon’s historical visit. Washington sought to withdraw its troops from the war in Vietnam,²⁹ while Beijing was concerned with the status of Taiwan and the need to gain international diplomatic recognition. Both sides showed a willingness to accompany each-other’s interests, culminating in the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué in February 1972.³⁰

26 Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7pfr5>.

27 Evelyn Goh, “Nixon, Kissinger, and the ‘Soviet Card’ in the U.S. Opening to China, 1971–1974,” *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 3 (2005): 475–502, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24915131>.

28 William G. Hyland, *Soviet-American Relations: A New Cold War* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1981), <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2006/R2763.pdf>.

29 Robert J. McMahon, “The Politics, and Geopolitics, of American Troop Withdrawals from Vietnam, 1968–1972,” *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 3 (June 2010): 471–483, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00862.x>.

30 Current History, “The Shanghai Communiqué, 1972,” *Current History* 63, no. 373 (1972): 131–133, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45312727>.

Throughout this period, Sino-Soviet relations experienced significant changes. The time of heightened animosity was replaced by an era of détente in the 1970s, becoming less protracted as most socialist states around the world by now had made their political alignment clear. Instead, the competition between China and the Soviet Union continued elsewhere. On the African continent, newly independent non-socialist states were targets of Chinese and Soviet aid programs.³¹ Meanwhile, on the Indian sub-continent, the Soviet Union and China backed opposing sides during the Indo-Pakistani War in 1971.³² On the economic front, China started to look for more Western technology and diversified its trade relations to include more nations in Africa.

The 1980s: Sino-Soviet Rapprochement

During the 1980s, a slow reconciliation process between the Soviet Union and China began. Amid the thawing of Cold War tensions, both countries signaled a readiness to improve bilateral ties. However, substantial efforts were only made after the death of Leonid Brezhnev in 1982, which paved the way for Mikhail Gorbachev (a reformist) to assume the position as the General Secretary of the Soviet Union in 1985.³³

With a political platform that emphasized cooperation over competition, Gorbachev found a like-minded political partner in the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (also a reformist). Gorbachev's willingness to discuss what Deng identified as the "three obstacles"—i.e., Soviet forces in Afghanistan, Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, and the heavily

31 Rosemary Quested, *Sino-Russian Relations: A Short History*.

32 J.P. Chiddick, "Indo-Soviet Relations, 1966-1971," *Millennium* 3, no. 1 (1974): 17-36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298740030010201>; Klaus H. Pringsheim, "China's Role in the Indo-Pakistani Conflict," *The China Quarterly* 24 (1965): 170-175, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/651844>.

33 Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctt6wphdn>; Steven I. Levine, "The End of Sino-Soviet Estrangement," *Current History* 85, no. 512 (1986): 245-280, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45319512>.

militarized Sino-Soviet border—laid the foundation for a new bilateral relationship between Moscow and Beijing.³⁴ This period led to a gradual shift in economic power, where China's liberalization of its economy, eventually surpassed that of the Soviet Union. Part of this shift can also be attributed to domestic challenges for the Soviet economy due to ineffective planning, labor shortages, and the ongoing arms race with the United States.³⁵

The reconciliation process was slow, involving considerable commitments from both sides. The Soviet Union and China gradually re-established networks of political, economic, and cultural exchange through regularly held Sino-Soviet vice-ministerial meetings, culminating in a summit between Gorbachev and Deng in Beijing in May 1989.³⁶ Both sides agreed that there was no one singular model of socialism and that new Sino-Soviet relations would be based on mutual recognition and respect. While the summit did not resolve all long-standing differences on key issues, the outcome did mark the end of 30 years of Sino-Soviet animosity and the beginning of a new era of collaboration. An era that has since had its ups and downs but in a longer perspective been a period characterized by cooperation and finding solutions rather than hostility and confrontation.³⁷

34 Gail W. Lapidus, "The USSR and Asia in 1986: Gorbachev's New Initiatives," *Asian Survey* 27, no. 1 (1988): 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644595>; James C. Hsiung, "Sino-Soviet Detente and Chinese Foreign Policy," *Current History* 87, no. 530 (1988): 245-278, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45316099>.

35 Vladislav Zubok, "The Soviet Union and China in the 1980s: reconciliation and divorce," *Cold War History* 17, no. 2 (2017): pp. 121-141, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2017.1315923>.

36 William B. deMills, "Gorbachev and the Future of Sino-Soviet Relations," *Political Science Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (1986): 535-557, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2150793>.

37 John W. Garver, "The 'New Type' of Sino-Soviet Relations," *Eastern Survey* 29, no. 12 (1960): 1136-1152, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644761>; Thomas P. Bernstein and Hua-Yu Li, *China Learns from the Soviet Union, 1949-Present* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010).

1989-1991: Tiananmen Square and Collapse of the Soviet Union

The Soviet-Sino reconciliation occurred amidst growing popular dissatisfaction with the one-party state governance in China as well as in the Soviet Union, erupting into mass protests and peaceful demonstrations across Chinese and Soviet cities. Hence, the shaping of the new Sino-Soviet relations became a secondary priority as communist regimes across the East Bloc scrambled to respond to the Crisis of Communism between 1989 and 1991.³⁸

In 1989, the pro-democracy protests across hundreds of cities in China—with Tiananmen Square in Beijing as the epicenter—were perceived by the Chinese leadership as an existential threat to the party-state and the survival of the Chinese Communist Party. To ensure the continued rule of the Party, PLA troops were deployed across the country to suppress the unrest, culminating in heavy-handed crackdowns on unarmed protesters. The most infamous incident was the massacre in Beijing on June 4, 1989, which led to Western condemnation and sanctions and brought China into a period of international isolation.³⁹

Almost at the same time in Europe, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 meant the end of the Warsaw Pact and the break-up of the Soviet Union. By 1990, under the pressure of peaceful popular demonstrations and protests, most former Soviet-satellite states in Eastern Europe were replaced by democratically elected governments. The domino effect of this rapid transformation culminated in the complete dissolution of the Soviet Union in December the following year.⁴⁰ This also marked the

38 Radin, Scobell, Treyger, Williams, Ma, Shatz, Ziegler, Han, and Reach, *China-Russia Cooperation: Determining Factors, Future Trajectories, Implications for the United States*.

39 Wu Hung, "Tiananmen Square: A Political History of Monuments," *Representations* 35 (1991): 84–117, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928718>; M. E. Sarotte, "China's Fear of Contagion: Tiananmen Square and the Power of the European Example," *International Security* 37, no. 2 (2012): 156–182, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00101.

40 Aleksei Filitov and Rosemary Williams, "The End of the Cold War and the Dissolution of the USSR," *Journal of Modern European History / Zeitschrift Für Moderne Europäische Geschichte / Revue*

end of the Cold War. The Soviet Union was broken up and divided into 15 independent former Soviet Republics, with the Russian Federation assuming the de facto successor state role of the USSR.⁴¹

2.2 Sino-Russian Relations (1992–2017)

1992–2007: Co-ordinal Cooperation and Continued Normalization of Sino-Russian Relations

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union signaled the beginning of a new—yet initially uncertain—era for Beijing and its relationship with the newly independent Russian Federation and the newly independent states. While the threat of the Soviet Union disappeared, the Chinese leadership was concerned with the political and economic reforms pursued by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, which prioritized a closer relationship with the West.⁴²

However, Russia’s chaotic transition to a market economy bred popular dissatisfaction with Western-prescribed economic models, prompting Moscow to shift its focus eastward in 1992.⁴³ This alleviated China’s concerns about having to share a common border with a pro-Western neighbor. The two countries began building on the earlier Sino-Soviet rapprochement that had been initiated with the summit between Gorbachev and Deng in Beijing.⁴⁴

By the late 1990s, the Sino-Russian relationship was characterized by cooperation and a remarkably high level of cordiality, with notable

d’histoire Européenne Contemporaine 9, no. 3 (2011): 298–307, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26265944>.

41 David L. Shambaugh, *China’s Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

42 Gerald Segal, “China and the Disintegration of the Soviet Union,” *Asian Survey* 32, no. 9 (1992): 848–868, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645075>.

43 Thomas E. Weisskope, “Russia in Transition: Perils of the Fast Track to Capitalism,” *Challenge* 35, no. 6 (1992): 28–37, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40721389>.

44 John W. Garver, “The “New Type” of Sino-Soviet Relations”.

developments in diplomatic engagement and increased bilateral trade of military equipment and arms. The two countries no longer held the belief that one posed a serious threat to the other. Rather, the United States—the sole superpower in the post-Cold War period—inherited the mantle as the main political and military long-term threat to China as well as Russia.⁴⁵

In 1996, both countries issued a joint communique pledging to build an “equal and trustworthy strategic partnership”.⁴⁶ This was followed by Beijing and Moscow, signing the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation in 2001, signaling a continuously close relationship between the two former Cold War adversaries.⁴⁷ Contentious territorial disputes along the common Sino-Russian border were being resolved through bilateral negotiations. For instance, the two countries announced in 2004 that they had successfully demarcated 2,700 miles of common borders.⁴⁸ Russia also endorsed the “One China” policy, providing political support to China’s claim over Taiwan.⁴⁹

Internationally, Beijing and Moscow displayed increased cooperation in multilateral forums such as the UN, regularly expressing similar

45 Andrew Radin, and Clint Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1826.html.

46 Thomas S. Wilkins, “Russo–Chinese Strategic Partnership: A New Form of Security Cooperation,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 29, no. 2 (2008): 358–383, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260802284365>.

47 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation,” 2001, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110605071535/http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/2649/t15771.htm>; Alexander Korolev, “On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation,” *Asian Security* 15, no. 3 (2019): 233–252, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2018.1463991>.

48 Sören Urbansky, *Beyond the Steppe Frontier: A History of the Sino-Russian Border* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvmd85cv>.

49 Bobo Lo, “China and Russia: Common Interests, Contrasting Perceptions,” *Insight Turkey* 9, no. 2 (2007): 128–151. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26328836>.

opinions on significant security-related events.⁵⁰ For instance, both countries opposed the NATO intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina, perceiving it as an expression of unchecked U.S. military aggression—casting their first joint veto in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Recognizing the growing threat posed by U.S. unilateralism, both China and Russia strengthened their diplomatic coordination within the United Nations to counter U.S. influence.

The improving Sino-Russian relations also led to the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001. This period saw China and Russia intensifying their engagement with countries in Central Asia. Russia was interested in becoming the main security provider in the region, while China was mostly pursuing economic ties with countries in Central Asia. Therefore, despite an initial worry about renewed geopolitical competition, China and Russia managed to generally maintain friendly ties in the region.⁵¹

Bilateral trade between China and Russia saw an increase, and the relationship developed into one that was characterized by economic complementarities. China needed resources to power its growing capital-intensive economic growth model, and Russia needed new export markets for its vast energy reserves and natural resources.⁵² China also increased its acquisition of military equipment from Russia considerably, and the country quickly became the largest export market for Russian weapon manufacturers.⁵³ Primarily because of China's massive modernization program (China increased its defense spending

50 Ibid.

51 Helge Blakkisrud and Elana W. Rowe, "Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Diverging Security Interests and the 'Crimea Effect'," in *Russia's Turn to the East* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69790-1_7.

52 Axel Berkofsky, "Russia and China: The Past and Present of a Rocky Relationship," *Il Politico* 79, no. 3 (2014): 108-123, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44735412>.

53 Ming-yen Tsai, "China's Acquisitions of Russian SU Fighters: A Great Leap Forward?" *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 8, no. 1 (2001): 1-5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44288652>.

from some USD 100 billion to some USD 200 billion during the ten years between 2006-2015, according to data from SIPRI), western reluctance to sell arms to China following Tiananmen Square and Russia's arms industry desperate in search for new clients. The arms sales peaked in the period 2002-2006.⁵⁴

On the military front, China and Russia also engaged in mutual assistance in weapons research and development, strategic consultation, and military training. Direct military-to-military engagements increased, and Chinese arms manufacturers acquired licenses to produce Russian weapon systems in Chinese factories. This greatly benefited China's massive undertaking to modernize its military and establish its own aerial, aerial defense, and naval capabilities.⁵⁵ The two countries' militaries also began to explore possible avenues for direct military-to-military engagement. For instance, China and Russia participated in five joint military exercises between 2003 and 2007. The most notable development was the creation of the Annual Mission Exercise Program through the SCO, focusing on border security and counterterrorism.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, further advancements in the sphere of economic and military engagement were hindered by continued mutual distrust and suspicion.⁵⁷ For instance, towards the end of this period, Russia became increasingly worried about Chinese arms producers potentially reverse-engineering and copying Russian weapon systems. Additionally, the perceived threat posed by the United States was diffused enough that

54 Siemon T. Wezeman, "China, Russia and the shifting landscape of arms sales," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2017, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2017/china-russia-and-shifting-landscape-arms-sales>.

55 Mandip Singh, *Learning From Russia: How China used Russian models and experiences to modernize the PLA* (Berlin: Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2020), https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Merics_ChinaMonitor_PLARussia_3.pdf.

56 Pan Guang, "The SCO's Success in Security Architecture," in Ron Huisken (ed.) *The Architecture of Security in Asia-Pacific* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2009), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt24h898.9>.

57 Berkofsky, "Russia and China: The Past and Present of a Rocky Relationship".

it did not deter China and Russia from pursuing a closer relationship with the West. These closer relations with the West were mainly driven by economic considerations. Russia continued to prioritize becoming the main energy supplier to Europe, while China was preoccupied with attracting foreign direct investments from the developed world. Both countries were also trying to acquire Western cutting-edge technology.⁵⁸

2007–2017: Plateau and Slight Regression, Followed by Renewed Cooperation

The development of Sino-Russian relations remained relatively unchanged from 2007 to 2012, despite divergences on several key issues—including the Russia-Georgian War in 2008.⁵⁹ On the diplomatic front, the two countries continued to increase their bilateral cooperation. China and Russia worked together on the multilateral front, spearheading the development of the BRICS grouping as well as issuing joint vetoes within the UNSC.⁶⁰

While trade between the two countries increased as expected, the relationship became increasingly asymmetric—i.e., China was becoming more important to Russia than Russia was to China. In terms of military relations, direct military-to-military interaction between the two countries experienced a slight decline during the beginning of this period. Moscow reduced its arms exports due to continued concern about Chinese efforts at reverse engineering and stealing high-end Russian weapon technology, and China was starting to rapidly develop its domestic weapons production capability. China also started to become increasingly dissatisfied with the general quality of Russian arms deliveries.⁶¹

58 Radin, Scobell, Treyger, Williams, Ma, Shatz, Ziegler, Han, and Reach, *China-Russia Cooperation: Determining Factors, Future Trajectories, Implications for the United States*.

59 Susan Turner, "China and Russia After the Russian-Georgian War," *Comparative Strategy* 30, no. 1 (2011): 50-59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2011.545687>.

60 Peter van Ham, *The BRICS as an EU Security Challenge: The Case for Conservatism* (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, 2015), https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/the_brics_as_an_eu_security_challenge.pdf.

61 Paul J. Bolt, "Sino-Russian Relations in a Changing World Order," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (2014): 47-69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26270816>.

In comparison, Sino-Russian relations once more experienced a strengthening during the latter half of this period. Following Xi Jinping's emergence as the new president of China in 2012 and the re-election of Vladimir Putin as President in 2013, the evolving personal relationship between the two leaders signaled a new era of cooperation between the two countries. For instance, between 2012 and 2014, President Xi met President Putin many times more than he met other world leaders.⁶²

Another turning point in the Sino-Russian relationship occurred in 2014—when Russia invaded and annexed the Crimea peninsula from Ukraine. Amid a broader rift with the West, the annexation of Crimea triggered a barrage of crippling economic sanctions, imposed by Western countries on Russia, forcing Moscow to mitigate the effects of the sanctions and as a consequence pursue a policy change of “pivoting to the East”.⁶³ This served as a cataclysm for the acceleration of the warming of Sino-Russian relations. But Moscow's unprovoked attack on Crimea equally underscores the importance in some guiding principles in Chinese foreign policy, the respect for a nation's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. China's rather cautious policy on Crimea demonstrates this balancing act while not setting a precedence that would risk spilling over to any Chinese separatist ambitions.⁶⁴ Putin's use of history to legitimize the annexation of Crimea (and later the war in Ukraine) is very similar to Xi's rhetoric regarding Taiwan.⁶⁵

62 Bonny Lin, Brian Hart, Samantha Lu, and Yu-Jie Liao, “Analysing the Latest Xi-Putin Meeting and China's Belt and Road Forum,” The Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/analyzing-latest-xi-putin-meeting-and-chinas-belt-and-road-forum>; Andrea Kendall-Taylor, and David Shullman, *Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership* (Washington: Center for a New American Security, 2021), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28653>.

63 Baladas Ghoshal, “Moscow-Beijing Strategic Partnership & Beyond: The Russian Pivot to Asia Pacific,” Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09220>.

64 Temur Umarov, “China's Relations with Russia Amid the War in Ukraine,” *Atlantisch Perspectief* 46, no. 3 (2022): 19–24, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48732607>.

65 Jing Huang, “Xi Jinping's Taiwan Policy: Boxing Taiwan In with the One-China Framework,” in Lowell Dittmer (ed.) *Taiwan and China: Fitful Embrace*, 239-248 (Berkeley: University of California, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780520968707-014>.

China and Russia began increasing their coordination efforts in multilateral settings—including at the UNSC.⁶⁶ Through the SCO, the two countries found a platform to pursue their respective interests in a coordinated fashion, avoiding the possibility of regional collisions on key issues in Central Asia.⁶⁷ Globally, Russia and China voiced joint opposition to the U.S. deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system in South Korea and called for the pursuit of a diplomatic solution to the tension on the Korean Peninsula.⁶⁸

On the military front, China and Russia issued several joint documents, outlining their shared concerns about destabilizing actions by the United States. High-level direct military-to-military engagement increased, and military cooperation saw major expansions. However, Russian arms sales to China decreased after 2006 and it was not until 2015 that China and Russia could sign a new significant arms deal, with the agreement to sell Russian Sukhoi-35 fighter aircraft and the S-400 surface-to-air missile system.⁶⁹

Russia also quickly became an important partner for China's ambition to expand its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) into the Arctic region, also known as the Polar Silk Road, and since the publication of its five-year plan in 2011, the Arctic has assumed a steady and growing importance in China's global ambitions.⁷⁰ China's growing ambitions in the Arctic

66 Kendall-Taylor and Shullman, *Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership*.

67 Paul Stronski and Nicole Ng, *Cooperation and Competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_331_Stronski_Ng_Final1.pdf.

68 Alexander Gabuev and Li Aixin, "Can Russia and China Join Efforts to Counter THAAD?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 27, 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/27/can-russia-and-china-join-efforts-to-counter-thaad-pub68410>.

69 Wezeman, "China, Russia and the shifting landscape of arms sales."

70 Yu Cao, "Implications for Sino-Russian Cooperation on the Polar Silk Road," *Arctic Yearbook 2022*, 2022, <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2022/2022-scholarly-papers/425-implications-for-sino-russian-cooperation-on-the-polar-silk-road>.

were formalized with the adoption in early 2018 of a new Arctic policy,⁷¹ where China highlights three overall objectives:

- Security (*anquan* 安全): the Arctic is crucial for China's nuclear deterrence.
- Resources (*ziyuan* 资源): China wants access to Arctic minerals and hydrocarbons, fishing, tourism, and transport routes.
- Strategic science and technology (*keji* 科技): access to the Arctic is essential for the roll-out of the Beidou global navigational system, China's rival to GPS. Beidou is crucial for China's cyber warfare capabilities, C4ISR, and many more military applications.

The adoption of the new Arctic policy is in part a manifestation of China's global ambitions, but it also serves to create a situation where China would have a seat at the table, when important decisions on Arctic development are discussed and even better decided, hence the introduction of the term "a near Arctic State" and the need to develop a "multilayered structure" for Arctic governance.⁷² But, for China, the Arctic is not of similar critical importance as it is for Russia.⁷³

Bilateral trade and investment also increased between the two countries. Chinese companies began investing heavily in Russian energy projects, with the completed Power of the Siberia gas pipeline being the most significant to date. China's demand for energy and resources was met by increased Russian exports.⁷⁴ However, despite growing economic

71 State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guowuyuan xinwen bangongshi, "Zhongguo de beiji zhengce" [China's Arctic Policy]," 2018, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-01/26/content_5260891.htm.

72 Marc Lanteigne, "The Role of China in Emerging Arctic Security Discourses," *Sicherheit Und Frieden (S+F) / Security and Peace* 33, no. 3 (2015): 150–155, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26389207>.

73 Jim Townsend, and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "Russian and Chinese Priorities in the Arctic and Prospects for Their Cooperation," in *Partners, Competitors, or a Little of Both?: Russia and China in the Arctic*, 6–11 (Washington: Center for a New American Security, 2021), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep30199.6>.

74 Camilla T. N. Sørensen and Ekaterina Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese-Russian Cooperation in the Arctic: Possibilities and Constraints* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2017),

integration and greater cooperation, the total volume of Sino-Russian trade remained a fraction of China's trade with the rest of the world. In addition, Russia was not seen as a particularly attractive destination for Chinese investment due to strong state inference and weak rule of law.⁷⁵

2.3 Recent Development of Sino-Russian Relations (2017– 2023)

Political Relations

On the bilateral front, the Sino-Russian relationship continued to strengthen from 2017 till the time of writing (October 2023). The election of Donald Trump in 2016 proved to be an important driver for closer China-Russian relations. The Trump presidency exhibited an increased hostility towards China, initiating the still ongoing and intensified China-United States trade war in January 2018. This emerging rivalry between China and the U.S. incentivized Beijing to mitigate the effects of the rivalry and one option pursued was to seek even closer strategic cooperation with Moscow as a means of deterring the perceived threat posed by Washington. Meanwhile, an internationally alienated Moscow had already begun to pursue closer relations with China years ago, following worsening ties with the West in the aftermath of the Russian annexation of the Crimea Peninsula from Ukraine in 2014 and Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War in 2015.

Both China and Russia harbor a distaste toward Western liberal democracies and their promotion of human rights and freedom of expression (especially towards the United States) and a desire to reframe the parameters that define a "democracy". However, their shared anti-West stance and anti-NATO expansion have not been the sole, maybe nor the most important, incentivizing factor for Moscow

<https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/emerging-chinese-russian-cooperation-arctic.pdf>.

75 Radin, Scobell, Treyger, Williams, Ma, Shatz, Ziegler, Han, and Reach, *China-Russia Cooperation: Determining Factors, Future Trajectories, Implications for the United States*; Hillman, *China and Russia: Economic Unequals*.

and Beijing to pursue closer ties. Equally important for recent advancements in Sino-Russian rapprochement is the developing personal relationship between President Xi and President Putin. During the pre-pandemic era (2017–2019), bilateral meetings between Xi and Putin experienced an increase in frequency, usually ending in joint statements that emphasized the need to safeguard each other's national interests as well as expand and strengthen Sino-Russian ties. These jointly issued commitments include enhancing cooperation, exchange, and coordination in areas of military, political, and economic affairs. In total, President Xi and President Putin met each other more than 20 times from mid-2017 to early 2022, not counting phone calls and virtual meetings, ranging from more formal occasions (i.e., bilateral settings and multilateral forums) to more private and personal meetings (e.g., birthday celebrations).⁷⁶

In 2017 alone, Chinese President Xi Jinping met Russian President Putin more than any other world leader. Beginning with the meeting between Xi and Putin on May 14, 2017, held during the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) in China, both leaders vowed to further strengthen China-Russian relations. The leaders met again on June 8, when both Xi and Putin attended the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Astana, Kazakhstan. A joint statement by Xi and Putin at the SCO called for the maintenance of a high-level comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries and the reinforcement of bilateral economic ties.⁷⁷ This was followed up with a State visit to Russia by President Xi from July 3 to 4. The two-day summit ended with a total of three joint statements being

76 Qingqing Chen and Yuwei Hu, "Ahead of Xi-Putin meeting, a look back at memorable moments shared by the two close friends," *Global Times*, February 4, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202202/1251392.shtml>.

77 DD Wu, "Xi-Putin Meet on SCO Summit Sidelines to Strengthen China-Russia Ties," *The Diplomat*, June 9, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/xi-putin-meet-on-sco-summit-sidelines-to-strengthen-china-russia-ties/>.

issued.⁷⁸ In late November 2017, Xi and Putin reportedly met bilaterally on the sideline of the main meetings of the 2017 APEC summit in Da Nang, Vietnam, discussing topics such as the deteriorating security situation on the Korean Peninsula.⁷⁹

President Xi and President Putin continued to meet regularly throughout 2018 and 2019, presenting a facade of rock-solid development of Sino-Russian relations.⁸⁰ For instance, on June 8, 2018, before attending the annual summit of the SCO, President Putin travelled to Beijing for bilateral talks with his Chinese counterpart. Putin was greeted by a warm welcome by Xi, and the leaders lauded the deepening ties between their countries. President Xi also awarded his Russian counterpart with China's first friendship medal, calling President Putin his "best, most intimate friend". The award ceremony was live-streamed on state television in China, serving to underscore the growing strategic importance of Sino-Russian relations.⁸¹ In 2019, on June 6, President Xi visited Moscow for a bilateral summit with his Russian counterpart. The meeting took place against the background of souring bilateral trade relations between China and the United States and deteriorating relations between Western countries. Once again, both leaders expressed mutual admiration and praised the continued deepening of bilateral Sino-Russian ties. President Xi again described Putin as his "best friend".⁸² The meeting ended with the signing of trade deals and joint agreements,

78 DD Wu, "Russia-China Relations Reach a New High," *The Diplomat*, July 7, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/russia-china-relations-reach-a-new-high/>.

79 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Xi Jinping Meets with President Vladimir Putin of Russia," November 11, 2017, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/2017zt/xjpcxdeswjapcebnylnwjsxgsw/201711/t20171114_703750.html.

80 Charlotte Gao, "Xi to Meet Putin at Russia's Eastern Economic Forum Amid Tensions With US," *The Diplomat*, September 7, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/xi-to-meet-putin-at-russias-eastern-economic-forum-amid-tensions-with-us/>.

81 "China's Xi awards 'best friend' Putin friendship medal, promises support", *Reuters*, June 8, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-china-russia-idUKKCN1J41RJ>.

82 "China's Xi praises 'best friend' Putin during Russia visit," *BBC*, June 6, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48537663>.

including one that underscores China's and Russia's commitment to the strengthening of global strategic stability.

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person meetings between Xi and Putin came to a halt in early 2020. Instead, the two leaders continued their interaction through telephone conversations and virtual meetings between 2020 and 2021. Besides pledging further development of Sino-Russian ties and rejecting Western criticism of China's initial response to the outbreak, the pair frequently discussed ways of supporting each other during the height of the pandemic.⁸³ In 2021, the two countries also agreed to extend the China-Russia Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation.⁸⁴ During a virtual meeting on December 16, 2021, Xi and Putin lauded the developing relationship between their countries as "a paradigm of international relations in the 21st century".⁸⁵

The first face-to-face meeting between Xi and Putin after the pandemic occurred ahead of the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics 2022, amidst China's and Russia's worsening ties with Western countries as well as the ongoing Russian military build-up at the Russian-Ukraine border. The two leaders announced a partnership with "no limits, and forbidden areas of cooperation", underscoring their resolve to continue deepening their bilateral ties. In a show of unity, the two leaders also issued a joint statement, opposing the expansion of NATO.⁸⁶ Russian

83 "Xi, Putin pledge further development of China-Russia ties in New Year greetings," *Xinhua*, December 31, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48537663>.

84 Qingqing Chen and Liu Xin, "China, Russia agree to extend good-neighborliness treaty as Putin congratulates CPC on centenary in phone call with Xi," *Global Times*, June 28, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202106/1227260.shtml>.

85 "China-Russia ties-'a paradigm of international relations in 21st century'," *CGTN*, December 15, 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-12-15/Xi-Putin-virtual-meeting-begins-160TxyFr2/index.html>; "Russia's Putin, China's Xi hail ties amid tensions with West," *Al Jazeera*, December 15, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/15/russia-putin-china-xi-to-hold-talks-amid-tensions-with-west>.

86 Robin Wright, "Russia and China Unveil a Pact Against America and the West," *The New Yorker*,

unprovoked attack on Ukraine, shortly after the meeting, directly became a “test” of the no-limits cooperation agreement, and it is evident that limits do exist. China’s policy of not directly supporting Russia with weapons is one such limit and China is clearly trying to balance its policy on Ukraine, not to provoke the U.S. and the West. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s visit to Moscow in September 2023 and the announcement that “Moscow’s interest must be considered in resolving the conflict” is another example of this balancing policy.

On the multilateral front, the warming relationship between China and Russia continues to translate into ever-enhancing diplomatic coordination within the UNSC. Russia has vetoed a total of 16 different UNSC resolutions put forward by Western countries between 2017 and 2022, of which seven are joint vetoes with the People’s Republic of China. The majority of the vetoes target agenda items that are directly related to Russian military and political involvement across the globe, including “the situation in the Middle East”, “the situation in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela”, and “Middle East”, among other things.⁸⁷ The usage of vetoes by both Russia and China (i.e., double vetoes) is a wider attempt by the world’s two most powerful autocrats to keep “western military ambition” in check. China and Russia have also increased their coordination in managing their diverging interests through other multilateral forums. For instance, the BRICS grouping, and the SCO remain the premium platforms for the management of Sino-Russian relations. The cooperation of the BRICS grouping has continued and expanded by inviting additional members, in spite of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. During the latest summit held in South Africa in August 2023, Russia and China continued their cooperation together with the remaining BRICS countries. This can be viewed as a

February 7, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/russia-and-china-unveil-a-pact-against-america-and-the-west>.

87 United Nations, “UN Security Council Meetings & Outcomes Tables,” Dag Hammarskjöld Library, <https://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick>.

further reaffirmation of their political relationship, as well as an effort to challenge the West's position in the global system.

On regional affairs, improving bilateral relations between the two countries has been a precondition for a reconciliation of the growing power and influence of China as well as Russia's interests to maintain and preserve its status and influence as a dwindling former superpower. In Central Asia, the current state of affairs can be described as a specific "division of labor" in which China focuses on trade and investment expansion under its signature infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while Russia dominates politically and militarily.⁸⁸ For instance, in May 2018, China's BRI was formally linked with the Eurasia Economic Union (EAEU), a Russian-led economic integration project in Central Asia. Besides demonstrating the growing importance of Russia as a key partner to China and vice versa, the linkage also signals Beijing's and Moscow's shared willingness to accommodate each other's economic and military interests through multilateral means in Central Asia.⁸⁹

In the Arctic region, as the temperature has continued to rise three times faster than the global average, cooperation between China and Russia has experienced an expansion in the last five years. From the perspective of China, an increased presence in the Russian Arctic, which accounts for 53 percent of the Arctic Ocean shoreline, will allow Beijing to secure a bigger role in the Arctic region as well as much-needed sources of natural

88 Paweł Paszak, "China and Russia in Central Asia—Rivalry or Division of Labor?" Warsaw Institute, December 10, 2020, <https://warsawinstitute.org/china-russia-central-asia-rivalry-division-labor/>.

89 Catherine Putz, "Can Russia and China 'Synergize' the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative?" *The Diplomat*, November 9, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/can-russia-and-china-synergize-the-eurasian-economic-union-and-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>; Gaziza Shakhanova and Jeremy Garlick, "The Belt and Road Initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union: Exploring the 'Greater Eurasian Partnership'," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 49, no. 1 (2020): 33-57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810262091166>; Janko Šćepanović, "The sheriff and the banker? Russia and China in Central Asia," *War on the Rocks*, June 13, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/06/the-sheriff-and-the-banker-russia-and-china-in-central-asia/>.

gas including other resources like food.⁹⁰ China's activities and ambition in the region are apparent in the country's 2018 Arctic White Paper, as previously mentioned.⁹¹ The document labels China as a "Near-Arctic State" and outlines the proposal of a Polar Silk Road. Meanwhile, for Russia, a partnership with China in the region is aligned with Moscow's interest in reasserting its geopolitical and geo-economic dominance over the Arctic region. Numerous partnerships have been signed by Moscow and Beijing, seeking to exploit the region's vast natural resources and establish new sea-based shipping routes. At the moment, jointly operated liquefied natural gas production projects in the Arctic dominate Sino-Russian cooperation in their region. Chinese ambitions and cooperation with Russia are however not limited to energy but cover a broad range of other areas like food, science, and particularly the underwater domain and environmental issues. The temporary suspension of activities within the Arctic Council, a direct consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has meant that the most valuable partner for Russia in Arctic affairs currently is China. Nevertheless, despite the current mutually beneficial arrangement especially for China and to a lesser degree for Russia, some mutual distrust and suspicion continue to hamper further deepening of bilateral cooperation in the Arctic region.⁹²

For most countries in Southeast Asia, China is an important economic partner. Trade between Southeast Asian countries and China occupies economic centrality in the region. The region has strategic and economic importance to Beijing's ambitious BRI. But China suffers from a lack of trust among several ASEAN nations, partly as a consequence of "unfair" business practices in many of the BRI-related infrastructure projects

90 The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's Arctic Policy," 2018, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm.

91 Ibid.

92 Camilla T. N. Sørensen and Ekaterina Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese-Russian cooperation in the Arctic* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2017), <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/emerging-chinese-russian-cooperation-arctic.pdf>.

and China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, which has put Beijing on a collision course with Hanoi, as well as with the Philippines. Russia on the other hand enjoys a high level of trust in the region, and Moscow's attempts to widen its reach and influence have generally been met with goodwill and Russia is actively pursuing closer relationships with several ASEAN countries.⁹³ Russia is a long-term ally of Vietnam whose relationship dates back to the Cold War.⁹⁴ Hence, inevitably, Moscow's growing presence in the region might pose a challenge to China's attempt to consolidate its influence,⁹⁵ and it remains to be seen how Russia and China successfully can manage their sometimes competing interests in the region.

On the Korean Peninsula, a similar kind of dynamic is unfolding between China and Russia. As the North Korean government's most important international supporter, China has long played an outsized role in mediating and managing inter-Korean affairs and tensions. However, the relationship between Chinese President Xi Jinping and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has been rocky in recent years, in part due to the latter's continued effort to acquire increasingly more sophisticated missiles and nuclear capability. Attempts by the North Korean leadership to diversify its reliance on international partners have gained new momentum due to the war in Ukraine. North Korea suddenly found itself in a position where it could be useful to Moscow and over the last year, we have seen a gradual warming of bilateral relations between Pyongyang and Moscow. Putin and Kim met in September 2023 to, among other topics, discuss arms sales to Russia—even though they both deny that that was the intention of the meeting. Putin mentioned that “there were opportunities to explore” in

93 Lucas Myers, “Too Close for Comfort: Southeast Asia's Attempt to Balance with Russia Against China,” Wilson Center, November 9, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/too-close-comfort-southeast-asias-attempt-balance-russia-against-china>.

94 Ibid.

95 Arrizal Jaknanihan, “What China Gets Wrong about Southeast Asia,” *The Diplomat*, June 3, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/what-china-gets-wrong-about-southeast-asia/>.

military cooperation, and Russia was also willing to help North Korea by obtaining high-technology infrastructure such as satellites, showing signs of intensifying cooperation.²⁶

Pyongyang has traditionally benefitted from being able to balance the influence of Beijing and Moscow and now Pyongyang once more can exercise this balancing act.⁹⁶ Hence, Moscow's expanding foothold in East Asia might potentially change the current geopolitical status quo, to the benefit of North Korea and it may at least mitigate some of the asymmetries in overall Sino-Russian relations.

Military Relations

As a sign of warming bilateral relations, military cooperation, and exchanges between the two countries have seen expansions in recent years. Arms sales between China and Russia have been surging since 2015, with Russia agreeing for the first time in 2015 to sell its most advanced weapons systems to China—including the S-400 air defense system and Su-35 fighter jets. This represented an end to Russia's long-standing policy of withholding sales of its most advanced weapon systems to its immediate neighbor to the south.⁹⁷ New arms deals have, however, been few and far between, with the recently announced sale of Mi-171H combat helicopters in 2020 being the most significant additional arms deal between the two countries.⁹⁸

96 Josh Smith, "Explainer: Putin and North Korea's Kim forge closer ties amid shared isolation," *Reuters*, October 7, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/putin-north-koreas-kim-forge-closer-ties-amid-shared-isolation-2022-10-07/>.

97 Brian G. Carlson, *Vostok-2018: Another Sign of Strengthening Russia-China Ties* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2018), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/vostok-2018-another-sign-of-strengthening-russia-china-ties>.

98 Paul N. Schwartz, *The Changing Nature and Implications of Russian Military Transfers to China* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210621_Schwartz_Russian_Military_Transfers.pdf?VersionId=47ltXU2w57d.CobDxg1b1nGmtA1tUcU.T.

On June 29, 2017, the Chinese defense ministry confirmed that China and Russia signed a roadmap on military cooperation for 2017–2020, at the Astana SCO meeting. The road map was short on concrete actions and objectives but reinforced “the high-level mutual trust and strategic cooperation” according to the statement. Different reasons contributed to closer military cooperation, even in sensitive military areas, in this timeframe. One such example is the December 2019 acknowledgment that Russia has been helping China to create a missile launch detection system, an important and rather sensitive part of any country’s nuclear deterrence capability. Furthermore, cooperation in advanced technologies or what is often referred to as Emerging Disruptive Technologies (like hypersonic, AI, and automated systems) seems to have been part of this road map. Another sign of the ambition and level of cooperation is Russia’s and China’s readiness to jointly use their armed forces to take diplomatic or demonstrative action in various parts of the world.

In terms of high-level joint military exercises and operations between China and Russia, there have been several milestones reached in recent years. In July 2017, three Chinese warships spent one week training with the Russian Navy off the coast of Kaliningrad.⁹⁹ In September 2018, Russia held its annual domestic military exercise, codename Vostok-2018. China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) participated in the 2018 edition, marking another milestone in the increasingly close defense relationship between China and Russia.¹⁰⁰ In July 2019, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and the Russian Air Force jointly conducted a long-range aerial patrol involving two Chinese Xian H-6K and two Tupolev Tu-95MS long-range, and nuclear-capable bombers in the Indo-Pacific region for the first time.¹⁰¹ On October 19, 2021, a naval group of 10 naval vessels

99 “China in Baltic navy drill with Russia,” *BBC*, July 21, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40682442>.

100 Carlson, *Vostok-2018: Another Sign of Strengthening Russia-China Ties*.

101 Franz-Stefan Gady, “The Significance of the First Ever China-Russia Strategic Bomber Patrol,” *The Diplomat*, July 25, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/the-significance-of-the-first-ever-china-russia-strategic-bomber-patrol/>.

from the Chinese and Russian navies sailed through a strait separating Japan's main island and its northern island of Hokkaido. The joint naval exercise was closely watched by the Japanese government.¹⁰² China and Russia also held a joint Military Drill in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region on August 10, 2021. The operation involved more than 10,000 ground troops and air forces, marking another significant milestone in Russian-China relations.¹⁰³ And, in October 2021, China and Russia held their 10th annual "Maritime Interaction" naval drill with the Russian Pacific Fleet's anti-submarine ship Admiral Panteleyev, the Moscow-based Sputnik news service reported. China's People's Liberation Army Navy sent several destroyers and a diesel submarine. The two navies said that they drill together to strengthen "combat capabilities" in case of "seaborne threats".¹⁰⁴

Even after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, joint exercises have continued. Examples are the Vostok 2022 exercise in eastern Russia involving more than 50,000 troops where China participated with some 200 troops including air and naval units, a joint maritime exercise in December 2022 in the East China Sea that according to a statement from China's Eastern Theatre Command of the PLA was "directed at demonstrating the determination and capability of the two sides to jointly respond to maritime security threats ... and further deepen the China-Russia comprehensive new-era strategic partnership of coordination".¹⁰⁵ There have also been increases in Russia-China exercises in the Arctic area and overall expanding Chinese and Russian

102 Kyoshi Takenaka, "China, Russia navy ships jointly sail through Japan strait", *Reuters*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-russia-navy-ships-jointly-sail-through-japan-strait-2021-10-19/#:~:text=Russia%20and%20China%20held%20joint%20naval%20drills%20in,when%20their%20relations%20with%20the%20West%20have%20soured>.

103 "China and Russia hold large-scale joint military drills", *Al Jazeera*, August 10, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/10/china-and-russia-hold-large-scale-joint-military-drills>.

104 Ralph Jennings, "China Deepens Informal Alliance with Russia," *VOA News*, December 3, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-deepens-informal-alliance-with-russia/6338773.html>.

105 Li Weichao, "China-Russia joint naval exercise kicks off," Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, December 21, 2022, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/4928825.html

military cooperation. In a meeting in Beijing in July of this year, between the Head of the Russian Navy and the then Chinese Minister of Defence, Li Shangfu stated that he “hoped for increased exchanges, regularly organized training, to conduct joint exercises, joint patrols and joint war games and defense ties to reach a new level”. In the air domain, the two countries continue to cooperate and conduct joint patrols. In November, Tu-95 bombers of the Russian air force and Chinese bombers flew joint patrols over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. Part of the drills included Russian bombers landing in China for the first time, and Chinese bombers flying to an air base in Russia. More recently and of particular interest is a joint naval exercise between China, Russia, and South Africa, carried out in waters south of South Africa in February 2023. It is both an illustration of the close military relationship between Russia and China and it is equally an illustration of the importance of Africa in China and Russia’s international diplomatic efforts and the BRICS cooperation. The increase in exercises and patrols is in line with the most recent Russia-China military roadmap, signed on November 23, 2021, which states that the road-map will “facilitate deeper co-operation in joint patrols and military exercises” as well as “strategic co-ordination in joint military activities”.¹⁰⁶

China and Russia have not only expanded military cooperation in traditional areas but are also undertaking more extensive technological cooperation, including in fifth-generation telecommunications, artificial intelligence (AI), biotechnology, and the digital economy. Beijing and Moscow recognize the potential synergies of joining forces in the development of these dual-use technologies, which possess clear military and commercial significance.¹⁰⁷ This technological cooperation fits well

106 John Grevall, “China, Russia approve 2021–25 road map to increase military co-operation,” *Janes*, November 24, 2021.

107 Samuel Bendett and Elsa B. Kania, “A new Sino-Russian high-tech partnership,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2019, https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/2019-10/A%20new%20Sino-Russian%20high-tech%20partnership_0.pdf?VersionId=xAs9Tv5F.GwoKPiV9QpQ4H8uCOet6LvH.

with China's Military-Civil Fusion strategy and with Russian military doctrinal thinking on Total War, presented by General Gerasimov in an article in 2013.¹⁰⁸

Economic Relations

From 2017 and to 2023, the economies of both Russia and China experienced several shocks and disturbances. These shocks include the global economic impacts and recessions induced by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic; the ongoing global stock market turbulence that started in 2020; the global inflation rate; the geopolitical and economic fallout of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022; and the ongoing Sino-U.S. geopolitical rivalry across numerous fronts.

With the exception for a brief halt during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, bilateral economic cooperation between China and Russia has largely continued, expanding and deepening during this period. Nevertheless, economic cooperation between Russia and China remains unbalanced as Russia's trade with China remains much more important to Russia than China's trade with Russia.

With an export-led economic model, the Russian economy—and by extension the Russian state apparatus—is heavily reliant on its sales and export of natural gas and crude oil. In 2021, the revenue from its energy export made up 45 percent of Russia's federal budget. The Russian economy is therefore highly vulnerable to disruptions in the global oil and natural gas market. In addition, the opportunity for strong economic growth remains low in the mid to long-term for Russia, as its economy will unlikely be able to reduce its dependence on its energy sector in this timeframe. The Russian economy is dependent on high energy prices, whereas China benefits from low and stable energy prices.

108 Valery Gerasimov, "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations," *Military-Industrial Kurier*, February 27, 2013, Translated by Robert Coalson, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/military-review/archives/english/militaryreview_20160228_art008.pdf.

China's economy has undergone extensive export diversification efforts and strengthened different industrial sectors to reduce its economic vulnerability. The country's economy still faces the challenges posed by structural slow-downs caused by such factors as an aging population and declining birth rate, rising corporate debt, labor shortage, low-investment efficiency, among others, and most of these factors remain unresolved. The imbalance economic relationship between China and Russia was evident even before the war in Ukraine, but the war and subsequent sanctions against Russia, have accelerated the imbalance.

The overall trajectory for Sino-Russian bilateral trade volume since 2017 has been one of continued growth and deeper integration, despite the COVID-19 induced decreases in 2021. In addition, the structure of bilateral trade between China and Russia continues to be dominated by a few key products and commodities. The bulk of Russia's exports to China consist of raw materials such as crude petroleum, coal briquettes, refined petroleum, minerals, and metals. Meanwhile, the main products exported from China to Russia consist of electrical machinery, electronics, machinery, mechanical appliances, and parts (e.g., computers, telephones, cars, motor vehicles, etc.).¹⁰⁹

In 2017, China became Russia's No. 1 trading partner, leaving others far behind. Trade turnover between the neighbors reached \$108.3, fixing a record growth of 24.5 percent, and has since shown a rather steady trajectory. One important element in the continued increase in trade came in May 2018, when the BRI was integrated into the development of the Eurasian Economic Union. An agreement on trade and economic cooperation was signed between the Eurasian Economic Union and China, and in late October, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang announced that the agreement had officially taken effect. Under the framework of the BRI and its alignment with the economic union's development strategies,

109 The Observatory of Economic Complexity, China/Russia, 2023, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/rus>.

trade opportunities between China and Russia received additional momentum. In addition to increasing cooperation in energy, nuclear energy, aerospace, aviation, and infrastructure, the two countries should foster new sources of growth by expanding cooperation in science and innovation, agricultural products, e-commerce, and finance.¹¹⁰ Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the sanctions imposed against Russia, Sino-Russian trade experienced a short downfall. However, it soon gained traction again, exceeding the trade volume of previous years.¹¹¹ 2022 saw an increase in trade of 29 percent, according to statistics from the General Administration of Customs of the PCR. Of this, the Chinese export to Russia accounted for \$76.123 billion, and the Russian export to China accounted for \$114.149 billion.¹¹² Due to the strong sanctions from the West, Russia has become even more dependent on China for the survival of its economy, a dynamic that has affected the countries' economic relationship. The surge in Sino-Russian economic cooperation after the outbreak of the war can be seen as primarily having benefited China, while the economic interests of Russia are struggling.

Considerable growth in Sino-Russian bilateral trade is especially noticeable in the energy trade and the metal trade. In 2022, China became the largest importer of Russian energy, importing Russian fossil fuels for about EUR 86 billion. Russian energy exports have consisted of oil, coal, pipeline gas, and LNG, and have experienced a significant increase in volume and value. Even though the energy exports have

110 Yu Sui, "China-Russia Milestones in 2019," *China US Focus*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, January 7, 2020, https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/2019-10/A%20new%20Sino-Russian%20high-tech%20partnership_0.pdf?VersionId=xAs9Tv5F.GwoKPiv9QpQ4H8uCOet6Lvh.

111 Janis Kluge, "How Western Sanctions are Transforming Sino-Russian Economic Cooperation," Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2023, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/how-western-sanctions-are-transforming-sino-russian-economic-cooperation-135805>.

112 China-Russia Information Network, "Zhonghe zixun wang, "Zhongguo haiguan shuju: 2022 nian zhonghe maoyi e zengzhang jin 30% chao 19000 yi meiyuan [Chinese customs data: Sino-Russian trade volume will increase by nearly 30% in 2022 to exceed US\$190 billion]," January 13, 2023, <http://www.chinaru.info/zhonghejmyw/zhongemaoyi/68186.shtml>.

been heavily discounted due to price ceilings, sanctions, and embargoes, the value of the exports became 56 percent higher in 2022 than in 2021.¹¹³ In the energy trade too, it can be seen that the Sino-Russian economic relationship is growing unequally. The value of Russia's share of Chinese energy imports has only seen a minor rise in comparison to China's share of Russian exports, which has doubled from 15 percent to 30 percent. Russia's increasing dependency on China being its main energy consumer is risky and could potentially be used by China as leverage in other areas. As mentioned, the metal trade between the countries has also experienced a sizable growth since the start of the war, of which a particular increase can be seen in China's export of alumina to Russia, a material that is essential to produce military hardware.¹¹⁴

While many areas of Sino-Russian economic cooperation have flourished after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, others have not. Some Chinese companies are cautious about extensive cooperation with parts of the Russian industry due to the threat of secondary sanctions from the West, the unclear future of Russian industries with Western investors leaving as well as the potential damage it could have on relations with the U.S. and its allies.¹¹⁵ Big Chinese companies are also afraid of losing access to the U.S. and EU markets in case of substantial cooperation with Russia.¹¹⁶ An example of an area where economic cooperation has not deepened is the car industry. With Western investors leaving the Russian car industry, Chinese companies seem unwilling to invest in it and are only open to superficial cooperation. Other areas that also come up short include the IT sector (where Huawei halted mobile

113 Hugo Von Essen, "Russia-China Economic Relations since the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine," Swedish National China Centre, Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, 2023, <https://sceeus.se/en/publications/russia-china-economic-relations-since-the-full-scale-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

114 Von Essen, *Russia-China Economic Relations since the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*.

115 Kluge, "How Western Sanctions are Transforming Sino-Russian Economic Cooperation."

116 Sergei Lukonin, "Russia-China Relations: An Asymmetrical Partnership?" *MGIMO Review of International Relations* 16, no. 2 (2023): 65-86, DOI 10.24833/2071-8160-2023-2-89-65-86.

equipment to Russia), the arms trade, and the joint development of the CR929, a domestic Chinese long-haul aircraft.¹¹⁷ Of significant interest is the arms trade, where China seems to be more cautious and has so far taken a balancing act, not to upset the U.S. and the EU. Even as the Russian arms industry is suffering and experiencing big challenges to keep up production, China seems unwilling to directly support Russia in this area. Apart from components and dual-use items, it is hard to find evidence and data on military sales to Russia. This has “opened a window” for North Korea and according to open-source reports, it is now suggested that more than 1,000 containers of military equipment have been exported from North Korea to Russia.

In March 2023, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin met in Moscow to discuss development plans and policy directions for Sino-Russian economic cooperation until 2030, further affirming the Sino-Russian economic cooperation. The presidents agreed to strengthen the cooperation in several economic and business areas.¹¹⁸ One important goal they set was to increase the use of local currencies, the yuan and the ruble, which according to Putin, already accounted for two-thirds of Sino-Russian trade deal payments.¹¹⁹ This is something that has been on the Chinese and Russian agenda for a long time but has become more urgent due to the war and the sanctions against Russia.¹²⁰

117 Kluge, “How Western Sanctions are Transforming Sino-Russian Economic Cooperation.”

118 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Zhonghua renmin gongheguo zhuxi he eluosi lianbang zongtong guanyu 2030 nian qian zhonghe jingji hezuo zhongdian fangxiang fazhan guihua de lianhe shengming [Joint Statement by the President of the People’s Republic of China and the President of the Russian Federation on the development plan for key directions of China-Russia economic cooperation until 2030],” March 22, 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202303/t20230322_11046176.shtml?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email.

119 Evelyn Cheng, “China and Russia affirm economic cooperation for the next several years,” *CNBC*, March 22, 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/03/22/china-and-russia-affirm-multi-year-economic-cooperation.html>.

120 Maia Nikoladze and Mrugank Bhusari, “Russia and China have been teaming up to reduce reliance on the dollar. Here’s how it’s going,” *Atlantic Council*, February 22, 2023, <https://www.>

Since 2014, China and Russia have been cooperating in trying to reduce their economies' reliance on the U.S. dollar for international trade and finance.¹²¹ As Russia became unable to transact in dollars and euros after sanctions were imposed, Russia has rapidly increased its use of yuan in the Russian national reserves. Russia has also diverted to direct ruble-yuan trade between the countries, making the volume of ruble-yuan trade increase.¹²² Even private use of the yuan is increasing in Russia, with Russian banks and companies starting to issue yuan bonds. More Russian banks now offer the possibility to save in yuan, which more individuals are doing.¹²³ On May 24, 2023, Russia and China's economic ties became further strengthened after Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin's visit to Beijing, where he met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Chinese Premier Li Qiang and signed a series of bilateral agreements for further economic cooperation. The agreements include promoting Russian agricultural exports to China, deepening investment in trade services, and furthering sports cooperation.¹²⁴

In conclusion, the onset of Russia's war in Ukraine in 2022 has put Russia's economy under severe pressure from economic sanctions imposed by the United States, the European Union, and other like-minded countries. China has played and continues to play an important role in helping Russia sidestep sanctions and keep the Russian economy afloat. The caveat with an increased economic reliance on China has however been a fundamental transformation of an already loop-sided Sino-Russian re-

atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russia-and-china-have-been-teaming-up-to-reduce-reliance-on-the-dollar-heres-how-its-going/.

121 Nikoladze and Bhusari, "Russia and China have been teaming up to reduce reliance on the dollar. Here's how it's going."

122 Ibid.

123 Von Essen, *Russia-China Economic Relations since the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine*.

124 Emily Tamkin, "Russia and China Sign New Deals to Deepen Economic Ties," *Foreign Policy*, May 24, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/24/russia-china-bilateral-agreements-trade-mishustin-beijing-trip/>.

lationship, further cementing China and Russia as the senior respective junior partners in an emerging partnership of like-minded authoritarian countries.¹²⁵

China's domestic economic challenges and its stronger dependence on "Western" markets and investments are likely to further increase the unequal relationship, when China attempts to narrow some of the differences with the West, to address its domestic economic challenges.

125 Jonathan E. Hillman, "China and Russia: Economic Unequals," Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-and-russia-economic-unequals>; Alexandra Prokopenko, "The Risks of Russia's Growing Dependence on the Yuan," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88926>.

3. Changes in Sino-Soviet and Sino-Russian Relations

The earlier-presented timeline offers an overview of the many inflection points in the relationship between Beijing and Moscow from 1949 to 2023, allowing us to derive some important insights.

First, the most recent 30 years of Sino-Russian relations can be characterized by a slow and sometimes bumpy ride, but the overall impression is a positive trajectory. This stands in contrast to the volatile nature of Sino-Soviet relations (1949–1989), which changed drastically from the period when the two countries formed an alliance and the Soviet Union was China’s “big brother” (*lao dage* 老大哥), which began in 1950 with the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance and lasted until the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950s. In the post-Mao period, Sino-Russian relations have by contrast gradually improved and trade has developed steadily year by year, and today China remains far more important to Russia than Russia is to China. Internationally, the relationship today is characterized by a remarkable level of cordiality and respect—evident in multilateral forums where China and Russia regularly echo each other’s positions on key issues. Military cooperation has also continued and even expanded: it has moved from focusing on buying and selling arms to include more direct military to military consultations, training and exercises, and joint development in emerging technologies.

Second, the changes in Sino-Soviet and Sino-Russian relations seem to strongly correlate with external factors and events, with the most important one being Moscow’s and Beijing’s perception of the threat posed by the United States. For instance, NATO’s bombing of the former Yugoslavia was widely perceived by China and Russia as being another expression of U.S. unilateralism. For these reasons, during periods of

heightened competition and tension with the U.S., the relationship between Moscow and Beijing has generally been closer and this trend is clearly visible at present.

Third, the personalities and political ambitions of the respective leaders do matter. When leaders' ambitions and personal styles coincide, as evident with President Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping as well as with Putin and Xi, major changes are possible and stronger relations develop. Looking forward, with Putin and Xi likely to remain in office for the short to medium term, we can expect continued close cooperation between Russia and China. The very close personal bonds between the two likely shape much of China's policy on the war in Ukraine and a clear defeat of Russia could have significant domestic negative implication for President Xi's leadership.

Fourth, history indicates that the overall relationship has been strengthened, but several asymmetries exist in economic and trade relations, in dependencies and in technological modernization and maturity as well as in some political issues. These asymmetric dependencies are likely to increase given that Russia for decades will be suffering from economic and political "isolation" as a result of the war in Ukraine. But still, Russia will have much to bring to the table from a Chinese perspective, not least continued military cooperation including lessons learned from the war, energy and other resources, foreign policy knowledge and expertise, and longstanding partnerships with several countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America.

Fifth, Russia's unprovoked war in Ukraine has and will continue to have a profound impact on Sino-Russian relations. It has already demonstrated that the two have, if not the same strategic objectives at least several similar objectives, and until now China does not seem willing to use its political and economic influence to deter Russia. The war has not only strengthened China's position vis-à-vis Russia but has also strengthened China's military position in East Asia, as "the West" is heavily engaged

in military support to Ukraine. Furthermore, the military lessons from the war will draw China and Russia closer as will efforts to re-build Russia's military capability after the war.

Sixth, both Russia and China are strongly opposed to "color revolutions", viewing them as Western-sponsored attempts to seek regime change. For instance, Russia remains wary of the popular uprising after the U.S. expressed support for the color revolutions in Ukraine in 2004–2005. Meanwhile, China learned the hard way when the UNSC mandate to impose a No-Fly Zone over Libya morphed into an operation designed to oust Muammar Gaddafi.

Seventh, Russia and China are currently united by a kind of shared ideology centered on opposition to the Western-dominated world order with its focus on human rights, democracy, and freedom of speech. Globally, the two countries are also increasing their cooperation attempting to reshape international norms and governance structures into a multipolar world order, more aligned to their way of undemocratic and autocratic ruling.

Eighth, both Russia and China, or rather the Presidents Putin and Xi, acknowledge and foster the importance of culture and history as decisive factors in their pursuit of both domestic and foreign policies. Combined with massive social control and information campaigns and restricting free speech and media to rationalize their policies and boost domestic support.

Ninth, history clearly highlights a trajectory where Russia has gone from being the senior partner to becoming the junior partner. This trend is likely to continue as China's economy, technological advancements and overall political clout are unlikely to suffer major setbacks. As Nina L. Khrushcheva put it in a recent insightful analysis of the significance of President Xi's visit to Moscow this year: "Some believe that Xi's visit to Moscow was intended to lend legitimacy to Putin's regime in the wake

of the ICC indictment. It is more likely, however, that Xi visited Moscow to show—not just to Russia but also to the U.S.—who is in charge. By throwing Putin a lifeline, Xi has further empowered China, which is now better-positioned than ever to influence the international order.”¹²⁶

Russia-China Relations – Where To?

Unless there are some major changes in domestic politics in China and/or Russia which is unlikely, we believe that for the next five to ten years we will see a continuation of the current trajectory, which points in the direction of a comprehensive relationship centered on at least three shared perceptions of global geopolitical developments.

Firstly, the joint perception of a heightened “threat” from the U.S. and Western democratic nations. This “threat” is not just from the combined military power of the “West”, but from the values and principles that the “West” generally represents and promotes democracy, market economy, respect for human rights, freedom of speech, rule of law and individual rights. In part represented by the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, EU and NATO enlargements, and the “West’s” support of “color revolutions”. The struggle and the conflict lines are as much about the authoritarian systems that Russia and China represent, as they are about hard power and military capabilities. Russia and China both have a credible nuclear deterrent and a sizeable military capability and face low risks from external military intervention to their national sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, both Putin and Xi realize that their totalitarian systems, their personal positions, and their way of government are unlikely to survive a democratization process or the introduction of freedom of speech. To counter such risks, they are likely to increase military capabilities to maintain the narrative that both nations and their “culture and history” are threatened by the U.S. and the West.

126 Nina L. Khrushcheva, “Xi’s the Boss,” Project Syndicate, March 29, 2023, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/xi-visit-moscow-putin-display-of-chinese-strength-by-nina-l-khrushcheva-2023-03>.

In addition, they are likely to strengthen the entire domestic security apparatus, increase partnerships with nations less concerned over the lack of democratic institutions, human rights and freedom of speech, and try to cement their hold on power on a cult of personality, mass surveillance of the population and the suppression of press freedom and political dissidents, and the concentration of state power. Part of this will be an increase in information operations designed to boost the national narratives and discredit and potential disrupt Western actions and ambitions. As earlier discussed, both Russia and China are strongly opposed to “color revolutions”, viewing them as Western-sponsored attempts to seek regime change, and such political attempts may be new areas of confrontation, be it in Africa or elsewhere.

Secondly, the present Chinese and Russian leaders share the perception that the democratic world is inevitably in decline, or to use the Chinese terminology, that “the East is rising while the West is declining” and that a new multipolar world order is emerging. Examples of this perception are many: the rift in the transatlantic relationship during the Trump administration, the disharmony within the European Union over migration policy, the differences within Europe over its economic and trade relations with China, and the aftermath of the presidential election in the U.S., among others. More polarized political discussions in Europe and growing nationalistic and extremist sentiments offer both China and Russia opportunities to leverage political influence in Europe. The chaotic withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan and the rapid take-over of the country by the Taliban serve to reinforce the belief that the U.S. and its NATO allies are in a state of decline. In addition, they also share the desire to end the U.S. “unipolar moment” and establish a new multipolar world order in which especially China would have greater leverage and power. We are likely to continue to witness a sharper turn towards more totalitarianism, not less and more coordinated efforts by Russia and China to form partnerships with many nations in Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and parts of South America that do not fully support these “Western” ideals. Beijing and Moscow are also united

in their opposition to NATO and EU expansion as well as Washington's increased focus on establishing new partnerships in East Asia. Heavy criticism has been made from both Russia and China against NATO's new Indo-Pacific strategy and the collaboration within the AUKUS and Quad frameworks. The increased level of defense-related cooperation between China and Russia is meant as a clear signal to the United States and its NATO partners. Their message is that, if the West continues to apply what they consider to be undue pressure and increased partnerships with nations in China's and Russia's "near abroad", then they will increase their level of bilateral cooperation—including defense coordination—in response. Not forming a formal military alliance but more coordinated military activity. One important indicator of how far they are prepared to pursue this coordination is changes in China's current "balancing policy" towards Russia in the war in Ukraine or any type of cooperation related to nuclear deterrence. In sum, we are likely to witness Russia and China increasing their cooperation in attempting to reshape international norms and governance structures. The increasing focus on promoting international organizations where Russia and China have leading roles, where the SCO, BRICS and the Eurasian Economic Forum are three examples. Deliberation and decisions on international standards are likely to become areas of increased competition related to trade, economy, logistics, new technologies and cyber (e.g. cloud service providers). Several aspects, not least security and confidence-building measures, around the development and operational use of Emerging Disruptive Technologies including artificial intelligence are other likely inflection points.

Lastly, in China in particular, it is a widespread perception that the policies pursued overall have been successful. Or, as Neil Shearing concludes: "This most recent era of globalization was underpinned by a belief that economic integration would lead to China and the former Eastern Bloc countries becoming what former World Bank Chief Robert Zoellick termed 'responsible stakeholders' within the global system. But China has instead emerged as a strategic rival to the U.S. This strategic

rivalry is already forcing others to pick sides as the world splinters into two blocs: one that aligns primarily with the US and another that aligns primarily with China.¹²⁷ Other perceived indicators of the successful outcome of China's policies are continued and successful territorial claims in the South China Sea without any major drawbacks, the ability to convince nations to change their diplomatic recognition of Taiwan (ROC) for China (PRC), many successful business projects within the overall Belt and Road Initiative and the crackdown on the democracy movement in Hongkong, without major repercussions. China has also lately achieved some diplomatic successes by facilitating restoration of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia and presenting a peace plan for the war in Ukraine. Promoting China as an internationally reliable partner falls well in line with its three recently announced global visions: the Global Development Initiative,¹²⁸ the Global Security Initiative,¹²⁹ and the Global Civilization Initiative.¹³⁰

The perception in China and in many capitals around the world is that China (and Russia to a lesser degree) offers attractive alternatives to Western-dominated initiatives and programs. For example, in many countries in Africa and parts of South America, Russia's longstanding relations with these nations have supported Chinese initiatives. The trilateral naval exercise between South Africa, Russia, and China conducted south of Cape Horn in February 2023 serves as an illustration. However, probably the most important indicator of successful policies is

127 Neil Shearing, "World economy is fracturing, not deglobalizing," Chatham House, February 8, 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/02/world-economy-fracturing-not-deglobalizing>.

128 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Global Development Initiative – Building on 2030 SDGs for Stronger, Greener and Healthier Global Development (Concept Paper)," 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/topics_665678/GDI/wj/202305/P020230511396286957196.pdf.

129 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper," 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230221_11028348.html.

130 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Maldives, "The Global Civilization Initiative: Advocate Cultural Mutual Respect & Mutual Learning, Promote Civilization Prosperity & Progress," 2023, http://mv.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgsd/202305/t20230520_11080670.htm.

the economic development in China. China today is the world's second-largest economy and even if the economy is showing signs of reduced growth, it is still performing better than most other nations. For Russia, the perception is somewhat different and the war in Ukraine can partly be explained by the fact that President Putin found it necessary to risk a military confrontation, a war, to achieve his political ambitions. Soft power, propaganda, political corruption, and economic coercion did not achieve the desired effect. Ukraine was moving closer to Europe and the West, not the opposite. However, by launching an unprovoked war that was ill-prepared strategically and tactically, Russia set in motion forces it is now unable to control and contain. The outcome of the war will be hugely important, not only for the international system as a whole but equally so, for Sino-Russian relations. Initially, China did not seem to be overly concerned about the fallout of the war or, as Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi asserted on March 7, 2022, "No matter how perilous the international situation, China and Russia will maintain their strategic focus and continuously advance our comprehensive strategic partnership for the new era".¹³¹ He continued to stress that the situation in Ukraine made no difference to China's relations with Russia. But too much one-sided support to Russia may jeopardize the ambition of assuming the global leadership role President Xi aspires to and pose challenges to China's economy, and efforts to balance China's relation with Russia and modify its view on the war are becoming evident. The presentation of a 12-point peace plan for the war, the well-crafted statements or even the lack of statement on Ukraine, after his visit to Moscow and the statements in relation to Macron's visit to Beijing all serve the same purpose, i.e. to promote China as a peace-loving nation, offer nations an alternative to U.S. domination and make sure President Putin and the world understand who is in charge. Continued economic challenges in China may result in a somewhat adjusted Chinese foreign and economic policy but is unlikely to significantly alter the Sino-

131 Kawashima Shin, "China and the War in Ukraine: Anatomy of a Tightrope Act," *Nippon*, April 26, 2022, <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/a08101/>.

Russian relationship. It may even be in China's interest to picture itself as a more responsible international partner than Russia, without major changes in the relationship.

One additional area where the alignment and perceptions of the current rulers in Beijing and Moscow are particularly strong relates to culture and history. They view Sino-Russian unity and cooperation as a decisive measure to counter the values and institutions of liberal democracy, which they consider to be a lethal threat to their authoritarianism. For them, it is a matter of survival of their authoritarian rule to construct alternative worldviews. Putin seems to be obsessed with the idea of building a strong Russia based on his distorted image of traditional Russia and its culture. In China, Xi Jinping and his ideologues seem to spare no effort in trying to identify "specific characteristics" of Chinese culture to refute anything that smacks of universalism. The infamous Document Number Nine of 2012 identified seven problems, among these promoting Western constitutional democracy, universal values, and Western-style journalism.¹³² Seemingly, both Putin and Xi find it essential to promote ideologies that emphasize the essential differences between the decadent West on the decline and the superior qualities of their own cultures and social systems to the population in their countries. By means of its enormous propaganda machine and control apparatus, the Chinese leaders may for a shorter or longer period of time uphold their worldview as an ideological orthodoxy, but in view of the major changes in the mindsets of the Chinese citizens that decades of reform and opening up have resulted in, we question if this worldview has any chance of winning the hearts of most people in China. It is also hard to believe that most Russians will in the long run buy Putin's authoritarian and expansionist ideology, which is based on a wildly distorted view of Russia's history and culture. The outcome of the war in Ukraine will be instrumental for any change in the Russian mindset. A decisive defeat

132 "Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation," *ChinaFile*, November 8, 2013, <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

could be the starting point for a nationwide and popular discussion about “the Russian narrative”, whereas even a marginal victory or a cease-fire is unlikely to trigger such a change.

Even though Russia and China have many areas where their objectives align it is not without challenges and potential setbacks. The growing asymmetry within both the economic and political fields is a likely area for friction. With Russia’s growing dependency on China and if China were to exploit this dependency, Russia may find it necessary to once more limit the relationship. Russia’s more “interventionist foreign policy” may be another potential area of friction and any actions from Russia to horizontally escalate the war in Ukraine would likely be met by reservations in Beijing. Even a vertical escalation in the war in Ukraine may make China change its current “balancing policy” and reduce or withdraw its political support. Other potential areas of friction could arise from the growing Russia-DPRK relationship, Russia trying to improve its relationship with “China-friendly” ASEAN nations, or Chinese pressure on Russia to make major concessions and allow more Chinese resource exploitation in the Arctic.

One area where a gradual and careful adjustment may occur is in Chinese foreign and international economic policy. China, much more than Russia, is dependent on international economic and technological cooperation. The recent economic challenges in China within real estate and youth unemployment coupled with more restrictions in international trade and technological cooperation (semi-conductors) as a consequence of China’s assertive foreign policy and crack-down in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, is likely to result in a re-balancing in some foreign policy areas. China may be more willing to engage and cooperate in arrangements related to climate, international trade, financial services, and risk management. Such a development will further add to the asymmetries in the relationship between Russia and China but is unlikely to in the near future have a serious or major negative impact on the relationship.

4. Conclusion

Our historical timeline shows that major changes to Sino-Russian relations are possible. The driving forces behind these changes have been external developments (end of the Cold War), leadership changes and/or ideological convergence. Looking ahead, our main conclusion is that the trajectory in Russia-China relations that points to continuation rather than major changes. Key factors in this “continuation” are the anti-Western or anti-democratic stance, the efforts toward a more multipolar global governance system and the personal relations between Presidents Putin and Xi. An additional area that binds these two leaders together is a firm belief in the historical narratives about both nations being unfairly treated and unjustified in being pushed back or contained in their domestic and international ambitions. This continuation may take the form of even closer ideological convergence, closer coordination in foreign policy, increased military cooperation and a continued turn towards more totalitarianism and multipolarity and pragmatic cooperation of an ad-hoc nature.

The current geopolitical competition between the United States and liberal democracies on the one hand and China and Russia on the other hand is likely to remain. The relationship is highly dependent on the personal relationship between Putin and Xi, and this may also become an area for friction. An even more isolated Russian leader and further setbacks or Russian escalations in the war in Ukraine, will likely put political pressure on Xi to distance China from Russia and may even become a challenge to his political leadership. Another potential area of friction is the growing asymmetries between the two and China’s significantly larger dependency on international economic cooperation. With growing discussion and awareness of “the securitization of everything” championed by China, in the current competitive security environment, it will most likely not be possible for China to foster

improved economic relations without making changes to its foreign and security policies, including possible changes in its support for Russia. But the main trajectory is a continuation of the relationship, and this relationship can be summarized as “not always in agreements, but never against” combined with a high degree of mutual respect.

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Acknowledgment

This report has been made possible through the expert advice, contribution, and strong support of Professor Torbjörn Lodén, former Head of the ISDP China Center.

