

The Sino-Russian Partnership

Assumptions, Myths and Realities

January 2023

Bobo LO

With the support of DGRIS (Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy), Ministry of the Armed Forces, under “Russia, Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia Observatory” (Ifri)



Author

Bobo Lo is an Associate Research Fellow with the Russia/NIS Center at Ifri. He is also a Non-Resident Fellow with the Lowy Institute, Sydney, Australia; and a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) in Washington, D.C. Previously, he was Head of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House, and Deputy Head of Mission at the Australian Embassy in Moscow.

Dr. Lo has written several books, including *A Wary Embrace: What the China-Russia Relationship Means for the World* (Penguin Australia, 2017); *Russia and the New World Disorder* (Brookings and Chatham House, 2015); and *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics* (Brookings and Chatham House, 2008).

Abstract

When Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin announced a “no limits friendship” at their February 2022 summit, the message was that Beijing and Moscow had reached a new peak in relations. Yet Putin’s invasion of Ukraine has exposed the limits of Sino-Russian partnership, and highlighted their sometimes diverging interests. Far from being an authoritarian alliance, this is a classic great power relationship centred on realpolitik rather than ideological like-mindedness. China and Russia are strategically autonomous actors, with fundamentally different attitudes towards international order.

The Sino-Russian partnership remains resilient. Both sides recognize that it is too important to fail, especially in the face of huge domestic and international challenges, and when there are no viable alternatives to continuing cooperation. Nevertheless, the balance of power within the relationship is changing rapidly. Russia’s geopolitical and economic dependence on China is now greater than at any time. While predictions of a clientelist relationship are premature, this growing inequality represents a major long-term source of weakness. The gulf in Chinese and Russian interests is likely to widen, even as both sides remain in denial.

The challenges Beijing and Moscow pose to Western interests are largely separate, and should be addressed individually on their merits, and not on the basis of crude normative stereotypes. To view China and Russia as a conjoined entity is not just intellectually unsound, it is also a sure route to bankrupt policymaking. Conversely, it is naïve to imagine that reaching out to Beijing and Moscow could help loosen the strategic partnership. Western governments should recognize the limits of their influence and focus principally on upping their own game—from revitalizing democracy and the rule of law at home to addressing universal threats such as climate change and food insecurity.

Table of contents

INTRODUCTION	5
THE UKRAINE SHOCK	7
Russia's Failure and China's Pain	8
Testing the Limits of Partnership	9
ACHIEVEMENTS, FAILURES, LIMITATIONS	13
Security and Defence.....	13
Geopolitics and Global Order.....	16
Political, Ideological and Personal Affinities.....	19
Economic	22
SINO-RUSSIAN PARTNERSHIP—WHAT IT IS AND IS NOT	24
OUTLOOK—THREE OVERLAPPING NARRATIVES	27
The Hopeful	27
The Fearful.....	28
The Linear	29
Implications for Western Policy.....	31

Introduction

The Sino-Russian partnership, unlike Moscow's turbulent engagement with the West, has enjoyed a largely seamless progression since the early 1990s. When Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin at their February 2022 summit announced a "no limits friendship",¹ it appeared to be the logical culmination of decades of steady achievement on multiple fronts. The image both leaders sought to project was of an unprecedented convergence of interests and values, in a relationship whose potential seemed boundless.

Putin's invasion of Ukraine has, however, disrupted this smooth picture. From the outset, it was clear there were real limits to Sino-Russian friendship, and that the interests of the two sides were not the same. Beijing was surprised by the scale and viciousness of the war and by Russia's military setbacks. And Moscow discovered that Chinese support would remain largely rhetorical.

Yet Western hopes that the Sino-Russian partnership might fray under these pressures have so far proved unwarranted. Beijing has not abandoned Moscow. Although it has espoused a position of formal neutrality, the Chinese leadership has backed the Kremlin's claim that the Russian invasion is a "special military operation", provoked by the United States and its allies, and in particular by the expansion of NATO.²

The signals, then, are mixed. Is the Russian war in Ukraine merely a bump in the road in the seemingly inexorable process of Sino-Russian convergence, following which Beijing and Moscow will resume and even strengthen their cooperation? Or does it mark a turning point in the relationship, the beginning of its unravelling? Either way, the war will test core assumptions about the Sino-Russian partnership: the supposed authoritarian like-mindedness of the two sides; the extent to which their strategic agendas are compatible; and their capacity to cooperate effectively now and in the future.

Of course, these are early days, and the fortunes of the Sino-Russian relationship will necessarily be affected by the outcomes of

1. "Joint statement of Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin", Beijing, President of Russia Website, February 4, 2022, available at: www.en.kremlin.ru.

2. E. Cheng, "China Refuses to Call Russian Attack on Ukraine an 'Invasion', Deflects Blame to US", *CNBC*, February 24, 2022, available at: www.cnbc.com.

the war in Ukraine, as well as by developments elsewhere: the intense rivalry between the United States and China; the security situation around Taiwan and in the wider Asia-Pacific region; and domestic politics in America, China, Russia, and Europe. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to arrive at some preliminary judgements.

This essay will argue the following:

The war in Ukraine is the most serious challenge to Sino-Russian partnership in three decades. This is a pivotal moment, even if its consequences take some time to play out.

More than ever, the Sino-Russian partnership is driven by strategic calculus rather than ideological convergence.

Although the war has exposed the limits of Sino-Russian cooperation, it has also underlined its continuing importance to both sides. Beijing and especially Moscow have few options.

The war has accentuated the imbalance of power within the relationship. China is self-evidently the stronger (or “senior”) partner. Yet predictions that Russia will become a client-state of China are premature at best.

The challenges that China and Russia pose to Western interests and global order are very different. Conflating them on the premise that authoritarians “think alike” is a sure route to bankrupt policymaking.

The Ukraine Shock

The juxtaposition of the Sino-Russian summit of February 4, 2022 and the launch of the Russian invasion of Ukraine three weeks later has led to speculation that Beijing was complicit in Putin's enterprise.³ Although we cannot know for sure what Putin told Xi in Beijing, it is highly likely that he would have informed him of the decision to launch some kind of military intervention. To have kept the Chinese president completely in the dark would have violated the spirit of the "no limits" friendship talked up at the summit.

Nevertheless, Beijing's reaction to the invasion suggests that it was caught by surprise.⁴ It made no prior preparations to evacuate some 6,000 Chinese students in Ukraine, and in the first few days its public position was hesitant and confused. There are a couple of possible explanations for this. One is that Putin told Xi that the "special military operation" would be of limited duration. It would end in an early and decisive Russian victory, with Kyiv—and the West—forced to accept a *fait accompli*. The obvious analogy here is with Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea, achieved with barely a shot fired. Alternatively, Putin may have said to Xi that his primary objective was to consolidate Russian control over Crimea and the Donbass. While this explanation does not tally with the reality of Moscow's initial multi-fronted assault, Putin could conceivably have argued, retrospectively, that this ambitious approach was necessary to achieve his limited aims.

Xi may well have thought that invasion was a bad idea, but also that it was none of his business. There is a lot to be said for plausible deniability.⁵ Besides, if he—like many Western leaders—believed it would all be over soon, there would have been no point in trying to dissuade Putin from his intended course of action. Best to stand aside and maintain a publicly neutral and non-committal position. In this connection, one of the strengths of the Sino-Russian relationship has been the ability to overlook differences when their positions are not

3. See, for example, O. Arne Westad, "The Next Sino-Russian Split?", *Foreign Affairs*, April 5, 2022, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.

4. Y. Sun, "Ukraine: Did China Have a Clue?", Stimson Center, February 28, 2022, available at: www.stimson.org.

5. Unsurprisingly, the Chinese have consistently denied that they knew of Putin's intentions. See "Xi Jinping's Plan to Reset Chin's Economy and Win Back Friends", *Financial Times*, January 10, 2023, available at: www.ft.com.

necessarily aligned. For example, Beijing's continuing refusal to recognize the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation has had no negative consequences for their bilateral cooperation. Quite the contrary, Crimea (and subsequent Western sanctions) became the catalyst for a major expansion of the Sino-Russian partnership.⁶

Russia's Failure and China's Pain

It is a truism to say that the invasion of Ukraine has turned out disastrously for Putin. Almost everything that could have gone wrong has gone wrong. The Russian military has suffered enormous losses in personnel and materiel, while achieving very few of its objectives. Ukrainian national identity, far from being suppressed, has been greatly strengthened as a result of the conflict. Transatlantic relations, which were in some disarray following the fiasco of the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan, have been significantly boosted. NATO has rediscovered a sense of mission. The notion of a US-led international order, which had appeared to be in terminal decline, has gained new credibility. And Putin's failures have raised questions about the stability of his regime⁷—an outcome few would have predicted before February 24, 2022.

China, too, has been a net loser from Putin's war. True, Moscow is more dependent on Beijing than before. But the downsides have greatly exceeded any dividends. China has suffered severe reputational damage in the West from its close association with an international delinquent. The timing of the invasion so soon after the Xi-Putin summit created the impression that China was somehow involved. Beijing's subsequent refusal to criticize the invasion has undermined its claims to support national sovereignty and the territorial integrity of states. Meanwhile, the United States has become more confident in asserting global leadership; US-led structures such as the Quad (United States, Japan, India, Australia) and AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States) have been strengthened; European hostility towards China has increased;⁸

6. B. Lo, *A Wary Embrace*, Lowy Institute and Penguin Random House Australia, p. 15, 2017.

7. A. Lieven, "Putin's Regime May Fall—But What Comes Next?", *The Guardian*, September 27, 2022, available at: www.theguardian.com.

8. N. Barkin, "Watching China in Europe—April 2022", German Marshall Fund (GMF), April 6, 2022, available at: www.gmfus.org. See also interview with S. Kotkin, "What Putin Got Wrong about Ukraine, Russia, and the West", *Foreign Affairs*, May 26, 2022, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com; and I. Johnson, "Has China Lost Europe?", *Foreign Affairs*, June 10, 2022, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.

and key Western decision-makers view the Sino-Russian partnership as an alliance in all but name.⁹

The war has also engendered a new cycle of economic instability, marked by soaring food and energy prices, the disruption of supply chains, and an impending global recession—all this at a time of mounting domestic challenges to Chinese growth.¹⁰ There are unwelcome comparisons between Ukraine and Taiwan, with Western policy-makers and commentators tying Western resolve over Ukraine to the goal of deterring a Chinese assault on Taiwan. US President Joe Biden is now openly talking about employing American troops to defend the island in the event of such an attack.¹¹ The threat of a forcible reunification of Taiwan with the mainland, with which Xi has attempted to intimidate Taipei and Washington, has become less credible. The logistical difficulties in conducting such an operation dwarf those facing Russia in Ukraine.¹² The limitations of military power in pursuing strategic aims have been amply demonstrated. And the success of American-led assistance to Ukraine has emboldened Washington in its dealings with both allies and foes in the Asia-Pacific region.

Testing the Limits of Partnership

Putin's expectations of China at the outset of the invasion appear to have been fairly modest. So long as Beijing maintained a benign neutrality, that would be sufficient. Since the Kremlin expected the operation to be over in days, the question of Chinese material assistance—economic or military—would be moot. For Beijing, too, a quick Russian victory would have suited its purposes: embarrassing the United States; highlighting the ineffectualness of the West; and exposing the weakness of liberal values and institutions. There would be no need for Chinese action; it would be a passive beneficiary of escalating Russia-West tensions. Importantly, the Sino-Russian

9. See comments by Stefano Sannino, Secretary-General of the EU External Action Service (EEAS), CEPA Annual Forum, September 28, 2022, available at: <https://cepa.org>.

10. R. Rajah and A. Leng, "Revising Down the Rise of China", Lowy Institute Analysis, March 14, 2022, available at: www.lowyinstitute.org; also M. Pettis, "How China Trapped Itself", *Foreign Affairs*, October 5, 2022, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.

11. "Biden Says US Forces Would Defend Taiwan in the Event of a Chinese Invasion", *Reuters*, September 19, 2022, available at: www.reuters.com.

12. With Ukraine, the Russian military faced few natural obstacles and could attack from several directions at once—which is perhaps why the Kremlin was over-confident about victory. A Chinese invasion of Taiwan would involve crossing the Taiwan straits (160 km wide); necessitate complex amphibious landings; and involve conquering a largely mountainous country—all this to be executed by a military that has not fought a war since 1979, while presupposing US non-intervention.

partnership would not be subject to any stress, since there would be no real demands made of it.

The course of the war has upset these calculations. The longer it has gone on, the stronger Ukraine and the West have looked, and the more vulnerable Russia and China have become. It is evident in Moscow that Chinese support, never especially enthusiastic or effective, has diminished steadily.¹³ Beijing's discomfort at the turn of events has become palpable. In a rare candid moment, Putin acknowledged Chinese concerns in remarks at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Samarkand in September 2022: "we understand your questions and concerns about [the Ukraine crisis] ... we will of course explain our position on this."¹⁴

Beijing faces a major conundrum. On the one hand, Russia is its closest strategic partner. The two countries share a 4,300-kilometre border. Russia is China's number one source of energy imports. And it is a geopolitical counterweight to the United States. Beijing also recognizes that China needs an acquiescent Russia if it is to advance its interests in Eurasia and the Arctic. Underpinning all this is the knowledge that even a weakened Russia remains a formidable disruptive power, with the potential to spoil Chinese aims. Keeping it onside is therefore imperative.

On the other hand, China's future is contingent on the very global order and stability that Russian aggression is threatening. Despite attempts to boost self-reliance through the development of a "dual circulation" economy,¹⁵ China's growth continues to depend heavily on global supply chains and smooth access to external markets, resources, and technology.¹⁶ Such growth is also a primary source of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) and Xi Jinping's personal legitimacy. Without it, his agenda for change—the "Chinese dream of

13. A. Lukin, "Kitaj i ukrainskij krizis. Poziciâ Pekina poka ne sformirovalas' okončatel'no" [China and the Ukrainian Crisis. Beijing's Position Has Not Yet Taken Shape Definitively], *Nezavisimââ gazeta*, March 27, 2022, available at: www.ng.ru.

14. "Putin Acknowledges China's Concerns over Ukraine in Sign of Friction", *Reuters*, September 15, 2022, available at: www.reuters.com.

15. A. Garcia-Herrero, "What Is Behind China's Dual Circulation Strategy?", *China Leadership Monitor*, September 1, 2021, available at: www.prcleader.org.

16. Despite Beijing's efforts to develop the renminbi (RMB) as an international reserve currency, as of March 2022 it only accounted for 3.2 percent of international transactions—see N. Handwerker, "Can China's SWIFT Alternative Give Russia a Lifeline?", *The Diplomat*, March 10, 2022, available at: <https://thediplomat.com>. By contrast, in 2020, 90 percent of international bank transactions used the US dollar—see R. Sharma, "The Comeback Nation", *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2020, www.foreignaffairs.com.

national rejuvenation”¹⁷—is in jeopardy. Being bound by the excesses of a super-rogue state is a nightmare scenario for Beijing.

In these circumstances, the challenge is to find a middle way that enables China to maintain stable and productive relations with Russia, while preserving its central position in the global economy and international system. This Beijing has attempted to do. Publicly, it has sought to justify Russian actions, for example, blaming the United States and NATO for “provoking” the invasion. But it has given minimal material assistance. Leading Chinese companies, such as Huawei, have suspended or curtailed their commercial operations in Russia.¹⁸ SINOPEC pulled out of a USD 500 million investment in Russia’s largest petrochemical producer, SIBUR.¹⁹ The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB) have suspended lending for Russian-led projects. China has significantly increased energy imports from Russia, but hardly out of solidarity. Rather, it has exploited market conditions—slumping European demand—to secure oil at knockdown prices.²⁰ Tellingly, Beijing’s interest in the Power of Siberia-2 pipeline, already tenuous before the conflict, has shrivelled.²¹

The problem, however, is that this temporizing, ostensibly “neutral” approach will be difficult to sustain as the war morphs into a wider conflict between Russia and the West. Far from being able to achieve a balance of interests, China could find itself alienating all parties. Ideally, it would like Putin to emerge from the war, if not triumphant, then at least undefeated. That way, the limits of Sino-Russian partnership would not be strained. Russia would remain a counterweight to US power and Western influence. And China would not be left isolated in its strategic confrontation with America. Conversely, a Russian defeat and Putin’s consequent humiliation would be a disaster. The Kremlin might blame Beijing for not

17. The most detailed exposition of Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation” is in his speech at the 19th Communist Party Congress on October 18, 2017, Xinhuanet, available at: www.xinhuanet.com.

18. T. Huang and N. Lardy, “China Is Too Tied to the Global Economy to Risk Helping Russia”, Pietersen Institute of International Economics, March 15, 2022, available at: www.piie.com.

19. “China’s Sinopec Pauses Russia Projects, Beijing Wary of Sanctions”, *Reuters*, March 28, 2022, available at: www.reuters.com.

20. The discount may be as much as USD 35 per barrel—see H. Appel and B. Liu, “The Limits of the Russia-China Partnership After the Ukraine Invasion”, *PONARS policy memo*, No. 803, October 24, 2022, available at: www.ponarseurasia.org. See also “Ukraine: Russian Oil and Gas Turn to Asia”, *BBC*, September 30, 2022, available at: www.bbc.co.uk; and comments by Edward Chow in K. Silverstein, “Despite Their Thirst for Oil, China and India Will Never Depend on Russia”, *Forbes*, July 13, 2022, available at: www.forbes.com.

21. See testimony by Edward Chow before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 17, 2022.

providing tangible assistance.²² China could be left to pick up the pieces of their partnership. A resentful Russia would become more a liability than an asset, a constant source of instability. And Western resistance to China's global agenda would intensify.

22. There are already some signs of Russian resentment. A recent report by the Valdai Club observes that “this quiet withdrawal from the Russian market and sharp decline in the provision of goods and services across various sectors have affected the way people view Russia-China relations, since these developments are clearly at odds with the statements coming from both sides on mutual support and refraining from downgrading ties.” See Valdai Discussion Club Report, “Russia-China Strategic Partnership in the Context of the Crisis in Europe”, Valdai Club, p. 21, September 2022, available at: <https://valdaiclub.com>.

Achievements, Failures, Limitations

Against this backdrop, it is time to take stock. Nearly a year after Putin launched the invasion of Ukraine, what are the main strengths, weaknesses and limitations of the Sino-Russian partnership? And how has the conflict affected perceptions and policies in Beijing and Moscow?

Security and Defence

Arguably the greatest achievement of the Sino-Russian partnership is the settlement of their common border, which was finalized back in 2004. This has been a remarkable success, one that has stood the test of time.²³ It has provided both sides with a secure “strategic rear”, enabling them to focus on more pressing priorities elsewhere. The border settlement is also the foundation for progress in other areas of the relationship; without it, the achievements of the past two decades would scarcely have been possible.

Admittedly, the border settlement could come apart one day, and security could again become a major source of discord in the relationship. But so far there is no evidence of this. Indeed, a fraught international environment reinforces the argument for letting the territorial issue lie indefinitely. Given escalating tensions with the United States, the last thing China needs is yet another hostile neighbour, one with a still massive nuclear arsenal and conventional military capabilities. Besides, the Chinese already have most of what they need from Russia: ready access to discounted natural resources; a stable border; and a partner that largely supports (or, at worst, does not oppose) its goals in the Asia-Pacific.²⁴

23. It is easy to underestimate this achievement. The southern part of the Russian Far East (RFE) is the only territory, apart from Taiwan, yet to revert to China after being ceded by the Qing Dynasty in the “unequal treaties” of the 19th century. The disputed frontier was the source of bloody clashes in 1969, and was a major stumbling block to engagement for decades. Despite its continuing belief that these lands belong to China, Beijing has refrained from reviving any irredentist claims. Accordingly, Russian suspicions about China have subsided to a fraction of what they were during the 1990s.

24. From Moscow’s perspective, the most important of these goals is challenging US regional leadership and strategic dominance. But China is also helpful in containing Japan and countering mechanisms such as the Quad and AUKUS.

Moscow, too, has more need than ever for a stable security relationship with China. In the wake of Russian setbacks in Ukraine and confrontation with the West, the long-standing case for preserving a safe strategic rear is especially compelling. There is some speculation that China may seek to displace Russia as the leading power in Eurasia.²⁵ But although Beijing is looking to expand its footprint in the region, it has a vested interest in a stable neighbourhood rather than in opening yet another front of geopolitical competition.²⁶

Security confidence-building has encouraged the steady growth of Sino-Russian defence ties in recent years, reflected in increased arms sales and the growing number of joint military exercises.²⁷ Over the past three decades, but especially since 2014, Russia has provided ever more advanced weapons systems to China, including kilo-class submarines, the S-400 anti-air missile system and the Su-35 multipurpose fighter. It is also helping the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to develop a ballistic missile early warning system (BMEWS). In the past, defence cooperation was hampered by mutual mistrust. But the crisis in Russia-West relations following the annexation of Crimea led Moscow to abandon its former reluctance to sell top-end equipment to Beijing. Concerns about the theft of intellectual property and the (hypothetical) possibility that such weapons might be used against Russia have paled in comparison with the need to cement the strategic partnership against a hostile West and to avert the threat of geopolitical isolation.²⁸

The effect of the invasion of Ukraine on Sino-Russian defence cooperation has been mixed. There is no sign of any slackening in military-to-military exchanges. In September 2022 a Chinese contingent participated in the Vostok-2022 exercises²⁹; in November, the two sides conducted a joint air patrol in the Sea of Japan—their

25. See, for example, R. Gramer and J. Detsch, "Russia Is Losing Its Clout in Central Asia as Ukraine War Spreads", *Foreign Policy*, October 6, 2022, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

26. M. Laruelle observes that "Russian dominance may be crumbling, but no clear order has formed to take its place"—M. Laruelle, "The End of the Post-Soviet Order", *Foreign Affairs*, October 13, 2022, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.

27. A report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington DC notes that China and Russia participated in 78 joint military exercises in the period 2003 and mid-2022, with more than half taking place after 2016—B. Lin and M. P. Funairole, "How Deep Are China-Russia Military Ties?", CSIS, September 6, 2022, available at: <https://chinapower.csis.org>.

28. A. Gabuev, "Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese Relations After the Ukraine Crisis", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 29, 2016, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

29. R. Banerjee, "The Vostok Military Exercises 2022: Three Takeaways", *Modern Diplomacy*, October 19, 2022, available at: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu>.

second since the start of the invasion³⁰; and in December, they held joint naval exercises in the East China Sea.³¹ That said, the nature of this cooperation is unchanged. Interoperability between the two militaries remains minimal, and the chief purpose of such exercises is demonstrative: to convey a *political* message to the West about the strength of Sino-Russian partnership.

The picture is less clear in relation to arms transfers. Even before the war, it was apparent that the post-Crimea boost in sales of high-end equipment to China had played itself out.³² The question now is whether Russia's losses of materiel in Ukraine will constrain future arms exports to China.³³ Moscow may need to prioritize its own requirements, while the poor performance of Russian arms in Ukraine could deter demanding customers like the PLA. Importantly, indigenous Chinese military-industrial production is progressing rapidly, suggesting that Beijing's appetite for Russian equipment and technology will erode over time.³⁴

Western commentators have come to see Sino-Russian military cooperation as a game-changer for the security of the Indo-Pacific region, further evidence that the two sides are *de facto* allies. What the Ukraine war has shown, however, is that even in this relatively successful area of the relationship there are limits. China and Russia have benefited from their defence ties, but in ways that reflect their different priorities. For the former, it helps to fill gaps in its military capabilities, and provides its troops with useful operational experience (China has not fought a war since 1979)—but perhaps not for much longer. For Russia, defence cooperation serves as an “equalizer”, helping to balance an otherwise increasingly unequal

30. J. Grevatt, “China, Russia Conduct Joint Air Patrol over Sea of Japan”, *Janes*, November 22, 2022, available at: www.janes.com.

31. “Russia and China Hold Naval Drills, Practise Submarine Capture”, *Reuters*, December 28, 2022, available at: www.reuters.com.

32. According to the CSIS, the last orders for Russian military equipment to China occurred in 2019. See Hart, Lin and Funairole, “How Deep Are China-Russia Military Ties?”. It is worth emphasizing for the purposes of comparison that India is by some distance Russia's largest customer, while other Asian countries, such as Vietnam, are also major recipients.

33. H. Appel and B. Liu, “The Limits of the Russia-China Partnership after the Ukraine Invasion”, *PONARS EURASIA*, October 24, 2022.

34. The picture is mixed, since there are certain categories of military technology that are highly valued by the PLA. These include submarine quieting capabilities, advanced jet engines, the SA-21 (S-400) Triumf surface-to-air missile system, and the ballistic missile early-warning-system. See A. Erickson and G. Collins, “Putin's Ukraine Invasion: Turbocharging Sino-Russian Collaboration in Energy, Maritime Security, and Beyond?”, *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 75, No 4, Autumn 2022, pp. 102-08, available at: <https://cwp.sipa.columbia.edu>.

partnership. Again, though, this assumption may become suspect as China's military modernization proceeds apace.³⁵

Geopolitics and Global Order

The geopolitical equation is no less murky, despite the common description of the Sino-Russian relationship as an authoritarian alliance.³⁶ Since the 1990s, Moscow has consistently pursued an “independent”, that is, non-aligned foreign policy. Within this framework, partnership with China is regarded as a source of strategic leverage vis-à-vis the West, a means of forcing it to heed Russian interests and sensitivities. This may not always have worked—it failed to deter two waves of NATO enlargement—but partnership has been a factor in constraining Western decision-making, with European leaders such as French President Emmanuel Macron wary of “pushing” Moscow into Beijing's embrace.³⁷

Viewed from Moscow, the strategic partnership with China is a force multiplier for Russian influence and prestige. It also enables the Kremlin to portray confrontation with the United States as part of a wider conflict between the West and non-West. As such, it is critical in supporting Moscow's global ambitions and the myth of a resurgent Russia. Without China, such pretensions would have very little credibility.

Beijing's perspective on the geopolitics of partnership is somewhat different. It does not need Russia as an active collaborator in projecting Chinese power, but to get out of its way; securing compliance is the name of the game. This is most important in Central Asia, where the spectacular growth of Chinese influence would not have happened without the Kremlin's say-so. In 2015, Xi agreed to the alignment of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with Putin's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Beijing scarcely required Russian assistance to take advantage of economic opportunities in Central

35. *ibid.* See also Hart, Lin and Funairole, “How Deep Are China-Russia Military Ties?” In an interesting reversal of fortunes, Moscow asked Beijing in March 2022 for military drones to use in Ukraine, but was refused. “Russia Has Requested Military and Economic Assistance from China, US Officials Say”, *CNN*, March 14, 2022, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com>.

36. See, for example, D. Leonhardt, “A New Axis: China and Russia Have Formed an ‘Alliance of Autocracies’”, *New York Times*, February 9, 2022, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com>.

37. Emmanuel Macron, address to French Ambassadors on August 27, 2019, available at: <https://www.france24.com>. See also comments by then German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas during a visit to Poland, “Isolating Russia ‘Dangerous’ for Europe, Says Maas”, *Deutsche Welle*, January 7, 2021, available at: www.dw.com.

Asia. But it wanted to facilitate expansion of the BRI.³⁸ Much the same logic applies in the Arctic, where China's ambitions would have no chance of progressing against Russian opposition.

Geopolitical accommodation between Beijing and Moscow, then, is an asymmetrical arrangement. Both sides want different things, but their objectives are nonetheless compatible—which is why the partnership has been described as a case of “same bed, different dreams”.³⁹ The mistake of Western observers, however, is to swallow the official line that they have identical or near-identical views about the world. That is far from the case.

While China and Russia seek to undermine US global primacy, and their foreign policies align on many issues, they have fundamentally different attitudes towards international order. China is a system-player. It operates largely within the existing global order, from which it has benefited enormously over the past three decades. It exploits the advantages that such order brings, as well as its weaknesses and “blank spots”. The best illustration of Beijing's “insider” approach is the attention it gives to maximizing Chinese influence in UN bodies.⁴⁰ It operates on the premise that it has to work within the system in order to change it to its advantage.

More generally, Beijing subscribes to a stable international order—less as an abstract principle than as a practical framework for the pursuit of Chinese interests. True, it hopes for an order in which it wields considerably greater influence than at present, and where the power of the United States and the West is correspondingly reduced. But it is a revisionist rather than a revolutionary power. It seeks to “reform” the system in ways that favour Chinese interests. At the same time, there are many features of the current order that it wishes to see retained. These include a globalized economy with developed supply chains; ready access to essential resources, markets and technologies; and a loose set of international rules and norms that allow it to exercise the self-appointed prerogatives of a great power.

38. B. Lo, “Greater Eurasia: The Emperor's New Clothes or an Idea Whose Time Has Come?”, *Russie.NEI.Reports*, No 27, July 2019, www.ifri.org.

39. S. Saradzhyan and A. Wyne, “China-Russia Relations: Same Bed, Different Dreams”, *Russia Matters*, June 2018, p. 23, available at: <https://dash.harvard.edu>. The notion of “same bed, different dreams”, is reflected also in multilateral organizations such as the SCO and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). These bodies have little practical policy utility—unsurprising given their disparate membership and often contradictory interests. Yet for Beijing and Moscow participation serves a purpose by adding another layer to Sino-Russian engagement.

40. See Courtney Fung and Shing-hon Lam, “Mixed Report Card: China's Influence in the United Nations”, Lowy Institute Analysis, December 18, 2022, www.lowyinstitute.org.

By contrast, Moscow's—or rather Putin's—approach to global order is anarchic and destructive. As one commentator has put it, Russia is an “arsonist of the international system.”⁴¹ It was not always thus. There was a time not so long ago when Putin was angling for a great power-centred order akin to the 19th century Concert following the Congress of Vienna or, better still, the 1945 Yalta Conference between Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill.⁴² In such an arrangement, Russia would occupy a pivotal position as the balancing power between the United States and China.⁴³

However, the lack of realism behind these aspirations became increasingly obvious and unsustainable. Russia has only very limited means of projecting power. Its economy is ten times smaller than China's. Its soft power is weak. Russia simply does not have the stature or influence to play a primary role in a well-regulated, stable global order. And unlike the Chinese, it has neither the patience nor the aptitude to “work” the system.

Events in Ukraine have highlighted the divergence between Chinese and Russian approaches towards international order. They have accelerated a paradigm shift in Kremlin thinking—from a belief in great power accommodation to unapologetic rules-breaking. They have shown that Putin does not want to revise the existing global order so much as burn it down.⁴⁴ This is not just because he abhors the dominance of the United States, but also because anarchy is a great leveller, allowing a declining power to exert disproportionate influence. In a world of disintegrating rules and norms, there is more room for Russia to “play” and act as it pleases. Which is why, incidentally, Donald Trump's presidency so pleased the Kremlin. He legitimized endemic rules-breaking, encouraged moral relativism, believed in the natural “rights” of great powers, and discredited the very notion of a rules-based order.

Before the latest invasion of Ukraine, the differences between China and Russia towards global order impinged little on their partnership. While Beijing disapproved of the annexation of Crimea,

41. R. Hass, “Ukraine Presents Opportunity to Test China's Strategic Outlook”, Brookings Institution, March 1, 2022, available at: www.brookings.edu.

42. Vladimir Putin, address to the International Valdai Discussion Club, President of Russia Website, September 19, 2013, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

43. D. Trenin, “How Russia Can Maintain Equilibrium in the Post-Pandemic World”, Carnegie Moscow Center, May 1, 2020, available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org>.

44. Putin has cast the invasion of Ukraine in atavistic terms—as a mission to recover historically Russian lands. He compares the task to the enterprise of Peter the Great, who took over parts of the Swedish Empire three centuries earlier. See Putin speech to young entrepreneurs, engineers and scientists, President of Russia Website, June 9, 2022, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru>. Putin's emphasis on historical rather than legal rights is of course consistent with his view that Ukraine is not a “real” country.

the feeble response of the West did not put it, or the relationship, under any serious pressure. Indeed, the level of Western sanctions actually favoured Chinese interests, pushing Moscow to conclude a series of arms and energy agreements on Beijing's terms.⁴⁵

But the current war is different. The Russian invasion represents the most serious breach of international order since North Korea invaded the South in 1950. It is not just the sovereignty of one democracy that is at stake, or even the future of European security. Putin's war strikes at the very idea of international order *of any kind*—liberal, rules-based, great power, or other. As such, it ensures that the differences between China and Russia about order matter more than before. They may not (yet) be so great as to wreck their partnership, especially while they face a common foe in the form of the United States. But they place the relationship under significantly greater pressure and inhibit practical policy coordination. Tellingly, Xi has become less inclined to hide Chinese concerns about Putin's conduct of the war, for example at the SCO summit in Samarkand in September 2022 and again during the visit to Beijing of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in November 2022.⁴⁶

Political, Ideological and Personal Affinities

The fail-safe of Sino-Russian partnership is a powerful shared interest in the stability of their respective authoritarian regimes. Ideology certainly plays a role here. It is easier to establish a common purpose in countering US global leadership if one can agree about the subversiveness of liberal democratic values. Nevertheless, power is a more important factor than ideology. Putin supports the dominance of Chinese Communist Party rule not because he subscribes to (or even understands) its values. What matters is that the CCP is committed to a close partnership with Russia, and regards the United States as an implacable foe.

Equally, Beijing does not back Putin because it embraces his values—unlikely given the brazenly kleptocratic character of his regime. It does so because the Russian President is a guarantor of their partnership, and indulges China's geopolitical and economic interests. Again, the fact that Russia's relations with the United States

45. A. Gabuev, "Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese Relations after the Ukraine Crisis", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2016, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

46. K. Connolly, "China and Germany Condemn Russian Threat to Use Nuclear Weapons in Ukraine", *The Guardian*, November 4, 2022, available at: www.theguardian.com.

will be bad as long as Putin stays in power is an advantage, since Beijing can relax in the knowledge that he will harbour a benign attitude towards China. Both sides are guided principally by geopolitical calculus.⁴⁷ They view international politics through the realist prism of great power competition (and confrontation), and have little truck with the binary simplicities of a world divided between autocracies and democracies.

Much has been said about the warm personal dynamic between Xi and Putin.⁴⁸ Although this is clearly helpful, we should not exaggerate its significance. Xi has injected dynamism into bilateral engagement, while his aggressive approach to pursuing Chinese foreign policy goals has contributed to the deterioration of relations with the United States and Europe. But even under a different leader China would have followed a cooperative Russia policy, on which there has been a solid consensus in Beijing since the 1990s. Xi's predecessors—Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin—were just as committed to expanding Sino-Russian cooperation, if not quite as successful.

Similarly, Putin's promotion of strategic partnership with China is largely uncontroversial. In the past, even prominent liberal figures such as former Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar emphasized the need for good relations with Beijing.⁴⁹ And it was the allegedly pro-Western Boris Yeltsin who, together with Jiang Zemin, first announced the emergence of a multipolar world back in 1997.⁵⁰ While the degree to which Putin has embraced partnership with Xi worries some observers, this closeness is less the product of personal enthusiasm than of Russia's circumstances, above all the collapse of its relationship with the West.⁵¹

The invasion of Ukraine appears to have had little impact so far on Sino-Russian political solidarity. Though Xi may be irritated about Putin's poor judgement in launching the invasion, the case for standing by him remains compelling given that he represents the sole credible source of authority in Russia today. Internationally, too,

47. B. Lo, "The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order", *China International Strategy Review*, December 8, 2020, available at: <https://link.springer.com>.

48. "China's Xi Praises 'Best Friend' Putin during Russia Visit", *BBC News*, June 6, 2019, available at: www.bbc.co.uk.

49. E. Gajdar, "Rossiâ zainteressovana v stabil'nom razvitii Kitaâ" [Russia Has a Vested Interest in the Stable Development of China], May 2002, formerly available at: www.gaidar.org.

50. "Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order", *United Nations Digital Library*, April 23, 1997, available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org>.

51. See A. Gabuev, "China's New Vassal", *Foreign Affairs*, August 9, 2022, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com; also D. Alperovitch and S. Radchenko, "Another Russia Is possible", *Foreign Affairs*, August 29, 2022, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.

China is hardly spoilt for choice. Moscow may not be the ideal partner, but where else is Beijing to go?⁵² There is no end in sight to its geopolitical and ideological confrontation with Washington. Despite recent signs of a partial thaw, the Europeans remain deeply suspicious of Chinese intentions. And in the Asia-Pacific region, China is surrounded by neighbours that regard it principally as a threat.

Russia has even fewer choices. The Kremlin might wish that the Chinese were more forthcoming with material assistance. But it is in no position to allow resentment to affect its decision-making. Given that relations with the West will be damaged for years, possibly decades, talking up Sino-Russian like-mindedness is the only realistic course.⁵³ The war in Ukraine has killed off any lingering prospect of positioning Russia as a balancing power—whether between China and the United States, between East and West, or between the industrialized north and the Global South.

Crucially, both governments assess that alternatives to the status quo would be far worse. For Beijing, a post-Putin scenario could turn out very badly, less because of the direct impact on the Sino-Russian relationship than because of the uncertainty and instability generated in Russia itself. The last thing the Chinese government needs is a vast failed state on its doorstep. A politically liberalizing and pro-West Russia would also be a nightmare, as would the emergence of an ultra-nationalist populist regime dominated by “patriotic”, revanchist elements.⁵⁴

These anxieties are paralleled by Russian fears in the event of regime change or evolution in China. The weakening of Communist Party rule could see a rise in bottom-up, uncontrolled Chinese nationalism⁵⁵ and the revival of historical claims to the Russian Far East. Alternatively, China post-Xi could swing back in a liberalizing direction, and strive to establish some sort of understanding with the United States and the West. That would leave Russia in a dark and isolated place. Worst of all would be regime collapse in China—the

52. The Chinese-American scholar Yun Sun points out that “abandoning Russia and mitigating its threat to the West could very well leave China to face the full attention and force of a hostile United States later alone” in Y. Sun, “What Lessons Does China Take from Putin’s War”, *Foreign Policy*, April 7, 2022, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com>.

53. This is likely to hold true short of a complete political transformation in Russia—a scenario that appears increasingly improbable.

54. E. Wishnick, “Still ‘No Limits’? The China-Russia Partnership after Samarkand”, *Russia Matters*, September 22, 2022, available at: www.russiamatters.org.

55. The phenomenon of bottom-up nationalism is well described in P. Gries, *China’s New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy*, University of California Press, Chapter 7, 2005, pp. 116-34.

ultimate in low-probability, but high-impact scenarios.⁵⁶ The consequences for Russia could be far-reaching and long-term, as it struggles to adapt to new and frightening uncertainties.

For the time being, then, Xi and Putin represent each other's best bet. They may not always be on the same page, as the invasion of Ukraine has shown. But they are bound together in a mutual dependence—not on the basis of shared authoritarian “values”, but by personal and political self-interest.

Economic

The economic dimension has always been the weakest part of the Sino-Russian partnership.⁵⁷ That said, in recent years it has expanded considerably. Bilateral trade reached an all-time high of USD 190 billion in 2022 (up from USD 147 billion the previous year), on the back of substantial increases in volumes (and especially prices) of oil and other natural resources.⁵⁸ China is by far Russia's largest country trading partner (with around 20 % of its trade) and, given the long-term downturn in Russia-EU relations, it could overtake the whole of the EU before long.⁵⁹

From the Chinese perspective, however, the commercial relationship is modest. Russia is only tenth among China's trading partners, and accounts for a mere 3 percent of its total trade. Although Russian energy imports are important to Beijing, they are not indispensable. Since it first became a net energy importer in 1993, China has pursued a policy of diversification both in types of energy (oil, gas, coal, renewables) and sources of supply (Middle East,

56. What Nassim Taleb calls “Black Swans”—see N. Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, Penguin, 2010.

57. Guan Guihai, “Thirty Years of China-Russia Strategic Relations: Achievements, Characteristics and Prospects”, *China International Strategy Review*, Vol. 4, No. 1, June 2022, p. 33.

58. “China-Russia Trade Rises 34.3% to \$190 Billion in 2022, a New Record High”, *Global Times*, January 13, 2023, www.globaltimes.cn.

59. V. Kašin, “Rossiâ, Kitaj i Ukrainskij krizis” [Russia, China and the Ukraine crisis], Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), March 15, 2022, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

Russia, Central Asia, Africa, East Asia).⁶⁰ In short, bilateral economic ties matter far more to Russia than to China.⁶¹

This imbalance—sometimes euphemistically called complementarity—is the main reason why the Chinese have been loath to jeopardize their commercial interests with the West for Russia's sake. China is tightly integrated into the Western-dominated global economy, whereas Russia is a minor player.⁶² One of the striking features of the Chinese response to the war is how risk-averse their major companies have been. A number have terminated or suspended their Russia operations because they feared that charges of sanctions-busting could close off access to far more lucrative markets and critical sources of technology in the West.⁶³

The war in Ukraine has further tilted an already very unequal economic relationship in China's favour. As noted earlier, Beijing has taken advantage of slumping European demand for Russian oil and gas to increase energy imports at bargain basement prices. In the short to medium term, this means that overall trade will grow. But in the longer term the outlook is less rosy. For example, there are big question marks about the impact of China's transition to renewables on future bilateral energy cooperation.⁶⁴ Beijing's silence over the Power of Siberia-2 gas pipeline project may be a sign of things to come. And although there is much talk of de-dollarization—trade in national currencies and the use of alternative payments systems—the reality falls well short of the hype.⁶⁵

60. In theory, Russia offers a reliable land-based source of oil and gas, giving China options in the event of international sea-lanes being disrupted as a result of war, say, with the United States. In practice, the importance of this factor is overstated. The percentage of Chinese sea-borne oil imports has actually risen in recent years, including from Russia and Kazakhstan. See A. Erickson and G. Collins, "Putin's Ukraine Invasion: Turbocharging Sino-Russian Collaboration ...", *op. cit.*, p. 96.

61. P. Baev, "A Mutually Exaggerated Strategic Partnership?", *China Brief*, Vol. 21, No 20, October 22, 2021, available at: <https://jamestown.org>; V. Milov, "Ambitions Dashed: Why Sino-Russian Economic Cooperation is not Working", Wilfred Martens Centre, November 26, 2021, available at: www.martenscentre.eu; L. Maizland, "China and Russia: Exploring Ties between Two Authoritarian Powers", Council on Foreign Relations, June 14, 2022, available at: <https://www.cfr.org>.

62. Notwithstanding its leading position in energy and commodity markets, Russia accounts for less than 2 percent of global trade—available at: www.statista.com.

63. Although smaller Chinese companies have continued to do business in Russia, this has been of scant consolation to Moscow—see Valdai report, "Russia-China Strategic Partnership in the Context of the Crisis in Europe", *op. cit.*, pp. 19-21.

64. See B. Lo, "The Adaptation Game—Russia and Climate Change", *Russie.NEI.Visions*, No 121, March 2021, p. 26, available at: www.ifri.org.

65. N. Handwerker, "Can China's SWIFT Alternative Give Russia a Lifeline?", *op. cit.*

Sino-Russian Partnership— What It Is and Is not

So how should one characterize the Sino-Russian partnership in the wake of Putin's invasion of Ukraine? Perhaps it is easier if we start with *what it is not*. To a Western audience, China and Russia may look and talk like an authoritarian alliance. But this is not an alliance under any meaningful definition. Not only are there no mutual defence obligations, but neither side feels inclined to act in support of the other unless it suits their direct interests. This is not a relationship founded on generosity of spirit, but on hard-headed, even cynical, calculation.⁶⁶

Beijing's response to the war in Ukraine demonstrates this eloquently. There has been no question of jeopardizing China's position in the global economy by helping Russia to evade Western sanctions. And the Chinese have ruthlessly exploited Russia's difficulties in energy markets to extract increased supplies of oil and gas on extremely favourable terms.

Putin's invasion has reinforced the already strong case for maintaining the current format of the relationship—a flexible strategic partnership.⁶⁷ The obvious advantage of this arrangement is that Beijing is not committed to doing anything it doesn't want to do. So while it still suffers a certain taint from Russian actions in Ukraine, the consequences of this are far more manageable than if the relationship had involved alliance obligations. Equally, Moscow is able to keep its distance from escalating tensions over Taiwan, where it is under no obligation to support China militarily. The only circumstances in which the strategic partnership might become a

66. In analyzing whether the Sino-Russian partnership constitutes an alliance, Elizabeth Wishnick highlights the importance of strategic ambiguity and the uncertainty this generates in their relations with the United States and its allies—in “Strategic Ambiguity and the Deterrent Value of Sino-Russian Partnership”, China Aerospace Studies Institute, October 31, 2022, , available at: www.airuniversity.af.edu.

67. The distinguished scholar Zhao Huasheng remarks on the unfortunate outcomes of past attempts to form an alliance, and notes that the framework of a strategic partnership both encourages cooperation and allows flexibility—Zhao Huasheng, “Should China and Russia Form an Alliance?”, RIAC, January 12, 2021, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

formal political-military alliance is if the United States waged war on two fronts simultaneously—a scenario that is hard to imagine.

The conflict in Ukraine has underlined that China and Russia are strategically autonomous actors. Although their interests and policies coincide on many issues, from support for a “sovereign internet” to opposition to US-led alliances, they act independently. Indeed, they do not always keep each other informed. Beijing’s lack of preparedness at the start of the invasion, and Putin’s remarks at the SCO summit in Samarkand in September 2022 (“we will ... explain our position”), appear to show that consultation, even when it occurs, is partial and perfunctory. Both partners strive to avoid causing direct harm to each other interests or airing their differences in public.⁶⁸ But outside the narrow confines of the United Nations Security Council, active policy coordination (as opposed to declarative solidarity) is rare.

The war has accentuated the inequality of the relationship. Russia’s geopolitical and economic dependence on China is now greater than at any time in their history. Yet if Beijing largely determines the level and tempo of bilateral engagement, Russia is far from being a Chinese client-state. The assumption that Xi can dictate to Putin⁶⁹ is unwarranted. Putin remains strongly committed to pursuing a sovereign foreign policy and to promoting Russia as a global power. And while the prospects of achieving these goals have receded, the Kremlin’s level of ambition has not. China may be the indispensable partner, but it is not the *only* partner.⁷⁰ Moscow is reaching out to the Global South (Asia, Africa, Latin America)⁷¹; looking to rebuild ties with at least some European countries, such as

68. Dmitri Trenin put it well when he said “[t]he essence of the Sino-Russian relationship can be summarized thus: ‘Russia and China will never be against each other, but they will not necessarily always be with each other’”—in D. Trenin, “Russia and China Are Key and Close Partners”, *China Daily*, June 5 2019, available at: <https://carnegiemoscow.org>.

69. A claim made by Alexander Gabuev and other Russian liberal voices—see R. Kefferputz and Y. Poita, “Not All Sunshine and Roses—How Russian Experts View China”, *MERICIS*, September 15, 2022, available at: <https://mericis.org>.

70. As Guan Guihai warns, “[n]o matter how poor the China-US relationship gets or how good the China-Russia relationship gets, we must not expect Russia to stand unconditionally on China’s side or fight our wars”—in “Thirty Years of China-Russia Strategic Relations”, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

71. Putin’s 2022 address to the International Valdai Discussion Club was pitched directly at the Global South: “... an overwhelming majority of the international community is demanding democracy in international affairs and rejecting all forms of authoritarian [diktat] by individual countries or groups of countries”, i.e., the United States and the West, respectively—Valdai International Discussion Club Meeting, President of Russia Website, October 27, 2022, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

Hungary⁷²; and aiming to consolidate Russia's position in the post-Soviet space.

Looking forward, the challenge for China is to keep Russia close, but not so close as to be constrained or damaged by its worst excesses. Accordingly, Beijing seeks to secure stronger (and more overt) support for Chinese goals in the Indo-Pacific (Taiwan, South China Sea, pressuring Japan, managing India); to acquire energy and natural resource imports as cheaply as possible; and to pursue selective military cooperation. But it is keen not to be sucked into Russia's conflicts in Europe or to become Moscow's banker. Beijing has every interest in avoiding a North Korea-type dynamic whereby a difficult "junior" partner is able to leverage its weakness—the threat of regime instability or collapse—to force China into a situation of burden-bearing but with limited influence. In the meantime, it continues to treat Moscow with respect, aware of Russia's capacity for mischief-making should it stop doing so.

To sum up, the Sino-Russian partnership is a classic great power relationship centred on *realpolitik*. For all the public expressions of warmth, it is an unsentimental engagement whose conventions ("rules") are understood and accepted by both sides. Neither allows platitudes such as "no limits friendship" to cloud their perceptions of the other or to inhibit the pursuit of self-interest. Any disappointments and disagreements in the relationship are well contained. This cold-blooded approach gives it an underlying resilience. The respective ruling elites recognize that this is a mutually beneficial, if unequal, partnership, whose value is enhanced by the fact that there are no plausible alternatives to it. Sino-Russian cooperation may be less impressive than advertised or feared. But, in the short to medium term at least, it is a relationship too important to fail.

72. In his 2022 Valdai address, Putin also noted the EU's rejection of Hungarian efforts to "codify European Christian values and culture".

Outlook—Three Overlapping Narratives

The strengths, weaknesses and limitations of Sino-Russian partnership raise the question of where the relationship is heading. Broadly speaking, there are three overlapping narratives. These might be described as the hopeful, the fearful, and the linear.

The Hopeful

Predictably, the most optimistic narrative is the official line coming out of Beijing and Moscow. This asserts that Sino-Russian relations are at an all-time high. Cooperation is more extensive and developed than ever, levels of trust are unparalleled, and the two sides are in agreement on most international questions. Moreover, even when Beijing and Moscow do not adopt the same position, their relationship is sufficiently mature and resilient to absorb differences of opinion, perspective, and even interests.

In this interpretation, the war in Ukraine has not knocked the Sino-Russian partnership off course, but actually cemented it. Events over the past year have reinforced their joint enterprise in opposing American hegemony and a US-led international order. Closer to home, China and Russia are united in a common endeavour to preserve political and economic stability in the face of Western attempts to undermine it.

In other words, the partnership will continue to grow. Bilateral cooperation will become deeper and more expansive. The advantages of engagement will far outweigh any (minor) disagreements or differences. And in a fluid and often hostile global environment, China and Russia will have even greater need for each other—and every prospect of prevailing over a West in irreversible decline.⁷³

This hopeful tale unsurprisingly skates over a number of inconvenient realities: the widening asymmetry (inequality) of the relationship; divergent approaches towards global order and governance; and even concrete differences on certain issues (the war

73. See, for example, Valdai Club report, “Russia-China Strategic Partnership in the Context of the Crisis in Europe”, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

in Ukraine, the status of the Arctic⁷⁴). It underplays apprehension in Moscow about the challenges that a dominant China is likely to pose to Russian interests.⁷⁵ Yet if the official narrative seems imbued as much by faith as reason, there is nevertheless a persuasive logic to some of its arguments. Great power rivalry will become more salient. There is a heightened prospect of kinetic war, whether between the United States and China or between Russia and the West. And the presence of these risks may well draw Beijing and Moscow closer together, notwithstanding their differences.

The Fearful

Paradoxically, many in the West share this official view of Sino-Russian like-mindedness and strategic convergence. The unabashed authoritarianism of both regimes, and their confrontational interaction with the United States, has encouraged the conclusion that Beijing and Moscow think alike, and that their values and interests are closely aligned. Their common purpose is said to be nothing less than the overthrow of the “rules-based international order” and its replacement by either an “authoritarian governance model” or a “world safe for autocracy”.⁷⁶ The ideological similarities between China and Russia have fostered a binary world divided, in the words of Joe Biden, between “those who argue that ... autocracy is the best way forward ... and those who understand that democracy is essential” in meeting global challenges.⁷⁷ The Sino-Russian partnership has become the vanguard of an Authoritarian International, driven by an overarching mission: to beat the West.

74. There is a basic disjunction between Beijing’s view of the Arctic as part of the global commons (like Antarctica) and Moscow’s emphasis on the sovereign rights of the Arctic littoral states (Russia in particular, but also the United States, Canada, Denmark and Norway). To date, China and Russia have managed this divergence well. However, as the Arctic Ocean experiences accelerated global warming there is considerable potential for serious disagreements to arise—for example, over the use of Arctic marine resources or freedom of navigation along the Northern Sea Route (NSR).

75. A. Lukin, “Kitaj i ukrainskij krizis” [China and the Ukrainian Crisis], *Nezavisimaja gazeta*, March 23, 2022. This apprehension is shared by other strong advocates of Sino-Russian partnership, notably Sergei Karaganov—see S. Karaganov, “Russia Cannot Afford to Lose, so We Need a Kind of Victory”, RIAC, April 4, 2022, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>. See also V. Kašin, “Rossiâ, Kitaj i ukrainskij krizis”, *op. cit.*

76. A. Kendall-Taylor and D. Shullman, “Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership”, *CNAS report*, January 2021, available at: www.cnas.org, p. 24; M. Kroenig and J. Cimmino, “Global Strategy 2021: An Allied Strategy for China”, Atlantic Council, December 23, 2020, available at: www.atlanticcouncil.org.

77. Joe Biden address to the Munich Security Conference, Website of the White House, February 19, 2021, available at: www.whitehouse.gov.

For such observers, the Ukraine war has not altered these fundamentals.⁷⁸ Even if Sino-Russian coordination remains limited, the two sides nevertheless back one another. Thus, the Chinese government holds the line that Russia is more sinned against than sinner, while the Kremlin justifies Beijing's aggressive actions in relation to Taiwan. Whatever reservations each may harbour about the other's actions (or inaction) since the start of the invasion, Beijing and Moscow retain an overriding interest in working together. And this translates into a multi-dimensional and lasting threat against Western interests and values.⁷⁹

Anxiety permeates a related narrative from a Russian liberal perspective. This centres on the implications for Russia of its growing China-dependence. Here, the primary threat is to its future as a sovereign modern state. The Ukraine war has pushed Russia further into China's embrace, ensuring that before long it will become a client-state at the mercy of Beijing's will and whim, a nuclear version of the Iran of the mullahs.⁸⁰ This interpretation elides into the more general binarism of autocracies versus democracies by appealing to Western governments not to further strengthen the authoritarian consensus by being too harsh towards Moscow.⁸¹ The unsubtle sub-text is that China, by virtue of its sheer power and potential, represents the ultimate threat to international order and security.

The Linear

It is tempting to view the future of Sino-Russian relations in linear terms, for better or for worse. After all, their partnership has gone smoothly through the gears over the past three decades.⁸² There have been no downturns, let alone crises in the relationship. Both sides will therefore continue to do what they are already doing, acting as much out of habit and inertia as from a conscious desire to raise the quality of engagement. This scenario is all the more plausible given that there

78. D. Shullman and A. Kendall-Taylor, "Best of Bosom Friends: Why China-Russia Ties Will Deepen after Russia's War on Ukraine", *Marshall Papers*, June 22, 2022, available at: www.csis.org.

79. *Ibid.*

80. According to Gabuev, "Russia is turning into a giant Eurasian Iran, fairly isolated, with a smaller and more technologically backward economy thanks to its hostilities [with] the West but still too big and too important to be considered irrelevant"—A. Gabuev, "China's New Vassal", *Foreign Affairs*, August 9, 2022, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.

81. Alperovitch and Radchenko recommend that "[t]o pave the way for a future nonaligned Russia, the United States must avoid escalation in Ukraine, stave off Russia's complete destabilization, and provide Moscow with an alternative to its dangerous overreliance on Beijing"—in "Another Russia Is Possible", *op. cit.*

82. Guan Guihai, "Thirty Years of China-Russia Strategic Relations", *op. cit.*, pp. 22-30.

is no end in sight to their respective confrontations with the United States.⁸³

Linear analysis may, however, lead us to just the opposite conclusion: that Sino-Russian relations will decline from their high point at the February 2022 summit. The contrast between a globally ambitious China and a regressive Russia becomes increasingly stark. The inequalities in the relationship become more difficult to overlook, as their interests and horizons, as well as capabilities, diverge. In these circumstances, Sino-Russian cooperation could degrade substantially, even while both sides remain in denial. The decline would be less a matter of will than of *force majeure*.

The point is not that the partnership faces imminent collapse, but that its long-term outlook is unpromising. Beijing and Moscow would still have much in common—above all, in countering US global power and liberal influences—but their capacity to pursue a positive agenda would be limited. As their bilateral engagement becomes more unbalanced, narrow and fragile, so the latent differences between them will come out into the open and be more difficult to contain. For example, China's expanding footprint in Central Asia may elicit a more allergic response from the Kremlin, compounded by uncertainties in Russia's relations with key countries such as Kazakhstan.⁸⁴ For its part, Beijing could reassess the cost-benefit balance of having Moscow as a strategic partner, in light of Putin's adventurism and norm-breaking behaviour. As we have seen, the Russian invasion has already hurt Chinese interests by boosting Western unity, aggravating Beijing's relations with Europe, and disrupting vital supply chains and trade routes.

Of course, the problem with linear narratives is that they are frequently disrupted by events, either unforeseen or underestimated. Although the Sino-Russian relationship has followed a steady progression, it would be unwise to assume this will always be the case. We need only to recall US-China engagement in the half century following American President Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to Beijing.

83. An important shared narrative is that the United States is pursuing a policy of dual containment towards China and Russia—see “Russian-Chinese Dialogue: The 2022 Model”, RIAC/Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences/Fudan University, August 9, 2022, p. 8, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

84. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has conspicuously distanced Kazakhstan from Russia over the war in Ukraine—see T. Umarov, “Kazakhstan Is Breaking Out of Russia's Grip”, *Foreign Policy*, September 16, 2022, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com>; also M. Laruelle, “The End of the Post-Soviet Order”, *Foreign Affairs*, October 13, 2022. Meanwhile, Beijing has declared its unequivocal support for Kazakhstan's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. See *Tengri news report*, September 14, 2022, available at: <https://tengrinews.kz>.

The speed with which a once solid accommodation has unravelled is a salutary warning against taking things for granted. Considering the gulf in capabilities that has opened up between China and Russia, Xi's global ambitions, and Putin's anarchic behaviour, there is reason to be cautious when talking up the future of Sino-Russian cooperation. How would Xi respond, for example, if Putin's "special military operation" were to escalate into a wider conflict between Russia and the West, or see the use of tactical nuclear weapons against Ukrainian targets? Might this be one delinquent act too many for Beijing to stomach?⁸⁵

But equally we cannot assume that China and Russia will "inevitably" distance themselves from each other or that they will *never* form a political-military alliance. Just in the next few years, there are a number of variables (or "Black Swans") to consider. What if Donald Trump or a Trumpian candidate wins the 2024 US presidential election, and ups the ante in confronting China? Suppose there is a US-China military conflict over Taiwan or in the South China Sea, as some are predicting?⁸⁶ What if Putin eventually triumphs in Ukraine, unlikely though this seems today? These are all potential game-changers that could bring about a closer Sino-Russian partnership, involving active coordination of their foreign policies, genuine military interoperability, tighter economic ties and, in time, the building of alternative financial systems.

Implications for Western Policy

Understanding the Sino-Russian partnership is critical to developing effective policy responses to the challenges Beijing and Moscow present. Unfortunately, Western decision-makers have tended to lean on ideological and strategic stereotypes. It is time these were jettisoned in favour of a more nuanced approach.

The war in Ukraine has highlighted the bankruptcy of bracketing China and Russia as if they were a conjoined entity, an alliance or "axis" of authoritarians. The two countries present very different challenges that need to be addressed *in their own right*. Beijing's aggressive behaviour vis-à-vis Taiwan, its ambitious power projection

85. This presupposes that Xi would follow up on his November 2022 statement with Chancellor Scholz that they "jointly oppose the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons"—see K. Connolly, "China and Germany Condemn Russian Threat to Use Nuclear Weapons in Ukraine", *The Guardian*, November 4, 2022, available at: www.theguardian.com.

86. H. Davidson, "China Could Invade Taiwan in Next Six Years, Top US Admiral Warns", *The Guardian*, March 10, 2021, available at: www.theguardian.com. For a more recent but no less alarmist view, see E. Colby, "America Must Prepare for a War over Taiwan", *Foreign Affairs*, August 10, 2022, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com.

in the Indo-Pacific, and efforts to subvert international institutions undoubtedly threaten Western interests. But Western governments do themselves no favours by conflating these with Russia's wantonly destructive actions in Ukraine and outright repudiation of international order.

It is vital to distinguish between clear and present dangers on the one hand, and long-term challenges on the other. There are some modest signs that Western policymakers are belatedly grasping this, thanks to events in Ukraine.⁸⁷ China, by virtue of the breadth of its ambition and capacity, offers a significantly greater strategic challenge to the United States and Western pre-eminence. But it is Russia that presents the immediate threat.⁸⁸ It may be politically atrophied, economically stagnant, and geopolitically isolated—a “lonely power”⁸⁹—yet its very weakness makes it dangerous. Unlike powers that possess more diverse and flexible means of influence, it is overwhelmingly reliant on military might. And when this goes wrong, as in Ukraine, the Kremlin's instinct is not to reconsider its decision-making, but to double down on its original judgements and instincts, with catastrophic consequences for others as well as itself.

Western leaders should eschew abstractions such as a “rules-based international order”, “the right side of history” and a world divided between autocracies and democracies, and focus instead on concrete actions. There are plenty of authoritarian regimes around the world; according to Freedom House, their number has been rising steadily over the past 16 years.⁹⁰ But what matters in terms of international order and security is whether such authoritarianism translates into destabilizing, norm-breaking behaviour, such as invading other countries or facilitating the proliferation of WMD (weapons of mass destruction) technologies.⁹¹ Notwithstanding

87. See the latest US National Security Strategy, October 2022, Website of the White House, pp. 23-26 available at: www.whitehouse.gov.

88. Thus, Yasheng Huang describes Putin as the “clear, present, and mortal enemy of the West”—in Y. Huang, “What Lessons Does China Take from Putin's War?”, *Foreign Policy*, April 7, 2022, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com>. In similar terms, Karaganov writes of an “existential war” between Russia and the West—in “Russia Cannot Afford to Lose ...”, *op. cit.*

89. This term was first used by Lilia Shevtsova in her book, *Lonely Power: Why Russia Has Failed to Become the West and the West Is Weary of Russia*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010.

90. S. Repucci and A. Slipowitz, “Freedom in the World 2022: The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule”, Freedom House, February 2022, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org>.

91. It is simply untrue to suggest that authoritarian regimes (or even “personalist dictatorships”) are more predisposed than democracies to adopting “risky and aggressive foreign policies”—see Shullman and Kendall-Taylor, “Best and Bosom Friends”, *op. cit.*,

Beijing's aggressive posture towards Taiwan, there remains a world of difference between Chinese and Russian actions in relation to global order.

We must be ready to counter aggression from wherever it comes, using all necessary means—strengthening alliances, modernizing military capabilities, improving cyber and other forms of resilience. Conversely, we need to be open to practical cooperation with our opponents and “enemies”, regardless of their ideological colouring. Much as we might dislike the repressiveness of Xi Jinping's rule, the fact remains that climate cooperation with China will be essential if there is to be any hope of slowing global warming. Similarly, Putin's delinquent behaviour makes it more, not less, imperative to engage with Moscow on issues such as strategic arms control. The difficulties of making tangible progress need hardly be spelled out, but that does not obviate the importance of continuing efforts in this area.

At various times, Western policymakers have imagined that they might be able to split Beijing and Moscow from each other, or at least prevent them from becoming closer. These attempts have proved futile. Worse still, they have allowed Putin to leverage the partnership with China in emasculating Western responses to Russian aggression. Lately, this error has been reprised in Western efforts to persuade Beijing to move away from Moscow over the war in Ukraine. Yet there is no deal the West can (let alone will) offer, no pressure it can apply, that could achieve such an outcome. It would be wiser instead to recognize the limits of Western influence, while remaining alert to opportunities that may eventually arise from contradictions in the Sino-Russian partnership.

Finally, Western governments need to be true to the principles they espouse, from revitalizing democracy and the rule of law at home to addressing universal threats such as climate change and food insecurity. Historically, the West's appeal to the world has been based on its superior capacity to combine soft and hard power, to marry international problem-solving and geopolitics, and to demonstrate that good governance is key to projecting influence beyond one's borders. Yet many Western leaders have succumbed to the facile belief that great power confrontation defines the 21st century world. Such “realism” is anything but realistic or practical. It plays the game of international politics on Chinese and Russian terms, while offering little or nothing in its place. The West needs to return to its core

p. 4. Suffice to compare the disastrous US-led military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan with the fact that China has not fought a war in more than four decades.

strengths and prove once again that it can offer a more attractive global vision than its competitors.



27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris cedex 15 – France

Ifri.org