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The Future of Sino-Russian Relations from China's Perspective: Implications for US Policy

By Cindy Zheng

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Under President Xi Jinping, China's relationship with Russia and President Vladimir Putin, though born out of necessity, has been overshadowed by a cautious overtone on both sides. On April 9th, 2024, Beijing hosted Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov for a visit with President Xi.¹ Some analysts have interpreted the high-level visits of officials between the two countries as preparation for a meeting between Putin and Xi, which would send a strong message to the international community about the two countries' continued strong partnership. The security ties between the two, in defiance of the West, have tightened considerably over time, especially as China's competition with the United States intensifies and U.S. military assistance to Ukraine in the war increases.

Not all partnerships are created equally; the same could be said for the Sino-Russia relationship, with each side looking out for its own interests. Moscow wants to prove to Beijing that it is not globally isolated by the Russia-Ukraine War and is becoming more economically dependent on China as the war continues. On the other hand, China realizes that its partnership with Russia is its strongest deterrent against their common enemy, the United States. However, Beijing keeps an arm's distance to prevent itself from being seen as overly supportive of Russia and its actions in the Russia-Ukraine War, which could potentially lead to harsher criticism and sanctions from Western countries. China is also taking a backseat view of Russia's encroachment into Ukraine, observing how the international community may react and preparing for potential new domains of warfare in its own regional contingencies involving adversaries and the West, especially given the likelihood of U.S. involvement in such contingencies. This paper will examine China's perspective on the Russia-Ukraine War and how it views the future of the Sino-Russia relationship.

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China's Longtime Partner

The Sino-Russia partnership has a long history dating back to the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) under Chairman Mao Zedong. At the beginning of the PRC's founding, its relations with the Soviet Union were characterized by mutual reliance. China was a major communist country, holding significant political significance within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, while opposing American liberalism. The Soviets were also a huge asset to China, providing economic and military expertise.

A key turning point in Sino-Soviet relations occurred in the 1960s, leading to the Sino-Soviet split. The deterioration of relations between Beijing and Moscow was due to a buildup of political and ideological disputes, as well as the Zhenbao Island border crisis.² Zhenbao Island consists of coastal islands serving as a boundary line between the Soviet Union and China under the Treaty of Peking, signed as part of a series of unequal treaties between China and Western powers in the 1860s. China considered the treaty unfair because Russia imposed it on a weakened China at the time, while the Soviets claimed China had no legal claim to the island. On March 2, 1969, Mao ordered Chinese troops to attack Soviet troops on the border of Zhenbao Island. Mao's motive was to establish defensive deterrence against future Soviet aggression and control over China. However, Moscow interpreted this as an offensive attack. Within China, Mao had already begun spreading propaganda to distance China from its longtime ally. He labeled the Soviet Union a revisionist colonial power and designated China as the true leader of the worldwide communist movement. It was also in this context that the United States saw an opportunity to establish diplomatic relations with China to counter the Soviet Union.

Sino-Soviet relations remained sour until the fall of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the Russian Federation. In 1992, under Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Chinese President Jiang Zemin, China and Russia issued a Joint Statement on the Basis of Mutual Relations between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, marking the establishment of diplomatic relations since the USSR dissolved.³ The Sino-Russia joint communique emphasized a "partnership of strategic coordination based on equality and mutual benefit, oriented towards the

21st century." Since then, the institutionalization of bilateral relations has accelerated, including frequent high-level visits between the countries' leaders, hotlines, and summits to regularly exchange views and coordinate policies. The situation surrounding historical border disputes between the two countries has also significantly improved, with bilateral demilitarization of border areas and the signing of an 'Agreement on Sino-Russian Western Borders' that demarcated the border between China and Russia.⁴

Sino-Russian Defense Relations in Recent Years

The Sino-Russia strategic partnership covers a wide range of issue areas, but the most important aspect of the relationship centers around military defense. The height of their interactions in arm sales, joint military exercises, and military technology cooperation was between 2014 and 2019. China remains the second-largest market for Russian arms exports after India.⁵ Between 2019 and 2023, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, which provides comprehensive data on global arms exports, estimates that China accounted for 21 percent of Russian arms sales.⁶ The majority of this influx of military equipment includes advanced aircraft, engines, and air defense systems. However, China's attempt to forge its own path in developing military weapons using technology from Russia has caused friction regarding allegations of technology theft.⁷

Joint military exercises are another important component of the Sino-Russia relationship, and their frequency has increased. The joint military operations cover a variety of missions, including anti-terrorism drills, naval drills, and aerial patrols.⁸ China has benefited tremendously from its advanced and experienced Russian military counterpart from these drills. However, as China upgrades its military and the gap between the PLA and the Russian military becomes narrower, the power dynamics in the joint military exercises are also shifting.

Since the Sino-Russia rapprochement, domestic and international factors have shifted the dynamics between the powers. Under the Soviet Union, Moscow was seen as the "powerful big brother" in the relationship, with superior military weapons, military experience, and political influence. However,

in the post-Cold War period, with China's economic rise exceeding that of Russia, there has been a power reversal. Under President Xi, China is aspiring to build a "world-class military" and hold high importance in the global economy, and it is a major competitor against the United States for shaping international rules and norms.

On the other hand, Russia's transition to a market-based economy after the Cold War has faced various problems, including a lack of economic diversification due to its dependency on oil, the renationalization of Russia's private companies, and high inflation and interest rates. These economic challenges have been exacerbated by Western sanctions against Russia due to the Russia-Ukraine War, resulting in a contraction of Russia's GDP by 2.1% in 2022.⁹ Russia has been able to recover from the initial economic sanctions and redirect its oil exports to China and India to circumvent Western sanctions on oil.¹⁰ Despite Russia's ability to rely on its oil reserves, it may experience a recession or stagnation as the Russia-Ukraine War continues and depletes more of its resources. As China's capabilities and influence grow and Russia stagnates, amid evolving factors in the international system, an analysis of current trends will help inform the future trajectory of the relationship.

China's Response to the Russia-Ukraine War

The Russia-Ukraine conflict escalated on February 24, 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale military invasion into the eastern Ukrainian Donbas region.¹¹ Before the invasion, Xi and Putin had met in early February hours before the Winter Olympics in Beijing and issued a joint statement affirming the "no limits" ties between the two countries.¹² However, behind closed doors, signs of tension and distrust exist in the Sino-Russia relationship. Senior Chinese officials have stated that Putin did not inform Xi about his invasion plans when they met.¹³ Some Chinese scholars have argued that Russia's invasion has brought more trouble, especially considering its already declining reputation with key European countries that have a harsh position on Russia.¹⁴ Others have said that China has been a tremendous benefactor in the war by being Russia's economic lifeline amid Western sanctions and discounted oil prices.¹⁵ The cost-benefit analysis of the Russia-Ukraine War carries important weight in

China's view of Russia and the future of Sino-Russia relations.

Political Support

China has tried to adopt a stance of strategic ambiguity in the Russia-Ukraine War by neither publicly condemning nor expressing support for Russia in the conflict. Chinese leadership realizes that fully supporting Russia could incur reputational costs, allowing the United States and its Western allies to label China as an irresponsible country. It could also lead to other consequences such as secondary economic sanctions and protectionist policies from Europe, a strengthened united transatlantic front against China-related issues, and revive a rival-bloc mentality by further polarizing the American and Chinese spheres of influence. Natasha Kuhrt, a senior lecturer specializing in Russian security and foreign policy issues at King's College London, says that the Sino-Russia relationship does not fit the bill of a traditional military alliance.¹⁶ Otherwise, China would be providing direct military support to Russia during wartime. Instead, the longstanding Sino-Russia relationship is more about deeper common goals and perspectives regarding the international order.

Despite its differences with Russia in various areas, China's relationship with Moscow remains one of its highest priorities. Putin and Xi share the worldview that America's goal is to contain the rise of China and suppress Russia. Unlike the United States, which has a network of close partners and allies across Asia, Europe, and North America with extensive multilateral agreements and partnerships, China and Russia have fewer partners. Therefore, Sino-Russia relations are even more significant to both countries as a counter against the bloc of U.S.-led alliances. Even if the Chinese leadership holds a different stance on the Russia-Ukraine War, it will still choose to remain neutral to avoid upsetting China's problematic but critical partner.

Media Disinformation Campaigns

Even though China has tried to remain neutral in the Russia-Ukraine War, it has still been indirectly involved in assisting Russia with its military, economy, and political developments. While China has not made any public statements to international audiences about

its stance, domestically, it has deployed tactics to sway its citizens to express empathy for Russia in the war through media campaigns. There are leaked details of censorship guidance for Chinese media reporting on the Russia-Ukraine conflict on the Chinese-state-run social media platform Weibo. The directive ordered users not to post anything unfavorable to Russia or in favor of Ukraine and the West.¹⁷ The order, quoted by a video account linked to the Beijing News, states that “comments must be selectively moderated, and only appropriate comments must be published.” Moreover, the order said, “Anyone publishing content will be deemed responsible for it, and genuine care must be taken. Each post must be watched for at least two days, and great care must be taken when handing over [to the incoming shift].”¹⁸

Despite the one-sided propaganda, Chinese nationals generally favor Russia but want neutrality in action. In a survey of Chinese nationals conducted by the University of California, San Diego’s (UCSD) China Data Lab, 25% of respondents oppose Russia’s actions in Ukraine, 40% support them, and 35% neither support nor oppose.¹⁹ The results align with China’s official stance of neutrality, even though it is pushing propaganda in favor of Russia.

The Russia-Ukraine War has also amplified China’s support of more overt Russian disinformation campaigns. For instance, China has consistently promoted Russia’s claim that the United States operates bioweapons labs in Ukraine. According to data collected by the German Marshall Fund, Chinese diplomats and state media have tweeted about “labs” and “Ukraine” more than 500 times in the first 11 months of the war, and they continued doing so.²⁰ This amplification of biolab disinformation by China complements its previous efforts to spread false claims about U.S. bioresearch labs being responsible for COVID-19. These two disinformation campaigns reinforce each other, with Chinese sources sometimes explicitly linking them.²¹ Disinformation plays into China’s use of Ukraine-related topics to align with its own narratives and long-term strategic goals.

Military Support

On the military front, there is no evidence to date that China is providing military equipment in the traditional sense, such as lethal weapons, arms,

and military vehicles. However, it has provided Russia with critical parts used in military systems to keep Russia’s military-defense industry running during the war, thereby strengthening its battlefield capabilities. China has supplied Russia with optics, microelectronics, semiconductors, drone engines, and other machine tools.²² The parts that China is providing to Russia are dual-use technologies with military and commercial applications. Furthermore, the Biden Administration has stated that in the last quarter of 2023, China provided Russia with more than 70% of its machine tool imports.²³ Although these items may seem mundane on the surface, they could be used to produce optics for Russian tanks and armored vehicles, turbojet engines for cruise missiles, and protective gear such as bulletproof helmets and vests.²⁴ Additionally, China supplied Russia with 90% of its microelectronic imports in 2023.²⁵ Microelectronics are critical components in missile, tank, and aircraft production. China’s ongoing assistance to the Russian military is crucial in maintaining its operational capacity.

Economic Support

According to Chinese customs data, trade between China and Russia reached \$240 billion, indicating tightening economic ties even as the war continues. China’s economic support for Russia is perhaps one of the most important counters against the impact and pressure of Western countries. Even before the war, China was already one of Russia’s top five trading partners. However, as the war continued, China became an even more vital economic lifeline for Russia by buying Russian energy resources and serving as an alternative to Western suppliers. Notably, oil constitutes a significant portion of Russia’s economy, accounting for 16% of the country’s GDP in 2023.²⁶

Given Russia’s prominence and its energy resources in the global supply chain, it has been relatively successful in circumventing Western sanctions.²⁷ Russia’s protection of its oil exports has largely succeeded, with China being a major purchaser of Russian oil, allowing Russia to reroute its energy exports to India and China during the war and limit negative impacts on its economy. In 2023, Russia was China’s largest oil supplier, accounting for 19% of its crude imports, as China took advantage of Russia’s

lower prices as it sought new customers amid Western sanctions. During a meeting between Xi and Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin in December 2023, Xi stated that both sides should “deepen cooperation on economy, trade, energy, and connectivity.”²⁸ Xi’s statement underscores that despite the war, China and Russia have found ways to strengthen their ties and remain integral to the global economy.

Additionally, Russia has been able to rely on China as an alternative to Western suppliers for goods that are now limited due to sanctions. As European countries, the United States, and their American allies have withdrawn from the Russian market, Moscow has increased its purchases of Chinese goods ranging from cars to smartphones. For example, Chinese-made consumer electronics and automobiles have filled the gap left by South Korean manufacturers. During the first five months of 2023, Great Wall Motor and Geely from China secured the second and third spots in terms of sales volume in Russia’s auto market, according to data from the Association of European Businesses.²⁹ While the top position was held by Russia’s leading carmaker, AvtoVAZ, Great Wall and Geely saw their sales volumes more than triple compared to the previous year. They replaced South Korea’s Kia and Hyundai Motor, which held the second and third positions before the conflict in Ukraine.³⁰ While both countries have benefited from deepening economic ties tremendously during wartime, China has benefited more. As the war continues, China has observed the impact of Western sanctions and the lessons it can employ to mitigate its economy from shocks in its own future contingency scenarios.

What is China Learning from the Ukraine War?

The Russian-Ukraine War is of significant interest to China owing to potential parallels with a future Chinese invasion of Taiwan and the perception of U.S. encirclement it shares with Russia. China closely follows the war, observing and drawing lessons for future contingencies involving its own regional disputes. A UCSD survey on Chinese views toward the war shows that Chinese nationals supporting Russia were highly likely to view the U.S. military as aiming to contain China and prevent its objective of reunification with Taiwan.³¹

Despite these observations behind the scenes, China has made significant efforts to delink the two in public. China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi, during a Xinhua press conference, stated that Taiwan and Ukraine are not comparable and are totally different in nature. Yi argued that Taiwan is a part of China and an internal issue, whereas Ukraine is its own country and a matter of sovereignty.³² Although this might at times highlight the illegality of Russia’s invasion, Chinese officials have remained committed to pushing back against comparisons between the situation in Ukraine to that of Taiwan.

Similar debates have emerged among China analysts in the West regarding the careful generalization of Ukraine’s successful defense and Taiwan. Firstly, Ukraine spans approximately 603,550 sq km, while Taiwan is approximately 35,980 sq km, making Taiwan 17 times smaller than Ukraine.³³ Secondly, China’s military budget is five times larger than Russia’s.³⁴ The combination of these two factors means that China would be able to concentrate its warfighting efforts and efficiency over a smaller landmass compared to Ukraine.

Additionally, the security decision-making apparatus of China and Russia are significantly different. Andrei Kolesnikov, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, describes the Putin regime as total totalitarianism as the war began.³⁵ Since late 2022, Putin has publicly berated the director of the S.V.R., the foreign-intelligence agency, a direct successor to the spy section of the K.G.B., after his special military operation failed to meet his expectations. The deputy head of the National Guard, a former security service personnel to Putin, was forced to resign.³⁶ The purges in Putin’s inner circle signal the shrinking number of high officials to whom he will listen, including only those he perceives as having absolute loyalty to him. The lack of openness and discussion on the Russia-Ukraine War makes Putin the most powerful person in Russia.

In contrast, decision-making and control over the military in the CCP have more extensive structures, encompassing many party committee systems.³⁷ These party committee systems exist across all CCP organizations, making it difficult to determine the level of authority each has, possibly granting them vast autonomy and authority. The extensiveness of the

party committee system also leaves room for gaps in Xi's decision-making and control of the military.

The vast differences between the Chinese and Russian political and military systems do not make the Russia-Ukraine War a perfect case to infer how China will invade Taiwan and how it will respond to counterforces. However, the war is still useful for providing crucial insights into some of the strategic factors that China is observing about modern warfare. This section will examine the lessons that China may be learning in three different areas: military, economic, and political-diplomatic.

Military Lessons: The Importance of the Land Battlefield and Technology

China has not had practical warfighting experience since the 1979 Sino-Vietnam War, which was a failure for the Chinese military and exposed major problems within the PLA. Since then, Chairman Deng Xiaoping and subsequent leaders have introduced reforms to turn the PLA into a professional army.³⁸ China has made tremendous strides in military modernization, drawing heavily on Russian experience from force structuring to equipment. In the past few years, Chinese leadership has emphasized the need to develop its own innovative military strategies and technologies to become a “world-class military” among the ranks of other great powers.³⁹

However, this does not mean it has the capacity to completely decouple from Russia's experiences—at least for now. China's peacetime military training does not provide accurate outlooks about combat effectiveness during wartime, so observations from other countries wars are crucial for China to understand the gaps in its military and make improvements. For instance, Chinese military scholars have extensively studied the Gulf War and Iraq War, in which the United States was heavily involved.⁴⁰ The Russia-Ukraine war is important for China to observe as it involves multiple great power militaries, including Russia and Ukraine, backed by the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces. This is a modern war using modern technology, equipment, strategy, and personnel requirements, which are critical for growing the PLA's understanding of how to fight and win present-day wars.

Chinese military commentators have provided extensive coverage of the military aspects of the war, from fighting domains to weapons to personnel. One of the striking lessons that China is learning is the renewed importance of the land battlefield.⁴¹ Under Xi, military modernization has shifted towards an emphasis on more maritime and aerospace campaigns to protect China's territory and national sovereignty. China's 2015 defense white paper stated that “the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests.”⁴² The Russia-Ukraine War, however, has demonstrated the importance of the essential qualities of the land battlefield.

A prominent article from the Global Times, a branch under the PLA Daily, discusses how, in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the two sides launched a large-scale ground conflict in the early stage and focused on using large-scale artillery battles.⁴³ Throughout the war, traditional land combat equipment such as main battle tanks also played a major role. Moreover, the article states that “it is unknown whether the U.S. military has the ability to still rely on the air force to lead the war in the face of similarly matched adversaries... therefore, traditional armies, especially their main combat equipment, have regained attention.”⁴⁴ The analysis concludes that Russia's ground forces, particularly its main battle tanks, were insufficient and had limited capabilities compared to the new generation of U.S. and European battle tanks. The PLA has also observed that Russia is struggling with joint operations.⁴⁵ Russia's air support forces are not coordinating with the army to carry out strikes to their full effectiveness. Similarly, China faces many weaknesses in its joint operations, such as lack of integrative technologies and connectivity between sister services, and lack of unison in technology among operational units within a service.⁴⁶

Additionally, in the military sphere, another important lesson PLA commentators have discussed is advanced military training and technologies used in modern warfare under informatized conditions. An article from PLA Daily asserts that Russia has weaknesses in informatization warfare capabilities.⁴⁷ The PLA author points to different areas of informatization that the Russian military could improve. First, it claims that Russia can bolster the informatization level of its

command and communication systems by expanding the coverage of the command automation system and prioritizing the equipping of combat units with new generation digital radios. There are also mentions of actively incorporating artificial intelligence (AI) technology into the battlefield. Second, there is a focus on integrating drones into combat units to increase battlefield situational awareness. Drones have been a critical component of the war in Ukraine, with both sides using them to establish a unified battlefield reconnaissance network for real-time information transmission through secure channels and enhance reconnaissance strikes. China is already the largest drone producer in the world, but the PLA article now emphasizes investment in more advanced drone technology such as strategic drones, integrated observation and strike drones, and cruise missiles, alongside expanded production of precision-guided weapons.⁴⁸

Economic Lessons: Weaponized Interdependence?

The Russia-Ukraine War is also shaping China's assessment of the economic costs of military action against Taiwan. The economic lessons from the Russia-Ukraine war are harder for China to analyze due to significant differences between the Russian and Chinese economies. In 2022, China's GDP was \$17.96 trillion, whereas Russia's GDP was \$2.2404 trillion.⁴⁹ As discussed in the previous section, so far, even though Western sanctions have slowed down Russia's economy, Moscow has been able to mitigate the impacts by rerouting exports and shifting towards a wartime production economy. This has shown the CCP that Russia, as a significant actor in the global economy, cannot be isolated as easily as one might think.

Furthermore, China's global economic position is not only even better than Russia's, but it and the United States are more economically interdependent than the United States and Russia. America and coalition states would face greater costs if they imposed sanctions on China during an invasion and if Beijing decided to retaliate. The trade war between China and the United States initiated by the Trump Administration in 2018 is indicative of the more extreme economic pains that both sides, especially the United States, could experience if sanctions were ramped up during

wartime.⁵⁰

China is also a much bigger player in the global economy and supply chain than Russia, therefore actions on China will have effects on the global economy as a whole. Chinese commentators have extensively written in support of the position that China has an irreplaceable global economic position and view that as an advantage in conflict.⁵¹ In particular, they believe that states opposing China may refrain from joining or enforcing sanctions, particularly Indo-Pacific countries. For these reasons, the Chinese leadership's takeaway from Russia may be that sanctions have limited utility, bolstering its confidence that economic responses to a Taiwan invasion may have less impact on its economy than initially assumed.

Despite China's major economic role, there are reasons China is still concerned about the economic cost of a Taiwan invasion. For one, China's economic relations with Taiwan are much greater and crucial to its economy than Ukraine is for Russia. Taiwan is an important immediate country to China due to its production of semiconductors.⁵² Semiconductors are important in military weapons and technology production. During an invasion of Taiwan, the disruption of the critical supply of semiconductors could shift PLA leaders' military calculus. The loss of supply from Taiwan could constrain the PLA's military decision-making abilities.

Another point that has been raised about the economic costs is that China's extensive ties in the global economy create greater vulnerabilities, rather than serving as a buffer.⁵³ This includes its reliance on the dollar for trade and a significant number of foreign reserves, as well as its dependence on Western technologies. A recent study found that Chinese experts are deeply worried about the potential for sanctions.⁵⁴ The economic and military support that the U.S. government is providing Ukraine, namely the \$40 billion package distributed in May 2022, has been interpreted by China as a significant move.⁵⁵ This has strengthened the credibility of the United States and its coalition countries' resolve during a Taiwan conflict and led Chinese economists and strategists to be concerned that Chinese aggression in the Taiwan Strait will be met with a serious response.

Political Lessons: Fear of Alienating Partners

The political lessons that China has taken away from the Russia-Ukraine war have been mixed. Although China has remained ambiguous in the war partly to stabilize its relations with Europe, that approach has proven unsuccessful. China perceived the potential to use Europe to act as a counterweight against the United States, especially since European countries were hesitant to follow the American lead in enacting trade sanctions to isolate China internationally before the invasion. In deviation from its reluctant stance to condemn Russia in the war, the Chinese government voted in favor of a United Nations General Assembly resolution titled “Cooperation between the United Nations and the Council of Europe,” which acknowledged “the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine.”⁵⁶ This does not indicate a significant shift in PRC foreign policy towards Russia but is a development that underscores China’s willingness to adapt in order to uphold favorable relations with Europe.

However, as the Russia-Ukraine war has progressed and China has still refused to condemn Russia, European countries have interpreted China’s silence as enabling Russia’s actions. Consequently, they view European states as becoming more politically aligned with the U.S. position on China. One example China cites is that, within the past year, several European countries have taken a firmer stance on condemning China’s unfair trade practices and technology protection.⁵⁷

In a future conflict over Taiwan, China fears that a Europe aligned with the United States will revive a rival bloc mentality as seen during the Cold War. Chinese strategists fear the political and security risks of a strengthened transatlantic front against issues of concern to Beijing. They view a united transatlantic front as undermining China’s strategic and military actions across the Taiwan Strait. It is unlikely that China will give in to the European Union’s hopes that it will put more pressure on Russia due to Chinese top leaders’ assessment that Europe’s economic interdependence will succeed in the furtherance of China-Europe partnership and the cost of distancing itself from Russia is high. However, as European countries are slowly showing willingness to impose

economic sanctions and adopt a hostile political stance on China, Chinese leaders are concerned about how to maintain relations with Russia without alienating Europe.

Implications for US Foreign Policy

China’s mixed signaling in the Russia-Ukraine War (providing limited economic and military support to Russia but being reluctant to overtly affirm Russia’s position) demonstrates that the two countries’ relations are perhaps more constrained than the “no limit” alliance they claim to have. Analysts of China and Russia who are skeptical of the two countries’ bond have observed that both sides are fueled by suspicions about each other’s intentions. Russia is displeased about being China’s junior partner, given China’s far more significant global economic position and its continued modernization of its military, narrowing the gap with Moscow. On the other hand, as Putin continues to prolong the war and make erratic decisions, some Chinese strategists believe that Russia is a troublesome partner from which they may want to distance themselves in the future. Secondly, China has advocated since its rise that it adheres to the principles of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, common development, and the political resolution of disputes among nations.⁵⁸ The Russia-Ukraine conflict contradicts China’s reputation for upholding these principles. While both sides have their frustrations towards each other, Sino-Russian relations are bound by their alliance’s political symbolism against the United States.

The foundation of a strong Sino-Russia relationship has been its animosity towards the United States and what it calls the liberal rules-based international order. Sino-Russian relations strongly depend on the parties’ perceived threat of the United States. A trend towards a greater united transatlantic front between Europe, Asia, and America will push China and Russia closer, therefore. Accordingly, Russia and China regard the other as one of their most valuable partners due to their ability to counterbalance American power.

A recent study by Oriana Skylar Mastro finds that “China and Russia are moderately aligned, but their alignment is limited to facilitating China’s challenge to U.S. hegemony in Asia; it does not include China helping Russia take on the United States in Europe.”⁵⁹

This could suggest that China views Europe as already in the US camp and finds it difficult to revitalize its relations with the region. The unity between Europe and the United States in response to Russian aggression in the war has heightened a new sense of instability in international politics. The uncertainty of the current security landscape and the assertive U.S. competition and alliance-building in Europe and the Indo-Pacific could alter Beijing and Moscow's calculations. If China and Russia believe that the United States seeks to overthrow their regimes, a core interest to their survival, then the benefits of their alliance will outweigh the costs.

The question that most concerns policymakers regarding the implications of a China-Russia partnership is whether they will fully support each other militarily in the case of an existential crisis. Together, China and Russia hold a numerical advantage over the United States in terms of total naval assets, military personnel, tanks, and military spending. The three powers also possess nuclear capabilities that introduce new escalation risks as they compete.⁶⁰

Yet the current Sino-Russian dynamics in the Russia-Ukraine War show that both countries are not preparing to fight together. China is not providing direct military support to Russia, and there are no suggestions that it would be willing to risk its security for Russia. There are also no indications from Russia that it would be willing to contribute its own forces to China in the case of a Taiwan invasion. While Moscow backs the "one-China" principle, Taiwan hasn't played a major role in the Chinese-Russian partnership. The extent to which Russia would want to be involved in a conflict over the Taiwan Strait is limited. Both countries also want to preserve their strategic autonomy rather than pursue collective security, as seen from China's plans to pursue its own innovations in military modernization.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The relationship between the United States, Russia, and China is central to U.S. national interests, given the political, economic, and military power that each of the three countries possesses. Any extreme, like war initiated by one power against the other, could escalate quickly and have cascading dangerous effects

across the globe. U.S. policymakers need to monitor the trend of Sino-Russia relations in preparation for a future in which Russia and China collectively present a significant challenge to U.S. interests and to explore strategies for creating divisions between the two.

The future of the China-Russia relationship is uncertain as the power gap between them widens. Russia, feeling threatened by China's growing military might, economic power, and competition for influence in Moscow's areas of interest, may seek a counterbalance. Currently, Europe and the United States represent the only significant counterweights to Chinese power for Russia. While Russia's alignment with the West seems unlikely during its conflict with Ukraine, alliances and interests can change. Alternatively, a scenario where China's tolerance for Putin's military actions in Ukraine runs out and where China feels that it no longer serves its interests to be close to Russia could push Beijing closer to the US as in 1969. However, the increasing areas of contention between the United States and China make this harder to envision.

The most important lesson for the U.S. government is that Sino-Soviet relations are not fixed, and the U.S. government can take active measures to influence their course. For instance, the United States can exploit points of contention between Russia and China to widen the gap between the two. Russia and China do not share the same national interests and face a myriad of problems, including concerns over China's military technology theft, competition for regional influence in Central Asia and the Arctic, and differences over Russia's actions in Ukraine.⁶¹

Secondly, the United States should present an even greater united front with Europe against China's support for Russia, such as through frequent joint public diplomatic stances and sanctions against private Chinese companies that exploit loopholes in sanctions policies to transfer critical spare parts and technology with potential military use. In other words, China needs to feel that the costs of partnership with Russia outweigh its benefits, especially concerning its international reputation and relations with Europe. If China continues to support Russia and antagonize Europe, it faces the risk of the region aligning even more closely with America's hostile position towards China.

Lastly, how should the United States interpret the lessons that China is taking away from Russia? Since former President Donald Trump adopted a more confrontational policy towards China, the China threat has set off warning alarms about Xi's plans for a Taiwan invasion. Certain officials have claimed that Xi will invade Taiwan as soon as 2027.⁶² In turn, this has created a false sense of urgency for greater defense spending budgets to contain China, including increased arms exports to Taiwan, nuclear weapons upgrades, and so on. The exaggerated rhetoric about the China threat heightens U.S. actions and may cross China's boundaries, leading China to respond forcefully. This creates dangerous escalatory dynamics and increases the opportunity for both sides to make mistakes, potentially leading to unintentional war.

The lessons that China is taking away from the Russia-Ukraine War should challenge these assumptions. The Russia-Ukraine War has shown China that a war over Taiwan would be more costly and uncertain than it believed. Amid other factors such as China's own domestic priorities and its economic slowdown, it does not intend to invade Taiwan, nor will it have the capabilities to invade by the 2027 deadline understood by U.S. policymakers. This should help maintain deterrence and stability across the Strait. Finally, China's limited involvement in the Russia-Ukraine War should also reassure policymakers that China and Russia will not fight a combined war against the U.S. military.

Endnotes

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