

Sino-Russian Relations Amid the War in Ukraine and Their Reassessment of the International Order

By Katie Stallard and Gilbert Rozman

In a video meeting with Xi Jinping on December 30, 2022, Vladimir Putin declared, “We share the same views on the causes, course and logic of the ongoing transformation of the global geopolitical landscape.”¹ But is this true? Do they really share the same view of the international order? To address this, we consider not only the state of the Sino-Russian relationship, but also compare their views on three dimensions of that order.

For the purposes of this study, we divide views on the international order into three dimensions: 1) the role of great powers with emphasis on Sino-Russian-U.S. relations; 2) the shape of the Indo-Pacific region, including U.S., Chinese, and Russian plans; and 3) the state of the Sino-Russian bilateral relationship. We argue that by 2019 basic consensus had been reached, but divisions remained. Indeed, on great powers agreement was highest, on regionalism it was complicated, and despite prior talk of a possible alliance, on bilateralism, contrary to claims, it was troubled.

The first year of the Russian war in Ukraine has tested the Sino-Russian relationship, as at no other time since the early 1990s. Relations have not proven to be unlimited, as the leaders declared just before the Russian invasion, but they have proven to be resilient. Critical to this resiliency is the considerable overlap in their assessments of the preexisting U.S.-led order. Yet, differences regarding the desired future international order and their respective risk tolerance could challenge future relations.

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Sino-Russian Relations and Their Thinking on the International Order Prior to 2019

The Chinese leadership was quick to insist in the early 1990s on the unjust nature of the unipolar world order the U.S. was building after the Cold War. They made their case repeatedly to the Russian leadership, who mostly sympathized, but a full meeting of the minds proved elusive. After all, grievances raised by China against the world order had long emphatically targeted the Russian empire and the Soviet Union as the biggest transgressors. Also, China's increasing integration into the global economic order and economic growth ran contrary to Russia's experience during this chaotic decade.

With Evgeny Primakov steering foreign policy in the late 1990s and China's leaders also angry over NATO's intervention in Kosovo, they found more common ground on the international order. The two sides signaled new closeness in their 2001 treaty of friendship. Both targeted Japan by the mid-2000s and coordinated against the U.S. approach on North Korea in the Six-Party Talks. If in the 1990s China was pressing Russia to challenge the international order more aggressively, in the 2000s they were pressing each other with neither clearly in the forefront. Indeed, in 2007-08 Putin was more outspoken and inclined to use force. That situation changed at the decade's end as Beijing cast aside Deng Xiaoping's policy of keeping a low profile and hiding China's growing strength, reacting sharply to the global financial crisis with new vehemence against the old order. Addressing the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2009, both Vladimir Putin and China's then premier Wen Jiabao laid the blame for the crisis on Western dominance of the global economic system.² The relationship kept growing closer except for economic ties, and Russian demagoguery toward China—mainly from local officials—was stifled. Yet, trust was low, and Russians remained preoccupied with the West. Discontent with the West lacked a clear alternative, given low Russian self-confidence and hesitation to recognize how quickly China was rising as a power.

Four preconditions were essential for Russia to swing sharply to China and to draw linkages between that and Putin's determination to draw a red line in Ukraine against the West. First, it required a huge boost in Russian self-confidence, which followed from perceived economic and political success. Second, and relatedly, a belief in Western decline was necessary, which the global financial crisis and U.S. domestic political struggles conveyed, reaching its apotheosis during Donald Trump's presidency. Third, even before Xi Jinping became party chairman, Russians could discern a sharp break from earlier Chinese caution. Fourth, Putin cultivated a national

narrative that drew on historical landmarks that both raised the stakes for regaining control over Ukraine and provided a valuable source of common ground between Moscow and Beijing. All of these forces had come into play by 2012.

Already in general accord in their opposition to the U.S.-led order and on some vague principles for a replacement, China and Russia found a new level of coordination in 2012 when Vladimir Putin resumed the Russian presidency and Xi Jinping took the helm of the Chinese Communist Party. Putin announced Russia's "Turn to the East." Xi launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Each was envisaged as a platform for forging a new regional order, while both leaders also turned their attention to the bilateral architecture and the future great power order.

In 2013 Putin and Xi began repeated summit meetings. Given Medvedev's recent stress on modernization supplanting natural resources in spearheading Russia's advance in Northeast Asia, it was still unclear what Putin's sharper attacks on the international order would mean. Putin decided to ride China's coattails with three clear objectives: 1) to breathe new life into the Russia-U.S.-China triangle; 2) to become a force in reshaping the architecture of East Asia; and 3) to construct a new identity of Eurasianism to replace communism as a shared bond. In 2012 these goals had coalesced in what Putin called the "Turn to the East." As China took a harder line toward its neighbors, Russia could draw closer to it but also build ties to the others, but not the U.S., which he was demonizing. As North Korea's relations hardened with South Korea and others, Russia could both achieve a breakthrough with it and boost ties to the South. Talk of multipolarity overrode signs that Russia's options had been closing. While the mainstream held that a new cold war was already under way, also present was a multipolar school hopeful of relations with Japan and South Korea as well as India. Abe Shinzo's upbeat visit to Moscow in April 2013 led to talk that although the U.S. is Japan's first priority, closer ties with Asian neighbors were also a key goal. Park Geun-hye raised optimism further with her "Eurasian Initiative," as Russians assumed she needed Moscow for "trustpolitik" with North Korea.

Following Xi's cordial meeting with Barack Obama at their June 2013 Sunnylands summit, and with suspicions rife in Russia about Xi's intentions in Central Asia after his launch of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" (SREB) in Kazakhstan later that year, Putin's "Turn to the East" hardly looked like an agenda to gang up on the U.S., forge a new region together, and strengthen bilateralism. Dissatisfied with Russian attempts to exclude China from certain political, security, and even economic domains, Xi had decided to pursue

integration in a manner worrisome to Putin's plan for the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)—a customs union viewed as a counterweight to China's already growing presence. Putin had blocked China's proposal for an FTA within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and China was trying an end run. Regional ties seemed troubled, and bilateral relations were uncertain.

This changed with Russia's invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014. Putin's Cold War rhetoric put multilateralists on the defensive. His actions, and the Western sanctions they provoked, posed an immediate economic challenge. Despite the positive rhetoric about Moscow's relations with Beijing, in 2013 Russia's exports to the EU were at \$256 billion in contrast to only \$36 billion to China, with investments made in Russia even more skewed. Putin made a strong case during his May 2014 summit in China that massive Chinese funding would boost Russia's position as an energy superpower, compensating for its increasing isolation in the West. Putin had solidified ties with Xi Jinping, who was supportive of closer security relations, and had secured a massive boost to economic ties. Russia also agreed to link the EEU and the SREB, changing the framework for Central Asia, giving Xi a victory but pretending otherwise. At a July 2014 meeting of ambassadors, Putin insisted that China was staunchly against the U.S. due to its fears of encirclement, and that the environment was favorable for Russia to become the geopolitical balancer in a fast-changing region.³ Equally, to build an Asian order exclusive of the U.S., Xi needed closer political and economic ties with Russia.

The deterioration of Sino-U.S. relations in 2015-16 gave renewed hope to Russia. China had joined in the pursuit of a multipolar world, and it was working with Russia in the SCO and BRICS to establish that world. Leaders heralded repeated Putin-Xi summits, closer military ties, and the reliability of China's hostility to the West. They reconceptualized geography to transform Eurasianism into a geopolitical and community identity symbol, giving the impression that China was cooperating in the reconstruction of the region rather than Russia being left on the margins. There was talk of becoming the third regional power after China and the United States—a balancer in the Asia-Pacific between the two powers-- as the two sides recognized each other's sphere of influence.

Anticipation in Russia mounted that a new era was arriving, and something called Greater Eurasia was emerging. More important than China's rise was the perception of U.S. decline. Russia foresaw gaining a major say in shaping the new regional framework. China joined in calling for the construction of an overall Eurasian partnership, broadening the scale of regionalism. Russia

accepted the core status of BRI, with Putin insisting that the EEU, SCO, and ASEAN could draw together apart from China's domination. Rather than admit that China was on a path to regional hegemony or that Russia's ties were not diversifying, the Russian narrative predicted triangularity with China and the U.S. and a balanced Eurasia in which Russia need not defer to China and would still lead its own geo-economic, geostrategic, and geo-cultural sphere. In defense of multipolarity, there was some talk of India or ASEAN as a center, but the U.S. was excluded, and Japan and South Korea had become objects of contestation rather than potential poles. It was unclear how China's vision for the BRI meshed with Greater Eurasia or if these were two competing conceptions. Clearer was the attempt to counter TPP, which Obama had advanced as an organizing concept as part of the U.S. pivot to Asia. Aware of its economic weakness, Russia also countered various schemes with stress on other dimensions of power. It gave great weight to the SCO as the incubator of a new world order.

Posing a rarified grand strategic triangle, putting Russia at the center of a vision of a new regional order, and holding summits with grandiose promises all sustained Russia's search for acceptance as a co-leader with its own autonomous model. China responded with soothing words about leadership but stringent conditions. Greater Eurasia, the new geographical construct, was given as reason for hope, but China's priority was a transport corridor via Central Asia, bypassing the Russian Far East to Russian chagrin. Eager to find compatibility, the two identified the SCO as the coordinating arena. With Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un rocking the world order, Putin eagerly put the spotlight on security, and Xi Jinping soon grew more assertive. A new era had dawned by the end of the 2010s.

Consensus on what to do about the Grand Strategic Triangle strengthened, divisions over regionalism came more to the surface, and troubles in the bilateral relationship surfaced in more obvious ways. In Russian publications by 2019, wariness of China on regional and bilateral issues was not hidden. The pressure from China was growing. For example, Dai Bingguo urged raising ties to a higher level but limiting the impact of obstacles by: 1) neutralizing Russian actors who do not welcome stronger relations, i.e, those who point to troubles due to Chinese behavior; 2) building trust (as if Russians of late have shown too little trust in Chinese moves); 3) orienting the relationship toward the progress of humanity and the development of civilizations, respecting one another as forces for this common good even when problems arise (i.e., accepting China's agenda as good); and 4) improving mutual images. This shows that China sought a closer relationship on its terms. China sought to forge a Sinocentric system of regional economies and security. China's tone shifted. "Wolf warrior"

diplomacy, which mainly concerns countries considered opponents in Beijing, began to touch even Russia. Instead of recognizing Russia's perspectives, China was demanding more complete support.⁴

Moscow struggled to lend substance to its notion of a Greater Eurasian Partnership. Beijing gave lip service to the idea as it put real resources behind its own BRI. The idea of a “troika” of Russia, China, and India served a few Russian aspirations: to construct a continental architecture, while others had a maritime orientation; to gain the pivot when the two others struggled to improve their relationship; and to prevent a Sinocentric regional order from emerging. Claims to have special closeness to India served to allay concern about getting caught in an asymmetrical dyad with China and averting India's warming ties to the U.S. and its allies. India served as a bulwark for Russian aspirations in Asia. It was seen as a force for Eurasianism, the critical piece in the BRICS, a vital addition to the SCO, a barrier to Sinocentrism and the BRI, and an obstacle due to its strategic autonomy to U.S. ambitions to contain China. Yet Moscow had little to offer except arms to India. Russia sought to popularize the term Eurasia as the crux of discussions about a new world order and emphasized Russia as its birthplace. If after five centuries when the West was temporarily recognized as the epicenter of modernization, China and India were to regain that role, Eurasia would rise to become the center of the world, according to this vision.⁵ Yet, concerns about Russo-Indian relations in the context of the triangle with China were intensifying.

If Putin started the back-and-forth of the past decade by proclaiming the EEU, the initiative has increasingly been in Xi Jinping's hands. Russian moves have mostly followed Chinese ones or reflected concern that China's position is becoming increasingly dominant in Asia. It has been on the back foot in cross-border relations, responding to repeated plans for Northeast China reaching to the Russian Far East. It fought a rear-guard action in Central Asia, where China has sought to increase its influence. On India, Vietnam, and elsewhere in Asia's southern tier, Russia has retreated when China has pressed its case. At each point, Russia tries a mild rejoinder, hoping to keep its autonomy alive, before China takes its next move, putting Russia more on the defensive. Despite the pretense that each summit was bringing closer ties, in fact, rival claims for the BRI and the Great Eurasian Partnership as reinforcing visions of trans-Asian architecture conflicted in their notions of leadership, membership, and purpose.

The new Cold War was reason for optimism—Sino-Russian ties were better than ever, the U.S. position weakened, and Russia primed to exercise greater influence. Moscow took comfort from the thought that Beijing was turning more sharply against the U.S. and was ready to raise relations with Russia to a

much higher level. From 2014, having confronted the West militarily in Crimea, according to Moscow's desired characterization, Russia was the driving force in the relationship, urging China to agree that the divide with the U.S. was irreconcilable. Finally, by 2019, China appeared to be persuaded. Putin even dangled the possibility of a Sino-Russian alliance.

The Role of Great Powers in the International Order

The centerpiece of Sino-Russian relations over thirty years has been the triangle with the United States. Russia's calculus for the transformation of the international order starts with what Russian recognize as the Great Strategic Triangle, extends to regional architecture in Asia, and concludes with bilateral ties to China. If, ordinarily, the sequence would be reversed, this thinking reflects the uncertain state of relations with China and a roundabout approach to steering them in the desired direction. At times, one side has sought a more antagonist approach than the other, complicating the triangle. Russia was optimistic about China's desire to forge a strong stance against the U.S., but until 2018-19 some doubt existed that China would go as far as it desired. Dropping Deng Xiaoping's caution by 2008, then giving up on Xi Jinping's G2 division of the Pacific by 2016, and finally in anger over Trump's trade war and regional policies by 2019, China reassured Russia of its solidarity in the triangle, according to Russians.⁶

Confident that China had turned more sharply against the United States, Russia still faced two challenges in this all-important triangle: 1) would China treat it as a full-fledged partner? and 2) would China agree to an accelerated timetable for aggressive action? The Chinese eschewed the triangular framework that soothes Russia's ego, generally taking a bilateral Sino-U.S. approach. They also were wary of concluding that a cold war had begun, instead accusing the U.S. of a cold war mentality. Yet, blaming Washington for containing both China and Russia, even more so in 2022, they ascribed to triangular thinking conducive to strong Sino-Russian ties.

While the explicit ideological linkages of the Soviet era – for better and for worse – are gone, Putin and Xi share a set of values and a world view that has thus far proven to be remarkably compatible. As Rozman has argued, their “great power identities and relations are the principal driving forces in this partnership.”⁷ Moscow and Beijing share a common assessment of the disadvantages and the inexorable decline of the U.S.-led liberal international order, and an interest in pushing back against liberal democratic norms and Western definitions of concepts such as “democracy” and “human rights.”⁸ Both Xi and Putin have insisted that as founding signatories of the UN Charter, Russia and China

should be seen as the true guardians of the post-1945 international system, and in April 2022 China proposed a strategic framework for global security in keeping with this purported role, the Global Security Initiative (GSI).⁹

The “no limits” statement by Putin and Xi ahead of the war in February 2022 stressed the importance of upholding “universal human values,” such as “justice, democracy and freedom” and insisted that each country had the right to choose its own “methods of implementing democracy.”¹⁰ This argument has gained little traction in the West, but it has proved an attractive model for other autocratic regimes and among some countries in the Global South, where leaders can insist they are adhering to their own form of democracy.¹¹ Unlike during the Cold War, Beijing and Moscow are not necessarily seeking to export their ideology, but they are working to popularize these values; to push back against Western definitions of fundamental rights and to insist on the primacy of sovereignty. As Jessica Chen Weiss has summed up Xi’s approach, he is seeking to create a “world safe for autocracy.”¹²

Beyond the incentive to pursue good relations with the major power on the other side of their long (and difficult to defend) land border, both Putin and Xi view the contest with the U.S. as their most significant contemporary challenge, and their partnership, therefore, as an essential strategy to safeguard their own security. “The United States is implementing a dual containment policy against China and Russia, while China and Russia support each other and jointly resist the strategic pressure of the United States,” wrote Zhao Huasheng in 2021.¹³ Alexander Lukin characterizes Russia’s “pivot to China” as the “result of a long process of Moscow reassessing the nature of global processes and its own foreign policy.” Thus, Russia has “abandoned its perception of China as a potential adversary” and come to understand the “need for closer cooperation with Beijing on both global and regional issues.”¹⁴ Such assessments on both sides have only been strengthened since the start of Russia’s war against Ukraine in February 2022 and the rise in tensions between the U.S. and China in recent years, particularly with regard to the status of Taiwan. This does not mean that the growing asymmetry between the two countries has been erased – in fact, it has only increased since the start of the war– and there is no guarantee that past grievances cannot resurface. Instead, both will continue to function as limiting factors on the relationship, but for now, both Beijing and Moscow have good reason to minimize and manage their differences. Having associated himself so closely with Putin over the past decade, and on the eve of the war in Ukraine, Xi has an added incentive not to abandon the relationship as doing so would be an implicit acknowledgment that his judgement of the Russian leader was wrong.

The Indo-Pacific Region in the International Order

Both Russia and China have concentrated for a decade on reconstructing the architecture of Asia in line with their respective visions of transforming the international order. Xi Jinping settled on the BRI as the framework for a Sinocentric, hub and spokes, design, running west, south, and north. Vladimir Putin proposed a Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP), putting Russia at the fulcrum of a continental configuration but acknowledging two-headed leadership with China of the critical organizations to steer regionalism. They pledged to support each other's initiatives and claimed that the SCO could serve as the umbrella organization for coordinating the emerging regional architecture. Insisting that their joint endeavors were the crux of a new world order, Putin and Xi claimed to be building it in close harmony.

Unlike the Grand Strategic Triangle, where growing consensus against the United States establishes a firm foundation for challenging the existing order, Indo-Pacific regional ties have exposed serious divisions about what a new order should be. If consensus has easily been reached in opposition to U.S. designs for regional reorganization, such as the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), it has been much more difficult to agree on India's importance in the new framework, on ASEAN's centrality and pursuit of balanced great power relations, on the role of freedom of navigation and the name of the Northern Sea Route, and on the functions of the SCO. That the "heartland" of Asia forms the core of an emerging order is a shared aspiration obscuring the persistent struggle—even cat-and-mouse game—to guarantee one's own plans take precedence. Regional consensus fell far short of the overall, great power consensus.

Growing advocacy of the concept of the "Indo-Pacific" within Asia and by the United States over the past decade has raised alarm in Russia. It defines the region in a manner deemed maximally unwelcome by a continental power hugging the Arctic Ocean but far from the Indian Ocean. In response, coupled with responses to warnings it has become China's "junior partner," Moscow has insisted that the concept is a U.S. scheme for polarizing Asia and containing China, while simultaneously trumpeting the alternative of "Greater Eurasia," a geographical construct that serves to confirm Russia's status as a great power stakeholder in the eastern half of Asia. On the surface, Moscow is in conflict only with the U.S. moves, but it is struggling with China too.

Russia seeks a sphere of dominance in Asia—Central Asia, Mongolia, the Northern Sea Route—and a balance recognized by China in areas from the Korean Peninsula to India. Multipolarity is its desired architecture with Eurasia a label for areas under Moscow's sway or shared influence. Moscow has tried to keep aloof from BRI investments and pushed back over Central Asia and the Arctic, but China, despite its rhetoric, offered what amounted to a Sinocentric regional order.¹⁵

Sino-Russian Relations in the International Order

While the Sino-Russian bond appears strong on the surface and booming in overall trade, it is hollow on matters critical to forging a new international order together. Four signs of hollowness are particularly revealing. First, there is no shared vision of a future order except for platitudes and insistence on the UN Security Council as the decisive voice. This is a formula for Beijing and Moscow to continue to exercise their veto, not for constructive decision-making. They seem more interested in constructing separate spheres of influence than in forging a common sphere. Second, history looms in the background with the potential to spark a clash should nationalist forces on either side so desire. They have joined in demonizing Western history and have agreed on the landmark significance of 1945-53 in laying a foundation for a new order, dismissing the end of the Cold War as a false milestone for transformation. Yet, their differences over history are so sensitive, they have to feign silence and fear that a single misstep could spark a firestorm.

Third, personal exchanges and non-formulaic linkages are minimal. The COVID-19 limitations on movement only obscured the failure to develop networks of meaningful integration. Finally, civilizational arguments reinforce separation, not commonalities apart from objections to the values championed in the West. Russians have not found Chinese civilizational claims appealing nor vis-versa. In the heyday of traditional communism to the 1980s, they denigrated each other's cultural heritage, and mutual respect has not recovered despite claims of growing affinity.

Xi and Putin also share an understanding of the importance of historical memory, and an interest in maintaining a firm grip on their respective national historical narratives, such as their experience during World War II, as they seek to stoke popular support for their rule and frame their countries' contemporary challenges.¹⁶ The two leaders have been useful to each other in this regard – appearing alongside one other at wartime anniversary parades and shoring up their respective versions of history and their countries' contributions to the Allied victory.¹⁷ Through such high-profile joint appearances, both men also help to reinforce their image as powerful global leaders to their own citizens.

Prior to the war, both Putin and Xi had described their increasing security co-operation as a “critical dimension” of their strategic partnership, and while their joint patrols and shared exercises have often captured the headlines, the sale of Russian military technology to China arguably comprises the more important element of this cooperation.¹⁸ The vaunted modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) over the last quarter-century has depended heavily on imports of Russian weaponry, which has been estimated to make up

89 percent of Chinese foreign arms purchases between 1992 and 2006. The nature of those arms sales has evolved over that period, with China increasingly buying advanced weapons systems and jet engine technology.¹⁹ While Russian defense contractors initially voiced concerns about China reverse engineering and replicating their designs, and senior officials were cautious about the sale of certain advanced weaponry that could present a threat to Russia's own security, some of these restrictions have been eased in recent years, notably following the international sanctions that were imposed after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014.²⁰

Yet, China's economic rise, combined with lingering stereotypes on the Russian side of the border, has produced some unease in Moscow. "There is still talk in Russia of the 'China threat,' a holdover expression from past eras," acknowledged Fu Ying in 2016. Recent scholarship by Chinese and Russian researchers at government-linked institutions in both countries has acknowledged these difficulties. A dialogue in 2021, for example, agreed on the need to ensure that the partnership was not solely based on a "negative agenda" – for example, their shared opposition to the U.S. – but that they also developed a "positive agenda" that benefited their respective interests. "The goal of the tandem Russia-China global initiatives is not to confront the West, but to jointly shape a polycentric world order," concluded the report.²¹ A 2021 paper by Sun Zhuangzhi similarly observed that the two countries have "different international political thinking," "different security concerns," and a "difference in economic power." Yet, he assessed that it was in both countries' interests to step up their partnership. "Since China and Russia are facing a complex international and regional environment with many uncertainties and real security threats," Sun wrote, "it is of special significance to strengthen cooperation."²²

Alexander Lukin questioned in 2021 whether the Sino-Russian rapprochement had already peaked, stressing that while the two countries would continue to "pragmatically work together" as neighbors and partners in the fight against perceived U.S. hegemony, this did not mean that "Russia trusts China... or will come anywhere close to a more formal alliance." Rather, Lukin explained, "Russia understands that there are limits to its strategic cooperation with China," with Moscow reluctant to be seen to take sides in situations that could alienate other partners, such as India and Vietnam, which are both important markets for Russian arms sales and engaged in territorial disputes with Beijing.²³ China has similarly declined to recognize Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea or the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and shown no inclination to fight Putin's wars.²⁴ Probing the history of Sino-Russian military cooperation in a 2016 paper, Li Shuyin similarly identified a lack of "mutual trust" as a persistent impediment to the relationship. Li noted

that some in the Russian political elite continued to voice concern about the sale of advanced weapons and equipment to China, advocating for Russia to “hold back a few tricks” in the interests of its own long-term security.²⁵

Frequent talk of putting aside differences hints at serious obstacles to bilateral relations, which were revealed in Russian articles most candidly in the years leading to the Ukraine War. Unlike the mainstream Russian position blind to problems, numerous writers raised issues associated with historical memory, cross-border networking, arrogant interactions, and indifference to the interests of Russia. They reveal an underbelly of difficult interactions below the summit level.²⁶

Strategic Partnership with Limits: China’s Response to Russia’s War against Ukraine

Xi apparently believed that military intervention would be limited in scope, in the manner of the annexation of Crimea in 2014. If Putin had swiftly won, China stood to gain with the U.S. and its European allies distracted and the U.S. seen as in decline and unreliable as a partner by Taiwan and even South Korea and Japan. Moscow would be more dependent on China.

On March 5, 2022, during the second week of Russia’s war against Ukraine, Hu Wei wrote an article detailing the possible outcomes and what he termed “China’s choice.” Putin’s invasion of Ukraine was an “irreversible mistake,” Hu said, which would drag down Russia’s economy and see the U.S. “regain leadership in the Western world, and the West would become more united.” He warned of a new “Iron Curtain” descending again “not only from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, but also to the final confrontation between the Western-dominated camp and its competitors.” The correct strategic choice was clear, Hu wrote, “China cannot be tied to Putin and needs to be cut off as soon as possible.”²⁷ Instead, references to Hu’s article, which was published on an international platform – the Carter Center’s U.S.-China Perception Monitor – were censored in China, and it soon became clear that, while Beijing would walk a careful line and avoid endorsing Russia’s aggression, it would neither condemn the Russian invasion, nor meaningfully distance itself from Moscow.

China’s response to the conflict has demonstrated both the clear limits of the Sino-Russian partnership, and the resilience of the relationship. There is no evidence that China has provided direct military support to Russia since the start of the conflict, and there is no prospect that Chinese troops will be sent to fight on Russia’s side.²⁸ Neither Moscow nor Beijing has any interest in cementing a formal alliance with the other, regardless of Putin dangling the possibility, most recently in October 2020, with neither Beijing nor Moscow

keen to be entangled in the other's wars.²⁹ This is consistent with the approach that Beijing has long taken towards Moscow, and vice-versa, that their own self-interest comes first. Thus, while the relationship is viewed by both countries as mutually beneficial, geopolitically necessary, and a crucial component of their shared contest with the U.S., this does not mean that either side is likely to sacrifice their own interests on the altar of the other's foreign policy ambitions.

China has maintained its security cooperation with Russia in other areas since the start of the war, however, such as staging joint air patrols between South Korea and Japan during U.S. president Joe Biden's visit to Tokyo in May 2022, prompting both countries to scramble fighter jets in response.³⁰ Chinese troops also participated in Russia's annual "Vostok" military exercises in August 2022, which foreign ministry officials stressed was "unrelated to the current international and regional situation."³¹ A small contingent of Indian troops also travelled to Russia to participate in the exercises, signaling that neither country was prepared to jettison its relationship with Moscow despite its invasion of Ukraine. Both Xi and India's prime minister Narendra Modi signed up to a joint statement with Putin, along with the leaders of Brazil and South Africa, at the BRICS summit of emerging economies in June, which stressed the importance of respect for the "sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states" and their commitment to the "peaceful settlement of crises," ignoring the fact that Russia troops were violating Ukraine's sovereignty at the time.³²

While Chinese exports to Russia dipped markedly after the start of the war – dropping by more than 25 percent on the previous year by April 2022 – and Chinese companies are assessed to have broadly abided by export controls, the value of Russian exports to China surged, up more than 50 percent by April.³³ By December 2022, bilateral trade had increased by 32 percent on the previous year to reach a record high.³⁴ Beijing has approached the economic relationship with Russia after its invasion of Ukraine in a similar manner to its annexation of Crimea in 2014; condemning international sanctions in public, while quietly abiding by them and seeking to exploit the economic opportunities that come with Moscow's increasingly limited options. As Putin commented in September 2022 ahead of a meeting with Li Zhanshu, then the third highest-ranking member of the politburo standing committee, "Our Chinese friends are difficult negotiators, however, they are stable and reliable partners and the market is colossal."³⁵

The economic relationship between Russia and China has become increasingly asymmetric – Russia accounted for just 2 percent of China's overall trade in 2020, while China accounted for at least 18 percent of Russia's trade – and the ongoing war will only further heighten this imbalance. Yet focusing solely on the

topline numbers obscures the nature of that trade and the importance of the advanced military technology, which has been previously discussed, and the energy resources, specifically oil and natural gas, which Russia provides to China. Neither can be easily replaced from another source, and Russian energy supplies are particularly valuable to China as they are transported directly across their shared border and therefore could not be interdicted by the U.S. in the case of a future conflict, unlike shipments from the Middle East, which must pass through the narrow Strait of Malacca to reach China.³⁶

In the diplomatic sphere too, however, there were limits to the extent of Beijing's support for Moscow, with China abstaining from, rather than vetoing, high-profile votes to condemn the Russian invasion at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in February, and to establish a commission of inquiry into Russian war crimes at the UN Human Rights Council in March.³⁷ Evan Medeiros attributes China's diplomatic response to the war to its attempts to balance three competing interests: "alignment with Russia, commitment to long-standing principles in Chinese foreign policy [such as respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty], and China's ties with the United States and Europe." Medeiros calls this China's "trilemma," noting that the further it tries to pursue one interest, such as strengthening its alignment with Russia amid its atrocities in Ukraine, the more this undermines another, such as relations with the U.S. and Europe. The result is what he terms a "strategic straddle," with Beijing attempting to juggle all three interests, rather than choosing to prioritize only one, such as the Sino-Russian partnership.³⁸

Beijing has also stepped up its outreach to the "Global South" since the start of the conflict, which it views as a crucial power base from which to contest the U.S.-led international order.³⁹ It also seeks to expand the role of the BRICS grouping, which currently comprises Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, but Argentina and Iran have applied to join, and Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have said they may do likewise. China has learned from Russia's experience since the start of the war, write Bonny Lin and Jude Blanchette in August 2022, and is consequently "moving fast to both deepen and broaden partnerships to increase its immunity to crippling sanctions and to ensure that it is not alone in hard times."⁴⁰

This fits with the new GSI unveiled by Xi at the Boao Forum for Asia two months into the war. Criticizing what he called the "Cold War mentality" and "hegemonism and power politics" – clear references to the U.S. although he did not mention the country by name – Xi proposed a new strategic framework comprised of six pillars including respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, taking the "legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously" and

upholding the “principle of indivisible security,” which has been co-opted under Putin to mean a zero-sum sense of security, whereby NATO’s eastward expansion threatens Russia.⁴¹ Tian Wenlin invoked the war in Ukraine to explain the necessity of the GSI in an article published in May, asserting that the “world dominated by a traditional Western notion of security is facing unprecedented turbulence and uncertainty.” On the surface, he wrote, the conflict in Ukraine “appeared to be initiated by a Russian attack, but it was actually the result of the U.S. promotion of NATO’s eastward expansion and the squeezing of Russia’s strategic space.” As he characterized it, the war was “of a hegemonic and anti-hegemonic nature and is also a battle between the old and new systems in the bigger context of an international power transfer.”⁴²

The other key dimension in which China’s response to the war has been notable, and perhaps most unequivocally supportive of Russia, is the informational sphere. As Maria Repnikova has shown, Chinese state media outlets and social media platforms have consistently amplified pro-Russian talking points since the beginning of the conflict, with an “emphasis on NATO, the West, and specifically the United States as the culprits or instigators behind the crisis.” Repnikova further notes that Chinese state media outlets such as Chinese Central Television (CCTV) repeated false Russian claims about supposed U.S. biolabs in Ukraine and echoed Moscow’s abhorrent claims that the massacre of Ukrainian civilians by Russian soldiers in Bucha had been faked.⁴³ Sheena Chestnut Greitens notes that Chinese media outlets have also tended to use passive language to describe the start of the war, such as “conflict broke out,” a construction that has also been used for the Korean War to avoid laying the blame on North Korea.⁴⁴ She characterizes China’s approach to the war as “[f]ull-throated rhetorical-informational and diplomatic support, combined with a consistent level of ongoing military cooperation and more self-interested economic behavior...” Thus, Beijing’s response to the conflict across all these dimensions has been characterized by self-interest and the imperative to pursue existing grievances, such as the U.S.-led liberal international order and the expansion of Western security pacts to the perceived detriment of China’s own security and its claim to Taiwan.

Conclusion

Even if it had been true that Xi was “played” by Putin and did not understand the scale of his planned offensive when the two men declared their “no limits” partnership 20 days before the war, the months since can have left little doubt about the nature of the conflict he is waging. China’s approach to the conflict

has been consistent with its handling of Sino-Russian relations more broadly in recent decades: attempting to juggle multiple interests and extract maximum advantages for itself, while risking as little as possible.⁴⁵ For Beijing, one of these interests is the perceived need to preserve its alignment with Russia, regardless of its atrocities in Ukraine.

This should not be surprising. Given China's intensifying rivalry with the U.S. and focus on its own claim to Taiwan, along with the close personal relations and mutual obsession with regime security shared by Putin and Xi, it is clear that both view their alignment as necessary and beneficial. The long, complex history of Sino-Russian relations has taught both sides that it is better to have good ties with the power on the other side of their long border, freeing them both up to focus on their more pressing territorial disputes. Xi does not want to see Putin's regime collapse, perhaps to be replaced by a more liberal, pro-Western government in Moscow, which would reorient itself towards Europe and the U.S., leaving the latter free to concentrate on its contest with China. Similarly, while the economic relationship between the two powers has become increasingly unbalanced – a trend which has been exacerbated by the war – and Beijing has pressed for advantageous terms, both sides still benefit from the arrangement as Russia secures access to a valuable market at a time when its other options are receding, and China secures a direct supply of oil and natural gas, as well as advanced military technology.

Beijing's approach to the war has reflected its desire to preserve this relationship, even when doing so – or at least refusing to condemn Russia's aggression and war crimes – has incurred reputational costs in the West, as well as strategic costs, such as the upending of China's plans to make Ukraine a hub of its BRI network in Europe and strengthening Western groupings such as NATO, which have identified China as a new focus. However, Beijing has also strengthened its outreach to the "Global South," advancing its own narrative about the West's, and specifically the purported U.S. culpability for the conflict, and the need, therefore, for a new strategic framework, such as GSI. Chinese officials have amplified Russian disinformation and adopted a "both sides" approach to the conflict, which ignores Russian aggression. While claiming to be neutral, China's actions have demonstrated a clear, if careful pro-Russia stance.

Yet 2022 has also demonstrated the limits that have long applied to the Sino-Russian relationship and the compatibility of their view of a desired international order. Beijing's response to the war has been defined by self-interest and is consistent with its approach to Russia's annexation of

Crimea in 2014 or the Russo-Georgia war in 2008 in that it does not recognize secessionist claims – out of concern that the same logic could be applied to Taiwan – and while China vehemently criticizes international sanctions, it has largely tended to abide by them to avoid its own companies losing access to international markets. Thus, the Sino-Russian alignment is stable and underpinned by the complementary (although not identical) values, security concerns, and economic priorities of the top leaders, but both sides will continue to pursue their own separate interests.

The Ukraine War has showcased the Sino-Russian consensus on the Grand Strategic Triangle as the crux of the international order, overwhelming different thinking on the regional order and bilateral relations. Yet, differences over the regional order came to the surface as Kazakhstan resisted Putin's view of the post-Soviet sphere and found support in China for its defense of sovereignty. Meanwhile, tensions over bilateral relations are hidden by tighter censorship. The overall mood of agreement is not weakening for now, but it faces serious challenges ahead.

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