



China's perspective on Russia

Assessing how Beijing views and values its relationship with Moscow now and later

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Preface

This report is the result of a collaboration between FOI's Asia and Middle East Programme and the Project for Security Studies Strategic Foresight.

The author would like to thank Sheryn Lee, at the Swedish Defence University, for providing constructive and valuable comments on the report. In addition, the following persons provided important feedback at different stages: Carolina Vendil Pallin, Johan Norberg, Johan Englund, Fredrik Westerlund, Malin Karlsson, Oscar Almén and Jo Inge Bekkevold. The author would also like to express gratitude for the support and patience proffered by Samuel Neuman Bergenwall and Niklas H. Rossbach during the finalising of the report. Thanks are also extended to Richard Langlais, for language editing, and Marianna Serveta, for layout and design.

All remaining errors are the author's responsibility alone.

Sammanfattning

Denna rapport behandlar Kinas bilaterala förhållande till Ryssland. Detta görs genom analysera vad som motiverar Kina i interaktionen med Ryssland samt belysa utmaningar som präglar relationen. Rapporten identifierar sex grundläggande kinesiska motiv: att upprätthålla en stabil och fredlig grannrelation till Ryssland; att få politiskt stöd och legitimitet för den egna regimen; att förbättra det militära samarbetet för att balansera mot USA; att upprätthålla stabilitet i Centralasien; att fördjupa samarbete vad gäller ekonomiskt och teknologiskt utbyte och global styrning. Rapporten identifierar fyra utmaningar: historia och ömsesidig misstänksamhet; konkurrerande regionala intressen; begränsningar i det ekonomiska utbytet och olika synsätt på den framtida globala ordningen. Vidare utforskar rapporten scenarion för den rysk-kinesiska relationen 2030 genom att diskutera tre olika roller Ryssland kan spela för Kina: formellt allierad, konkurrent, och strategisk supporter. Rollen som strategisk supporter uppskattas vara mest trolig. Rysslands angreppskrig mot Ukraina har försatt de rysk-kinesiska relationerna på prov och det råder osäkerhet om hur detta påverkar förhållandet framöver. Samtidigt spelar Ryssland en allt viktigare roll i Kinas ambition att begränsa amerikansk global dominans. Så länge USA ses som den mest pressande säkerhetspolitiska utmaningen i Peking kommer Kina fortsätta att betrakta Ryssland som en viktig strategisk partner.

Nyckelord: Kina, Ryssland, internationella relationer, säkerhetspolitik.

Summary

This report examines China's bilateral relationship with Russia. This is done by analysing the key motivations in its engagement, while also highlighting challenges that impact the nature and future development of the relationship. Six main motivations have been identified: maintaining stable and secure border relations; garnering support to ensure domestic regime security; deepening military cooperation in counterbalancing the US; managing and upholding stability in Central Asia; improving economic and technology cooperation; and enhancing coordination on global affairs. Regarding challenges, four have been identified: history and mutual mistrust; competing regional interests; different views regarding the coming global order; and limitations in economic exchange. Additionally, the report explores scenarios for the Sino-Russian relationship by discussing three different roles Russia can play for China by 2030: formal ally; competitor; and strategic supporter. The role of strategic supporter is assumed to be most likely. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is testing the Sino-Russian relationship and it is uncertain how the war will affect it in the years to come. Nonetheless, Russia is assuming an increasingly important role in China's strategic efforts to counterbalance the US. As long as Beijing perceives the US as the key security threat, Russia will continue to play a strategic role for China.

Keywords: China, Russia, international relations, security studies.

Executive Summary

The Sino-Russian relationship has gradually improved since the end of the Cold War. China sees Russia as its most important international partner and has established a close strategic partnership that encompasses well-developed political, economic and military ties. The academic and policy community is divided over whether closer China-Russia relations points to the formation of an alliance, or if deep-rooted mutual mistrust and competing interests will lead the two sides to eventually embark on a more competitive trajectory.

This study unpacks how Beijing views and values its relationship with Moscow. This is done by conducting three analytically separated but inter-related tasks:

- (1) examining China's motivations for its engagement with Russia;
- (2) investigating the challenges that China finds in its relationship with Russia;
- (3) exploring future scenarios for the Sino-Russian relationship by sketching three potential roles Russia can play for China by 2030: a formal ally; a competitor; and a strategic supporter.

The study presents and examines six main motivations for China's engagement with Russia:

- Maintaining a cordial and friendly bilateral relationship helps to guarantee that China keeps its northwestern border regions stable and secure. This allows Beijing to focus on its national development and directing resources and time to its growing great power rivalry with the US.
- China seeks and gains Russia's support to legitimise and bolster its own domestic political system; ultimately, as a means to safeguarding and upholding regime security.
- Russia helps China counterbalance US global dominance, especially its military power, most importantly in the Asia-Pacific region, through an expansive and comprehensive defence and security partnership, including arms trade transfers and regular military exercises.
- Collaboration with Russia on managing Eurasian stability, particularly in Central Asia, benefits China. Both China and Russia share similar perceptions of important security issues, such as combating regional terrorism and extremism, while also making sure that Central Asian states remain stable and secure. Collaboration with Russia also benefits China in realising its economic initiatives in the region.
- China gains certain material benefits from its economic and technology engagement with Russia. Most notably, this regards energy cooperation, on oil and natural gas. A new and potentially promising dimension is in innovation, science and technology.

- Russia shares China's ambition to reshape the global governance system towards a less Western-led international order. Such efforts include Sino-Russian cooperation in the global arena, relating to common views and positions not only on security and international crisis and conflict management in the United Nations Security Council, but also on issues pertaining to global economic governance and cyber- and outer space.

The study presents and investigates four challenges that limit or potentially cause conflict in the bilateral relationship:

- There is long-standing mutual mistrust and suspicion, due to their complex and at times quite conflictual history, which functions as a latent source of tensions affecting concrete cooperation on various issues. Russia harbours an underlying concern that the changing balance of power will tilt in China's favour, turning Russia into the "junior partner" in the relationship.
- Competition over influence and power can emerge in regions where both China and Russia have interests, notably in Central Asia and the Arctic.
- Different stakes in the international system could potentially lead to frictions in the long-term. Both countries want to reshape the global order. However, China generally still benefits from integration in the current international order, especially in the economic and financial domains, and does not entirely share Russia's more combative approach.
- Limited economic exchange hinders a broadening of the strategic partnership. Despite improvement in China-Russia economic and trade relations over the last decade, they remain unstructured and imbalanced. China is Russia's top trading partner, while Russia is not so important for China.

With regard to the role Russia can potentially play for China in their bilateral relationship by 2030, the study sketches and discusses the likelihood of three roles. The roles do not indicate a fixed end-state but, rather, function as explorative role trajectories. The three roles sketched are:

- *The role of a formal ally.* A formal alliance is forged, likely triggered by simultaneously and rapidly deteriorating situations between the US and China and between Russia and the US, leading China and Russia to formally commit to supporting and defending each other militarily against a third party. This role is underpinned by years of continuously deepening military and defense cooperation and normative convergence, which have created increasingly improved conditions for entering a formal alliance.
- *The role as competitor.* Russia enters a competitive relationship with China. Existing challenges, such as mutual mistrust, competing regional interests and divergent views over the future global order are more pronounced, with bilateral interaction becoming difficult. Underlying this

is China's growing power and influence vis-à-vis Russia, thus pushing Moscow to counterbalance China by various means.

- *The role of a strategic supporter.* China's bilateral cooperation with Russia will continue to endure along lines similar to those at present. This means a close strategic partnership, but without any formal alliance commitments. However, China will be in a much stronger position vis-à-vis Russia and thereby determine the dynamics of the bilateral relationship on its own terms. China will be more selective in its engagement with Russia, extorting benefits and value on a more self-interested basis. Nonetheless, as long as China's political elites view the West and notably the US as the most pressing ideological and geopolitical security threat, China will continue to see Russia as playing a strategic role.

The role of strategic supporter is assumed to be the most likely scenario by 2030, with alliance considered least likely followed by that of Russia as a competitor. A continued and potentially closer China-Russia alignment (even if China will be more selective in its engagement) will have great consequences for the future balance of power. If current trends of increased great power competition endure between the US, on the one hand, and China and Russia, on the other, it is conceivable that the world will be divided into "two blocks". For many smaller and middle-sized states around the world, this will pose difficult choices in positioning themselves between the West and China and Russia. So far, many states have tried to remain neutral and balance the different great powers against each other, in order to avoid antagonising any side, while also extracting benefits for themselves. But the question is how long such balancing acts can work.

While Russia's war in Ukraine has forced the US to "return" its attention to Europe, the US sees China as its most pressing long-term security challenge. Therefore, Asia, not Europe, is its main strategic theatre. The task for Europe will be how to respond to these American priorities, yet also deal with Russia and China, not only as individual actors, but also as a potential collective unity.

China and Russia will not be easily parted, but a potential deepening of existing frictions and differences between them could highlight certain costs to further alignment. China, compared to Russia, remains more integrated into the world economy and maintains crucial trade, finance and technology links with the West. Long-term costs for disruptions to China's economic links with the West can function as a barrier to its closer relations to Russia. Deepening defence cooperation and strengthening deterrence by Western allies and partners to raise the cost of aggressive behaviour remains important, not least regarding potential actions by China toward Taiwan.

At the same time, it remains imperative to prevent the US-China relationship from turning into an outright zero-sum competition. Crucial global challenges such as climate change and transnational health issues can only be addressed involving both China and the US. While strategic competition between China and the US

cannot be avoided altogether, the relationship can nonetheless be skilfully managed to prevent chronic high tensions, and in the worst case direct military conflict.

The Sino-Russian relationship is complex and evolving. Attaining deeper and more thorough understanding of not only the motivations but also the challenges facing Sino-Russian relations, including as they are seen from Beijing, continues to constitute a necessary task for analysts and policymakers alike.

Abbreviations

AC	Arctic Council
ABM	Anti-ballistic missile
AI	Artificial intelligence
AIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Nations
ASEM	Asia-Europe Forum
AUKUS	Trilateral pact between Australia, United Kingdom and the United States
Bmc	Billion cubic meters
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
C+C5	China-Central Asia Foreign Ministers Mechanism
CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia
CICIR	China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations
CNPC	China National Petroleum Corporation
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
ESPO	Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean oil pipeline
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign direct investment
G20	Group of Twenty
IMF	International Monetary Fund

IoT	Internet of Things
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
LNG	Liquified natural gas
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSR	Northern Sea Route
PCA	Permanent Court of Arbitration
PLA	The People's Liberation Army
Quad	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
RATS	Regional Anti-terrorist Structure
RMB	Renminbi
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WTO	World Trade Organization

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1 Introduction

A key question facing observers and policymakers when seeking to unpack the nature and dynamics of the evolving Sino-Russian relationship is how Beijing views and values its relationship with Moscow.

On the one hand, China has incrementally worked to strengthen, broaden and deepen its bilateral ties with Russia. Improving relations with its northern neighbour in recent years has assumed a particularly high priority, as its perception of increased hostility from the US has pushed it even closer to Russia.

Today, China portrays Russia as its most important international partner. Beijing officially defines its relationship with Russia as “a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era”.¹ In China’s official jargon, this is its highest form of strategic partnership with foreign countries.² China’s president, Xi Jinping, has met his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, close to 40 times since becoming president in 2013, describing him as his “best friend”.³ When Putin visited Beijing on 4 February 2022, in relation to the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics, China and Russia issued a joint declaration stating that there are “no limits” and “no forbidden areas” of cooperation.⁴

Expansive security and defense cooperation is cultivated. Deepening trade and economic links are aspired to, especially on energy, and collaboration in emerging technologies and innovation is promoted. China expresses that Russia is a key partner in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and is seeking alignment with Moscow on international conflict management in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and, more broadly, on global governance issues pertaining to cyber- and outer space.

On the other hand, China recognises how a troubled historical past, cultural differences and limited levels of comprehensive people-to-people interactions still

¹ China Ministry for Foreign Affairs, “Zhonghua renmin gongheguo he Eluosi lianbang guanyu fazhan xin shidai quanmian zhanlue xiezuo huoban guanxi de lianhe shengming” [Joint statement of the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the development of a comprehensive strategic partnership of cooperation in the new era], June 6, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.-cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679110/1207_679122/t1670118.shtml.

² Helena Legard, “From marriage of convenience to strategic partnership: China-Russia relations and the fight for global influence”, *Short Analysis*, August 24, 2021, Berlin: Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), <https://merics.org/en/short-analysis/marriage-convenience-strategic-partnership-china-russia-relations-and-fight-global>.

³ BBC, “China’s Xi praises ‘best friend’ Putin during Russia visit”, *BBC*, June 6, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48537663>.

⁴ President of Russia, “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development”, February 4, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

obstruct a deeper sense of communality. The bilateral balance of power is tilting in China's favour. In 2020, China's economy was ten times the size of Russia's.⁵ China is a rising technological superpower, while Russia is struggling to modernise its economy. In 2021, China's defence spending was more than four times Russia's.⁶ Its defence industry is advancing fast.⁷ Moreover, Beijing's ability to project regional and global power and influence is growing, included in parts of the world where Russia has strong interests, such as in Central Asia, the Arctic and the Middle East. These factors could potentially lead to colliding interactions. In terms of global governance, Beijing is an influential player in many key international institutions, while Russia plays a more limited role. In many regards, Russia is thus playing the "junior role" in the bilateral relationship, a stark contrast to the Cold War, when the Soviet Union was the dominant power between them.

China is widely perceived as the only realistic peer competitor to the US for global preponderance, while Russia is viewed as a declining power confined to playing a mostly secondary, albeit still influential, regional role in international politics.⁸ This is a position Russia will have a hard time to accept.⁹ Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine is likely to exacerbate Russia's relative decline, as it will turn the country into an international pariah, at least in the eyes of the Western world. With regard to Sino-Russian relations, Russia could be forced to move even closer to China, as it is left with few other choices than to turn to its strategic partner for political, economic and perhaps even military support.

That said, for China the current Ukraine crisis is arguably the most severe test in the post-Cold War period of its bilateral relationship with Russia; the outcome for Sino-Russian relations going forward is far from given. So far, China is "tacitly" supporting Russia, despite apparent international reputational damage, potential economic costs and more fraught political relations with the US and Europe. The question, however, is whether the Chinese calculus will change should the war continue for long, or should severe escalation occur. Will China continue to remain close to Russia or perhaps even deepen relations to form an alliance? Or will Beijing distance itself, possibly even coming into conflict with Russia over the long term? Finding answers to these important questions requires a more fundamental understanding of the basic motivations driving China's engagement with

⁵ World Bank, "GDP (current US\$) – China, Russian Federation", data available here: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN-RU>.

⁶ SIPRI, "World military expenditure passes \$2 trillion for first time", *Press Release*, April 25, 2022, Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2022/world-military-expenditure-passes-2-trillion-first-time>.

⁷ Tobias Junerfält and Per Olsson, "Regional Defence Economic Outlook 2021. Asia and Oceania", *FOI Memo 7532*, Stockholm: Swedish Defense Research Agency (FOI), May 2021.

⁸ Andrew Radin et al., *China-Russia Cooperation. Determining factors, future trajectories, implications for the US*, Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2021.

⁹ Bobo Lo, *The Wary Embrace. What the China-Russia relationship means for the World*, Sydney: Lowy Institute of International Policy: Penguin Books, 2017.

Russia, as well as of the main challenges and limitations so far. In other words, how China views and values its relationship with Russia will have major consequences not only for the bilateral relationship but also for China's relations with the rest of the world, and especially with the US and Europe, for the foreseeable future.

1.1 Research objective

The overarching objective of this research report is to describe and assess the nature, content and future trajectory of the Sino-Russian bilateral relationship, with a focus on China. This is conducted by performing three analytically separate but inter-related tasks:

- (1) examining the motivations for China's engagement with Russia;
- (2) investigating the challenges that China finds in its relationship with Russia;
- (3) exploring future scenarios for the Sino-Russian relationship by sketching three potential roles Russia can play for China by 2030: formal ally, competitor, and strategic supporter.

1.2 The current debate on Sino-Russian relations

There is a rich and lively academic and policy debate on Sino-Russian relations.¹⁰ While the literature is too vast and diverse to cite in full here, three overarching characteristics shape the current state of the literature.

First, scholars and analysts can be broadly divided into two general camps when describing and assessing current developments and predicting future relations between the two countries. According to China-Russia expert Bobo Lo, one camp can be defined as "believers" and the other as "sceptics".¹¹ The former camp emphasises the positive development of political, economic and normative convergence between China and Russia evidenced since the end of the Cold War. The

¹⁰ For recent overviews see Brandon K. Yoder, "Theoretical Rigor and the Study of Contemporary Cases: Explaining Post-Cold War China-Russia Relations", *International Politics* 5 (57), 2020, pp. 741–759; Fabienne Bossuyt and Marcin Kaczmarek, Russia and China between cooperation and competition at the regional and global level. Introduction", *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Volume 62, 2021 – Issue 5–6, pp. 539–556.

¹¹ Bobo Lo, "Introduction", in Jo Inge Bekkevold and Bobo Lo (eds.), *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 3–5. Just a note of clarification: several other China-Russia scholars have made similar "categorisations" as Bobo Lo's. An early attempt, for example, was made by Yu Bin, who classified one group as "alarmists" and the other as "optimists". See Yu Bin, "In Search for a Normal Relationship: China and Russia in the 21st Century", *China and Eurasia Quarterly*, Vol. 5, Issue 4, 2007, pp. 47–81.

strategic partnership surely has its challenges, but these are largely manageable. In the end, certain benefits and uniting factors, be they mutual aversion towards US global hegemony, or benefits from closer energy trade, exceed any issues or problems that might push them apart.¹² The “sceptic” camp is the flip side of this perspective. In essence, while acknowledging that much has improved, underlying tensions and challenges in the long run, most crucially the change in the bilateral balance of power between China and Russia, will not be contained. Coupled with long-standing historical legacies and underlying sources of mutual mistrust, the relationship is thus much more limited, pragmatic and indeed fragile than what proponents of the more positive camp assert.¹³

Second, there is a vivid debate over what constitutes the drivers in explaining the growth in China-Russia cooperation. For several analysts (often Western), the main driver is what can be dubbed the “US factor” in China-Russia relations. Simply put, this line of argument holds that closer ties between China and Russia are due to shared threat perceptions and active efforts to counterbalance US primacy. This pertains in particular to the perception of strategic pressure and influence in Beijing and Moscow’s own neighbourhoods; for Russia, in Europe and in the post-Soviet sphere, and for China, in the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁴ A common approach here is to focus on the security and military aspect of Sino-Russian collaboration with regard to the US.¹⁵ But other forms of “counter-measures” are also frequently cited as evidence, such as Sino-Russian collaboration in the United Nations (UN) or in Central Asia, through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), on global governance issues pertaining to cyber-

¹² Some examples include: Marcin Kaczmarek, *Russia-China Relations in the post-crisis International Order*, New York: Routledge, 2015; Alexander Gabuev, “Unwanted but inevitable: Russia’s Deepening Partnership with China post-Ukraine”, in Jo Inge Bekkevold and Bobo Lo (eds.), *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century*, London: Palgrave MacMillian, 2019, pp. 41–66; Paul J. Bolt and Sharyl N. Cross, *China, Russia, and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018; Deborah Welch Larson, “An equal partnership of unequals: China’s and Russia’s new status relationship”, *International Politics*, volume 57, 2020, pp. 790–808.

¹³ See, for instance: Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience. Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics*, Brookings Institution Press, 2008; Pavel K. Baev, “Russia’s pivot to China goes astray: The impact on the Asia-Pacific security architecture”, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 37 (1), 2016, pp. 89–110.

¹⁴ Theoretically, this perspective is generally grounded in the realist school in international relations theory. Realism, of course, is not an entirely unified school of thought and several sub-branches exist. Broadly speaking, though, realists make basic assumptions about how international politics is organised, based on the distribution of relative power in the international system and how this compels and constrains state behaviour, particularly that of great powers. See Kenneth Waltz for a basic treatment of the main principles: Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press Inc., 1979.

¹⁵ See for instance Andrew Kydd, “Switching Sides: Changing Power, Alliance Choices and US-China-Russia Relations”, *International Politics*, No. 57, 2020, pp. 197–222.

and outer space.¹⁶ The US factor argument has become the dominant perspective of late, not least in the aftermath of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the heightening of US-China tensions during the Trump administration, but no less severe during the current Biden administration. Moreover, the "anti-US agenda" defining the China-Russia alignment is being strengthened by Xi Jinping's personal preference of seeing Russia as a favourable partner in China's contest with the US.¹⁷

Another view holds instead that stronger relations can be explained through growing economic and trade interdependence. The argument here is that mutual needs and benefits, especially regarding the energy and resources sectors, constitute important motivations for closer engagement.¹⁸ Over time, interaction in these domains creates positive spillover effects and synergies for wider integration, not only in the economic sphere, but also positively, by creating stronger fundamentals for more sustained broad cooperation, not least politically.¹⁹

Finally, several scholars point to political domestic factors, such as regime type, normative convergence and shared national identities.²⁰ As authoritarian states (albeit with some important differences), rejecting a liberal democratic system of governance, China and Russia's ruling elites have a common interest in withstanding political and social pressure that can upend their current political standing and societies more broadly. For leaders in Beijing and Moscow, regime security is a top priority that also influences foreign policy. Growing cooperation between the two is thus a function of a common need to enhance regime stability by giving each other political support, boosting cooperation and, most importantly, not meddling in the other side's domestic affairs and core national security interests.²¹

Third, the Sino-Russian literature has an over-tendency to focus on the Russian side of the bilateral relationship. This is of course not a problem per se, but more of a shortcoming, in the sense that analysts and observers tend to overlook what the Chinese view and policy with regard to Russia consists of. This is unfortunate, not only concerning the specialised Sino-Russian academic and policy debate, but

¹⁶ See for instance: Chaka Ferguson, "The Strategic Use of Soft Balancing: The Normative Dimensions of the Sino-Russian 'Strategic Partnership'", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 35, No 2, 2012, pp. 197-222.

¹⁷ Yun Sun, "China's strategic assessment of Russia: more complicated than you think", *War on the Rocks*, March 4, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/chinas-strategic-assessment-of-russia-more-complicated-than-you-think/>.

¹⁸ Victor Larin, "Russia-China Economic Relations in the 21st Century: Unrealized Potential or Predetermined Outcome?" *Chinese Journal of International Review*", Vol. 2, No. 1, 2020.

¹⁹ Tom Røseth, "Russia's Energy Relations with China: Passing the strategic threshold?" *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 58, No. 1, 2017, pp. 23-55.

²⁰ Gilbert Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order. National Identities, Bilateral Relations and the East versus the West in the 2010s*, Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2014.

²¹ Andrej Krickovic, "Catalyzing Conflict: the Internal Dimensions of the Security Dilemma", *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2016, pp. 111-126.

also for the China studies and international relations literature, more broadly. China is the most consequential challenger to the US for global prominence.²² At the same time, some claim that Russia has reasserted itself as a great power of consequence and its regional and global influence should not be underestimated.²³ Russia maintains the second-largest nuclear weapons arsenal in the world and has been willing to use force to achieve political goals, as shown by the illegal annexation of Crimea, in 2014, and its military interventions in Syria. Following its full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, Russia's long-term development as a global great power is uncertain, as is discussed further below. As noted above, China has tacitly supported Russia so far in the war. Adopting "a China focus" can therefore contribute further insights on not only the workings of the Sino-Russian relationship but also China's overall foreign policy conduct, including how Beijing envisions its future role and interaction with the international community. This is particularly important in the context of the triangular relations between China, Russia and the US that will continue to shape international politics and global affairs in the decades to come.

This research report attempts to relate to these three overarching themes. First, it engages with the question of the nature and future prospects for China-Russia relations by analysing the drivers but also challenges in the relationship. Second, it looks at the Sino-Russian bilateral relationship with a distinct China focus.

1.3 Methodology and sources

This research report contains a qualitative analysis of the Sino-Russian relationship. The aim of the analysis is to unpack how China views and values its relationship with Russia, both presently and in the future. In operational terms, three separate but inter-related tasks are performed to achieve this goal.

The first task presents and examines what motivates China in seeking engagement with Russia. This entails performing an analysis of the gains and benefits that China is hoping to achieve through closer cooperation. In concrete terms, the study identifies six key motivations where China sees great value in engaging with Russia. These are: maintaining stable and secure border relations, garnering support to ensure regime security, deepening military cooperation to counter-balance the US, managing and upholding stability in Central Asia, improving economic and technology exchange, and enhancing coordination on global affairs.

The second task presents and investigates the challenges in its relationship that China finds could impede or even adversely affect the bilateral relationship. The

²² Rush Doshi, *The Long Game. China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, Oxford University Press, 2021.

²³ Michael Kofman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "The Myth of Russian Decline. Why Moscow will be a persistent power", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2021.

following four have been identified: history and mutual mistrust, competing regional interests, different views regarding the coming global order and limitations of economic exchange.

The selection of the motivations and challenges characterising China's relationship with Russia are based on a careful analysis of original Chinese language sources, such as official documents, statements and academic publications and research reports published by the Chinese foreign policy and Chinese Russia studies expert community (see below in this section for more details), an extensive reading of the broader Sino-Russian literature (published mainly in English) and coupled with an empirical examination of Chinese behaviour in relation to Sino-Russian interactions.²⁴

The set of motivations and challenges are not exhaustive and other issues may also be considered important.²⁵ It should be noted that some of the issues are "broader" than others. For instance, economic and technological exchanges are combined to constitute one common motivation.²⁶ The challenge labelled history and mutual mistrust contains several sub-issues.²⁷

²⁴ Identifying and understanding China's (true) motives (notably long-term strategic intentions) is a challenging task and source of continued debate in the China foreign policy studies field. For a well-grounded argumentation for why and how this can be performed nonetheless, see for instance: Joel Wuthnow, "Deciphering China's Intentions: What Can Open Sources Tell Us?" *The Asan Forum*, July 29, 2019, <https://theasanforum.org/deciphering-chinas-intentions-what-can-open-sources-tell-us/>. The issue of states' intentions and motives is of course a much broader and long-running theoretical and empirical debate in the literature of international relations theory. For an interesting discussion of this issue, especially when it comes to great powers, see Charles L. Glaser, Andrew H. Kydd, Mark L. Haas, John M. Owen IV and Sebastian Rosato, "Correspondence: Can great powers discern intentions?", *International Security*, Volume 40, Number 3, Winter 2015/2016, pp. 197–215.

²⁵ For instance, it can be claimed that improving people-to-people and more broadly cultural and social links constitutes an important aim in improving relations and thus also facilitating closer bilateral ties. In terms of challenges, the perhaps most obvious factor here is the growing power asymmetry between China and Russia, which is frequently singled out as a crucial challenge for the bilateral relationship going forward. However, it is here argued that this factor is an underlying condition that underpins the entire bilateral relationship. It thus makes it analytically easier to examine how this plays into a more specific set of issues than as a factor standing by itself. That said, the issue of growing asymmetry is addressed at some length in Section 3.1.

²⁶ It can be argued that these two issue domains should be separated, as they in many ways constitute different contents and policies. Furthermore, energy cooperation, which is arguably the most important economic dimension in the Sino-Russian economic relationship, could have constituted an issue on its own. On the other hand, energy interaction is closely linked to other dimensions of the economic relationship (for instance cross-border trade) making it challenging to separate completely. In addition, technology cooperation is increasingly becoming a feature of interaction between China and Russia (also in the field of energy) and is therefore easier to treat as part of the wider economic relationship that exists and is currently developing.

²⁷ This challenge contains several sub-issues that seemingly could stand by themselves, such as the impact of historical legacies on the relationship, or Russian concerns over Chinese migration into the Russian Far East. However, what unites all these issues is the underlying condition of (persistent) mistrust that affects how China and Russia view each other, which in effect also

It needs to be highlighted that the motivations and challenges have varied over time.²⁸ For example, maintaining stable and secure border relations is an underlying and indeed fundamental rationale for China in its relationship with Russia. In practical terms, this was particularly evident in the 1990s as China worked hard to settle the border dispute with Russia. China engaged in various types of diplomatic, security and economic initiatives to stabilise the once highly tense bilateral relation that followed the armed border clashes in 1969 and the subsequent massive military build-up at the border. However, although the border situation today remains largely peaceful and stable, this does not mean that issues such as Russian concern over Chinese migration in the Russian Far East have disappeared altogether. Even worse, concerns about renewed Chinese territorial claims can appear, creating challenges for China's northwest borderland security and economic development. In contrast, the challenge of competing regional interests is one that with time has grown in potential severity, given China's increased presence and influence in regions where both China and Russia have interests. A clear example is China's growing ambitions in the Arctic region; they have the potential to conflict with Russia's own interests and negatively affect the bilateral relationship as such.

The third task entails an explorative sketching of scenarios on potential roles that Russia could assume for China in its relations with it, by 2030.²⁹ Three potential roles are explored: Russia as a formal ally, as a competitor and a strategic supporter of China.³⁰ The motivations and challenges analysed in the preceding chapters (Chapters 2 and 3) are assumed to shape how China will perceive the future importance, benefits, challenges, and limitations of its relationship to Russia and thus

impacts how far the two sides are willing to extend and expand their bilateral relationship on numerous issues and areas.

²⁸ That is, the period covered in this report.

²⁹ The role-scenario sketching draws inspiration from previous research and explorations made by the author. The difference here is the explicit focus on addressing what specific future role Russia could play for China, and less on the bilateral relationship as such. See, for instance, Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, "Facing the 'new normal': The strong and enduring Sino-Russian relationship and its implications for Europe". *UI Paper* No 3, Stockholm: The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2019.

³⁰ It is of course conceivable to imagine other types of role scenarios. Two such could have been that of Russian "re-alignment" with the West and Russia as "burden" to China. The first would indicate a Russia that has redefined its role, becoming an integral part of Europe's markets, institutions, and perhaps even security architecture. The second role indicates that China's relationship with Russia will be more of a burden than asset to China. In this scenario Russia is so isolated and weak, even domestically instable, that its interaction with Russia is having a negative impact on China's domestic and foreign policy objectives. While these two roles could have constituted role scenarios in their own right, it is argued that the three present roles to a certain degree already capture some of these elements. For instance, the notion of re-alignment is addressed in the competition role (re-alignment with the West could lead to greater frictions in China-Russia relations) and the notion of Russia as a burden is discussed in the strategic supporter role (i.e. despite a burden to China, Beijing could still see certain value in retaining a functional relationship with Russia out of pure strategic necessity).

provide the basis for how to imagine the future roles. The scenarios also attempt to provide an estimate of the likelihood of realising the roles by discussing their respective costs and benefits. Beyond providing a discussion on the future role of Russia for China, it is also hoped that the scenario-sketching exercise says something about the nature, content and trajectory of Sino-Russian relations more broadly, albeit from a specific China focus.

Future assessment, even general scenario explorations as performed in this study, especially if they probe well beyond the present, are intrinsically speculative. The current war in Ukraine has made present predictions over the trajectory of Sino-Russian relations even more challenging.³¹ Events are still unfolding, and it is hard to predict the outcome of the war. At the time of writing, it remains uncertain on how China will position itself in the long term with regard to Russia and in its relations to the US and Europe. The exploration of the roles build on research-grounded analysis of past and present conditions regarding the Sino-Russian relationship. At the same time, the analysis needs to factor in recent events while acknowledging the high level of uncertainty that currently persists about how the war in Ukraine will continue, as well as its effects on the European security order and international politics more generally.

That said, general explorations of different plausible roles can be imagined and setting the year to 2030 allows for a flexible enough time perspective for doing that. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the year 2030 functions more as a reference point than a fixed “end-state” of Russia’s role for China. In other words, what is of interest here is to explore the potential, and even likely, trajectories envisioned through the roles presented here and not as decisive assessments that will hold by 2030.

It should also be added that the role exploration presented excludes the occurrence of any large-scale, unpredictable event, or extreme condition, such as a rapid deterioration due to climate change, a worldwide health crisis, or a fundamental breakdown of the international system.³²

³¹ Not only for most China-Russia observers, but also, more widely, international relations experts, Russia’s war against Ukraine constitutes a severe test for Sino-Russian relations that will do much to define the future trajectory of relations. Where differences exist is on whether the Sino-Russian alignment will endure or descend into irrelevance or even turn to tension. For a summary of some existing views, see *Foreign Affairs*, “Ask the experts – Will China and Russia Stay Aligned?” *Foreign Affairs*, June 21, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ask-the-experts/2022-06-21/will-china-and-russia-stay-aligned>.

³² Such events are commonly described as “black swans”. Events such as these are considered outside of the immediate analysis, as the focus here is more on the identified conditions and developments (as captured by Chapters 2 and 3). However, one can still argue that it makes good sense to factor in how unpredictable or sudden events can shape the policy priorities and direction of states’ relations with each other. See, for instance, Pär Gustafson, *Metod för framtida motstånd-
arbeskrivning: Tillämpning på rysk militär förmåga 2045*, FOI-R—5095--SE, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2021.

With regard to data and material, this research report utilises original Chinese open sources, such as government and official documents. These include white papers, bilateral agreements, leaders' statements and other official documentation and media coverage.³³ A valuable source of information is Chinese academic articles, books and policy reports, or commentaries, from the Chinese international politics and Chinese Russia expert community.³⁴ Available English language academic writings, policy reports and media coverage are also used.

1.4 Delimitations

This study focuses primarily on China in the Sino-Russian relationship. However, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of those relations, Russia's motivations and behaviour, as well as more broad-ranging developments in and characteristics of the bilateral relationship, are also discussed, when relevant.

China-Russia relations of the post-Cold War time period (i.e. after the dissolution of the Soviet Union) are examined. However, certain references to important historical events or features from modern history and especially the Cold War period are also included.

The main research work was conducted in 2021, that is, before the start of Russia's war on Ukraine, on 24 February 2022. Necessary adjustments that take more recent events into account have been added.

The time frame for sketching the three future-role scenarios is set to 2030, according to the motivations discussed above.

1.5 Outline of the Study

The outline of the report is as follows. Chapter 2 presents and examines what this study deems to be the main motivations driving China's engagement with Russia. Chapter 3 deals with challenges regarding the bilateral relationship. Chapter 4 moves the analysis into the future by exploring three potential roles that Russia could play for China by 2030: formal ally, competitor, and strategic supporter. Chapter 5 concludes the study by summarising the main findings, while also offering a final discussion.

³³ Official material and sources were mainly collected from the websites of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Council and the Ministry of Defence. The Chinese media outlets used include the People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, PLA Daily and Global Times.

³⁴ For instance, specialised international politics journals include *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations], *Guoji wenti yanjiu* [China International Studies] and *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics]. More specialised, "Russia-China focused", journals include *Eluosi xuekan* [Russian Studies], *Xiboliya yanjiu* [Siberian Studies] and *Eluosi Donggou Zhongya yanjiu* [Russian, East European and Central Asia Studies].

2 Motivations

This chapter presents and examines the motivations behind China's engagement with Russia. Six key motivations are identified and detailed below: maintaining stable and secure border relations, garnering support to ensure regime security, deepening military cooperation to counterbalance the US, managing and upholding stability in Central Asia, improving economic and technological exchange and enhancing coordination on global affairs.

2.1 Maintaining stable and peaceful border relations

Maintaining stable and peaceful border relations constitutes a fundamental rationale for China's engagement with Russia. China shares a 4200-kilometer-long border with Russia. In 2008, the two countries formally ended their more than century-long border dispute, which had been a source of significant historical tension and mutual mistrust, extorting high costs on both countries. In many ways, without the achievement of stability and security along the border, the Sino-Russian relationship could not have developed to its current stage and China would have faced significant hurdles in attaining its domestic and foreign policy objectives. As former Chinese top diplomat Fu Ying put it, "Beijing hopes that China and Russia can maintain their relationship in a way that will provide a safe environment for the two big neighbours to achieve their [respective] development goals."³⁵

The history of border complications dates back to the 19th century, when the Russian Tsarist empire occupied large parts of what the Chinese imperial Qing court considered Chinese territory, or at minimum as comprising areas of China's spheres of influence. The Treaty of Aigun (1858), the Beijing Treaty (1860) and the Treaty of Tarbagatai (1864) stipulated that China cede sizeable land masses of the present-day Russian Far East (what became the eastern border) and some smaller parts of Central Asia (what became the western border), but without clearly delineating the border. For China, the concessions were largely imposed and

³⁵ Fu Ying, "Zhong'E guanxi: Shi mengyou haishi huoban"? [Sino-Russian relations: Alliance or partners?], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations], vol. 4, 2016, pp. 1–10. Fu Ying is herself not a China-Russia expert, but her assessment widely counts as one of the lengthier insights from a top Chinese official regarding the China-Russia relationship (albeit now some year's old). Fu Ying's assessment also appeared in *Foreign Affairs* the same year. See Fu Ying, "How China Sees Russia: Beijing and Moscow Are Close, but Not Allies", *Foreign Affairs*, January–February 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-12-14/how-china-sees-russia>.

commonly referred to as “the unequal treaties”, due to the weakness of the Qing dynasty, which had no choice but to accept the treaties.³⁶

The border dispute issue was largely left untouched after the fall of the Qing dynasty, in 1911, which threw China into decades of political, economic and social upheaval, civil war and foreign occupation. Similarly, the border issue was not addressed in substance during the initial years after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), in 1949. In the beginning, China’s Mao Zedong hoped that the Soviet Union would reconsider the unequal treaties, as Beijing and Moscow had entered a formal alliance in the 1950s. Soviet leader Joseph Stalin was not willing to do so, however, and the border dispute was left simmering until tensions reached fever-pitch during the Sino-Soviet split, in the 1960s, with short but intense military border clashes at Zhenbao/Damanskii Island, on the Wusuli/Ussuri River, near Manchuria, in March 1969.³⁷

In the aftermath of the border clash, both sides viewed each other as their most pressing external security threat. Large military resources were amassed at the border and preparations were made in the event of a potential land invasion from the other side. The Soviet Union also expanded its Pacific Fleet, concluded a Friendship Treaty with India, and established strategic influence in Vietnam, with a military presence in ports and airfields, to encircle China.³⁸

Realising the high cost for both countries of further confrontation for national security and economic prosperity, China and the Soviet Union, under Deng Xiaoping and Michael Gorbachev, respectively, worked to normalise bilateral relations in the 1980s. Border talks and demarcation negotiations became a key feature. In May 1991, the two sides concluded an agreement on the eastern part of the border; this settled much of the entire border line that had been under dispute.³⁹ As the Soviet Union collapsed later the same year and was quickly replaced by the Russian Federation, China and the new leadership in Russia pledged to continue the border negotiation process, aiming to find a mutually acceptable resolution. In September 1994, an agreement on the much shorter western part was signed. Then, in October 2004, another agreement concluded the remaining territorial disputes, most importantly the issue of Heixiazi Island (Bolshoi Ussuriysky Island). In July

³⁶ For a detailed treatment of the historical background of their border relations, see S. C. M. Paine, *Imperial Rivals: China, Russia, and their Disputed Frontier*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996.

³⁷ For a well-documented account on the border clash, see Yang Kuisong, “The Sino-Soviet border clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American rapprochement”, *Cold War History*, 1(1), 2000, pp. 21-52.

³⁸ John Garver, *China’s Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People’s Republic of China*, Oxford University Press, 2016, Chapter 12.

³⁹ This represented around 98% of the disputed border area.

2008 a joint protocol was signed, demarcating the entire length of the border completely for the first time in the history of Sino-Russian border relations.⁴⁰

In addition to settling the border dispute, China engaged with Russia to demilitarise the border through border-troop reductions (initiated already in the 1980s) and adopt several confidence-building measures to maintain border stability and security and, broadly speaking, enforce mutual political trust. For instance, in 1994, China signed a military agreement with Russia stipulating mutual non-aggression, mutual de-targeting of strategic weapons, and non-first use of nuclear arms. In 1996 and 1997, China signed two agreements to define, reduce, regulate and verify the military presence and military activities in the border regions between China, Russia and the newly established Central Asian states. The two agreements laid the foundations for the establishment of the SCO in 2001.⁴¹ Finally, as border exchanges normalised in the 1990s, problems of uncontrolled Chinese trade and especially illegal Chinese migration into the Russian Far East became a key challenge threatening friendly and stable border interactions, but also negatively impacting the broader bilateral relationship.⁴² However, China responded to these Russian concerns through enforcing border trade management, improved visa regulations and improved central policy and implementation oversight over regional and local border administration.⁴³

According to leading Chinese Russia experts, such as Xing Guangcheng, at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the high costs of past confrontational border relations with Russia have left a strong impact on Chinese leaders.⁴⁴ While at present China does not consider Russia a security threat, achieving a sense of security nonetheless remains a top concern in the Chinese calculus in its relationship with Russia. As prominent Fudan University China-Russia scholar Zhao Huasheng frames it, “It can be said that security is the external and unchanging basic interest of Sino-Russian relations [...] When relations are friendly, both countries receive large security benefits, but when relations are tense, both countries become a serious strategic threat to the other’s security”.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ For a lengthy discussion on the process and methods China and Russia applied to solve their border dispute, see Akihiro Iwashita, “Border dynamics in Eurasia: Sino-Soviet border disputes and their aftermath”, *Journal of borderland Studies*, 23:3, 2008, pp. 69–81.

⁴¹ Jeanne L. Wilson, *Strategic Partners: Russian-Chinese relations in the Post-Soviet Era*, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004.

⁴² See Alexander Lukin, *The Bear Watches the Dragon. Russia’s Perceptions and the Evolution of Sino-Chinese relations since the Eighteen Century*, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2003.

⁴³ Elizabeth Wishnick, “Chinese perspectives on Cross-Border Relations”, in Sherman W. Garnett (ed.) *Rapprochement or Rivalry? Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia*, Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000, pp. 227–256.

⁴⁴ Xing Guancheng, “Zhong’E guanxi 70 nian duowei sikao” [Reflections on 70 years of the multifaceted Sino-Russian relationship] *Aisixiang*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/120400.html>.

⁴⁵ Zhao Huasheng, “Sino-Russian Cooperation in the Far East and Central Asia Since 2012”, *Eurasia Border Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Fall 2015, p. 105.

Ensuring that border relations remain peaceful is thus paramount for China and an absolute and necessary condition for keeping the broader relationship stable, while also conducive to the further deepening of bilateral ties.

2.2 Supporting regime security

China greatly appreciates that its partnership with Russia provides political support and legitimacy in an international environment where the leadership feels under attack from Western liberal democracies that it perceives are seeking to undermine the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

While far from identical, China and Russia share certain traits regarding domestic political governance and in particular the need to uphold regime stability.⁴⁶ At the most basic level, the political leadership in both countries share similar threat perceptions. The threats emanate both from what is perceived as a hostile external environment, represented foremost by the US and its allies and by repeated domestic challenges that carry the risk of resulting in social and political instability, leading in the worst case to regime collapse.⁴⁷

China, as well as Russia, views Western and notably US efforts at spreading liberal values and norms, strengthening civil society movements, and promoting democracy as especially harmful and, ultimately, as intended to bring about regime change. The Chinese often refer to this as “peaceful evolution”, which has constituted deep-rooted concern ever since the Mao era.⁴⁸ In the view of both Beijing

⁴⁶ There are some distinct differences in China and Russia’s political systems, civil-state relations and their political and social cultures. For instance, regarding its political system, Russia can be described as a competitive authoritarian regime, or “hybrid regime”, with formal democratic institutions and recurrent, albeit restricted, multiparty elections. China, on the other hand, is best described as a Leninist one-party state, with a non-Western liberal democratic political system, albeit one where party elites elect national leaders within a hidden intra-party process and structure. Despite this, both states are broadly considered authoritarian states, with increased restriction and control by the ruling governments over the domestic society. In addition, both states exhibit growing tendencies towards increased centralised and personalised rule by the top leadership. For an in-depth comparative study on issues such as these, see Karrie J. Koessel, Valerie J. Brunce and Jessica Chen Weiss, *Citizens and the State in Authoritarian Regimes: Comparing China and Russia*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁴⁷ For a longer analysis of how domestic challenges are related to regime security in China and Russia, see Andrej Krickovic, “Catalysing Conflict: The Internal Dimension of the Security Dilemma”. For a discussion of how the external and internal threat perceptions interact more specifically regarding China, see Wang Jisi, “The Plot against China. How Beijing Sees the New Washington Consensus”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-06-22/plot-against-china>. On more specific Russian threat perceptions, see Jakob Hedenskog and Gudrun Persson, “Russian security policy, in *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2019*, FOI-R--4758--SE, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2019.

⁴⁸ Matthew D. Johnson, *Safeguarding socialism. The origins, evolution and expansion of China’s total security paradigm*, SINOPSIS. China in context and perspective, AcaMedia z.ú., 2020, pp. 1–37.

and Moscow, examples include the post-Soviet sphere “colour revolutions” in the beginning/mid 2000s, the Arab Spring, in 2011, and more recently the protest movements in Hong Kong.⁴⁹ During incidents like these, Beijing often tries to shield China from any spillover effects, blaming outside forces, notably the US, for instigating the protests, while applauding its own political system.⁵⁰

The shared internal and external threat perceptions are evident in a number of ways. In general, Beijing and Moscow seek to arrange a global environment that is more conducive to gaining political support and legitimacy for their respective political governance systems. As leading principles for interstate interaction, this includes, at least rhetorically, upholding state sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states.

China and Russia often offer diplomatic support, at least tacitly, in the foreign policy conduct of the other side. For example, while China has neither formally acknowledged Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, in 2014, nor openly condemned Russia, it has criticised the European Union (EU) and US sanctions and other punitive measures against Russia.⁵¹ Since 2014, China has instead given Russia much needed diplomatic support in the face of strong Western condemnation. China welcomed and indeed supported Russia’s efforts to become more integrated with the Asia-Pacific region as a compensation for the economic and financial fallout from Western countries due to the sanctions regime.⁵² With regard to the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine, China strongly condemns the sanctions regime imposed on Russia, putting the blame for the European crisis on the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), while expressing its support for Russia’s demands for “security guarantees” from the West.

Much to China’s liking, Russia backs China’s Taiwan policy and opposes any form of Taiwanese independence.⁵³ Russia officially takes a neutral stance on the territorial disputes that China has with several Asian countries, although Moscow’s position seems to indicate a certain creeping alignment with China.⁵⁴ For instance, Russia backed China’s refusal to accept the 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) that decided in favour of the Philippines

⁴⁹ John M. Owen, “Sino-Russian cooperation against liberal hegemony”, *International Politics*, 57 2020, pp. 809–833.

⁵⁰ Karrie J. Koesel and Valeire J. Brunce, “Diffusion-Proofing: Russian and Chinese responses to Waves of Popular Mobilizations against Authoritarian Rules”, *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2013, pp. 753–68.

⁵¹ China did also not recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia after the Russian invasion in Georgia in August 2008.

⁵² Angela Stent “The Sino-Russian Partnership and Its Impact on U.S. Policy toward Russia”, *Asia Policy*, Vol. 13, No. 1, January, 2018.

⁵³ President of Russia, “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development”.

⁵⁴ Andrey Dikarev and Alexander Lukin, “Russia’s approach to South China Sea territorial dispute: it’s only business, nothing personal”, *The Pacific Review*, 2021, DOI: 10.1080/09512748.2020.

with regard to the territorial disputes in the South China Sea.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the growing frequency of joint Sino-Russian naval exercises and air-patrol missions in contested territorial areas in Asia is causing concern among Asian states that Russia is taking a stand with China, including with countries Russia wishes to cultivate growing ties with, such as India, Vietnam and Japan.⁵⁶

Moreover, the Chinese leadership highly appreciates that the two sides do not criticise or meddle into each other's domestic affairs. Russia has shown support for how China has dealt with Hong Kong, as well as for its suppression of the Uighur population in China's Xinjiang province.⁵⁷ Likewise, China does not criticise Russia for how it deals with anti-regime opposition and civil society protest.

In addition to the matter of political support and restraint, the two sides are also increasingly engaging in concrete forms of bilateral collaboration on issues pertaining to domestic control and surveillance. China and Russia have established mechanisms for bilateral consultations aimed at sharing experience and knowledge on how to govern their civil societies, not least in the cyberspace domain. In 2015, Beijing and Moscow signed a bilateral agreement on international information security; this reflects not only shared perceptions on information security but also contains suggestions for bilateral cooperation, such as information exchange and the sharing of technologies.⁵⁸ Over the years, consultations have advanced on cyberspace and information technology and data issues in general. In 2019, a new bilateral treaty was signed on combating illegal content on the internet and on cooperating on issues related to the Internet of Things (IoT). Commercial cooperation has also progressed; for example, the Chinese telecommunications company, Huawei, is engaged in developing Russia's AI (artificial intelligence) ecosystem. Other companies, such as China Dahua Technology and Russia's NtechLab, have jointly developed a camera with facial recognition functions.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Russia supported the Chinese claim that the disputes should be handled by the involved parties without external interference by, i.e., the US. Notwithstanding that, however, Russia did not explicitly support China's territorial claims in the South China Sea.

⁵⁶ Marcin Kaczmarek, "Russian Foreign Policy in a Time of Rising U.S.-China Competition", in Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, and Michael Wills (eds.), *Navigating Tumultuous Times in the Indo-Pacific*, Strategic Asia 2020–2021, Washington D.C.: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2022.

⁵⁷ NBS News, "Full Transcript of Exclusive Putin Interview with NBC News' Keir Simmons", *NBS News*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/transcript-nbc-news-exclusive-interview-russia-s-vladimir-putin-n1270649>.

⁵⁸ Government of Russian Federation, "On Signing the Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Cooperation in Ensuring International Information Security", April 30, 2015, https://cyberpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/RUS-CHN_CyberSecurityAgreement201504_InofficialTranslation.pdf.

⁵⁹ Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, "China's Technology Cooperation with Russia: geopolitics, economics, and regime security", *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Volume 14, Issue 3, Autumn 2021, pp. 447–479.

Finally, similar consultations and objectives are also included in multilateral venues as, for instance, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), or institutions where China and Russia are main members, such as the SCO and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa).⁶⁰

In other words, ensuring political support and providing legitimacy for its political system, expressed through the various interactions mentioned above, constitutes an important motivation for China's engagement with Russia.

2.3 Deepening military cooperation to counterbalance the US

A long-standing reason for China to cooperate with Russia is the value Beijing places in enlisting Moscow as a suitable partner to counterbalance US global dominance and especially its military power. Both China and Russia especially dislike American strategic influence and military presence in their immediate neighbourhoods. Russia views Europe and the post-Soviet sphere in this manner, while China is concerned with the Asia-Pacific region (increasingly the wider Indo-Pacific region), particularly Taiwan. While assertions and assessments have varied over time, the general consensus in China is that US military strategy and posture are principally aimed at deterring China from challenging US pre-eminence in Asia and beyond while also offsetting Russian efforts at reasserting itself as a great power.⁶¹

For instance, Beijing interprets NATO's expansion as being targeted at curtailing Russia's geopolitical influence in Europe. Similarly, Washington's efforts at consolidating and strengthening security partnerships in Asia are interpreted as US containment strategies against China's regional ambitions.⁶² Indeed, the signing of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership agreement in 1996 was to a certain degree influenced by such perceptions of US policies towards the two countries. The 1995–96 Taiwan Straits crisis, if not decisive, was nonetheless an important enforcing factor for the Chinese leadership. Another more recent example of perceived containment is the 2021 AUKUS pact between the US, UK and

⁶⁰ Carolina Vendil Pallin and Mattias Hjelm, "Moscow's Digital Offensive – Building Sovereignty in the Cyber Space", *FOI Memo: 7251*, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2020.

⁶¹ Tao Wenzhao and Xu Shengwei, "The US factor in post-cold war China–Russia relations", *International Politics*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00211-1>.

⁶² Adam P. Liff, "China and the US Alliance System", *China Quarterly*, Volume 233, March 2018, pp. 137-165.

Australia.⁶³ Accordingly, China-Russia coordination, Chinese commentators contend, will help to mitigate such US encirclement efforts.⁶⁴ US-led initiatives to strengthen the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), a regional security grouping involving the US, Japan, Australia and India, are viewed in the same perspective.

Chinese foreign policy thinking and behaviour are strongly influenced by increasing perceptions of US military, political and economic pressure.⁶⁵ The US National Security Strategy (NSS) in 2017 and the National Defense Strategy (NDS) in 2018 declared that China and Russia are the two top threats to US national security.⁶⁶ This is also leading Chinese Russia experts to more strongly emphasise their assessments of the impact of the US for China-Russia relations.⁶⁷ The joint declaration issued during Putin's visit to China in relation to the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics, on 4 February 2022, explicitly states, for the first time, common opposition to further expansion of NATO.⁶⁸ In fact, most Chinese observers see the ongoing war in Ukraine as the result of NATO eastward expansion and express understanding for Russia's position. As Liu Yun, Vice President of the China Society of International Relations and Executive Director of the Center for Russian Studies at East China Normal University states, "In Russia's view, Europe's security is divided security, the security of the United States and NATO is based on Russia's insecurity, and Russia's security concerns

⁶³ Zheng Yongnian, "Wukelan zhanzheng yu shijie zhixu chongjian" [The Ukrainian War and the Restoration of World Order?], *Observer*, February 26, 2022, <http://archive.today/HnNiz>.

⁶⁴ Wei Dongxu, "China-Russia coordination helps break AUKUS encirclement", *Global Times*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202110/1236726.shtml>.

⁶⁵ Oscar Almén, Johan Englund Björn Ottosson, *Great Power Perceptions. How China and the U.S. view each other on political, economic and security issues*, FOI-R--5040--SE, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2021.

⁶⁶ The White House, *National Security Strategy of United States of America*, 2017, U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America:*

Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge, Washington, D.C., January 2018.

⁶⁷ Bonny Lin, Christopher Weidacher Hsiung and Sergey Radchenko, "How Will Russia's War in Ukraine Impact Sino-Russian Relations?" *Interpret: China*, Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 25, 2022, <https://interpret.csis.org/how-will-russias-war-in-ukraine-impact-sino-russian-relations/>.

⁶⁸ Johan Englund, Christopher Weidacher Hsiung and Ella Ståhl, "Den europeiska säkerhetskrisen kan föra Peking och Moskva ännu närmare varandra" (The European security crisis can bring Beijing and Moscow even closer to each other), *FOI Memo 7817*, Stockholm: Swedish Defense Research Agency, 2022.

have not been taken seriously for a long time”.⁶⁹ The Russian narrative of the war is also being amplified by official Chinese representatives and media.⁷⁰

In more practical terms, China has strived to broaden and deepen several layers of its security and defence cooperation with Russia as a means not only to strengthen their bilateral ties, but also to enhance its own military capabilities and operational skills.

A core element of this for Beijing has been to acquire Russian weapons systems and military technology; in fact, Russia has been China’s principal source of foreign-purchased conventional weapons systems. From 1991 to 2010, Russia provided China with some 90 per cent of its major conventional weapons.⁷¹ In particular, China desires air and naval platforms to pursue its objectives in the Asia-Pacific, notably in the maritime sphere and in particular towards a future Taiwan contingency. Some early major purchases have included Su-27 and Su-30 fighter jets, Sovremenny-class destroyers, Kilo-class diesel submarines and anti-ship cruise missiles.⁷²

Over the years, the total value of the arms deals has declined. At the same time, Russia has begun offering more state-of-the-art weapons systems. In the wake of Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, in 2014, Russia and China signed deals in 2015 (although negotiations were initiated earlier) for the sale of Su-35 combat aircraft and S-400 air defence systems. China became the first foreign buyer of both systems, which have helped to strengthen China’s deterrence capabilities. For instance, use of the Su-35 aircraft improves combat air patrol missions over the South China Sea; they are also used to enhance signals of deterrence against Taiwanese independence. Su-35 aircraft reportedly patrol near Taiwan.⁷³

Russia has also provided China with other types of advanced military technology. In 2017, the two sides signed a three-year road map for increased military cooperation.⁷⁴ In 2019, President Putin announced that Russia would offer China

⁶⁹ Liu Yun, “E’Wu chongtu beihoude shencengci dongyin yiqi yingxiang” [The Deep-Seated Causes Behind the Russia-Ukraine Conflict and Its Effects], *Guangming Daily*, March 1, 2022, https://www.gmw.cn/xueshu/2022-03/01/content_35555286.htm.

⁷⁰ Maria Repnikova and Wendy Zhou, “What China’s Social Media Is Saying About Ukraine”, *The Atlantic*, March 11, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/03/china-xi-ukraine-war-america/627028/>.

⁷¹ Data obtained from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), see “SIPRI Military Expenditure Database”, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

⁷² David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global. The Partial Superpower*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 283.

⁷³ Lyle L. Goldstein and Vitaly Kozyrev, “China–Russia Military Cooperation and the Emergent U.S.–China Rivalry: Implications and Recommendations for U.S. National Security”, *Journal of Peace and War Studies*, October 2020, pp. 24–48.

⁷⁴ Vasily Kashin, “Russia and China Take Military Partnership to New Level”, *The Moscow Times*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/23/russia-and-china-take-military-partnership-to-new-level-a67852>.

the technology to help it develop an early-warning missile-attack system, a move judged to be an important step in furthering China-Russia military integration.⁷⁵ Only the US and Russia currently possess such systems. Russian technologies in this field will help bolster Chinese deterrence capabilities and form part of broader Chinese efforts to counterbalance development of US nuclear and missile capabilities.⁷⁶ Moreover, there are signs of cooperation on new technologies, such as AI, autonomous systems, and robotics with potential military applications. A concrete example is Chinese interest in how Russia utilised AI technologies in its various Syria operations. The emergence of deeper Sino-Russian collaboration in strategic technologies could mark an upgrade in their defence relationship, in part aimed at counterbalancing US dominance in military technology.⁷⁷

China and Russia are also conducting joint military exercises and, more generally, mil-to-mil interaction and exchanges. Joint military exercises with Russia offer operational and tactical training opportunities, which are especially valuable for China as it lacks real, present-day combat experience. Training and education programmes help Chinese servicemen improve their military skills. Sometimes underestimated, joint military exercises (and general mil-to-mil contacts) also function as confidence-building measures between the militaries of the two countries, a crucial element considering that defence collaboration has been one of the most difficult areas for cooperation in the past.⁷⁸ Tellingly, Chinese observers have long held that military cooperation with Russia serves to enhance mutual trust and understanding, ultimately preventing the re-emergence of hostilities such as those during the Sino-Soviet split.⁷⁹

According to one study, China and Russia have engaged in at least 28 confirmed joint military exercises from 2003 to early 2021. Importantly, over the years, exercises have become more sophisticated, moving from basic coordination to more integrated and joint operations, performing training on both low- and high-level threat contingencies, including on the improvement of tactical and operational interoperability for fighting a large-scale conventional adversary or hostile

⁷⁵ Alexander Korolev, “China–Russia cooperation on missile attack early warning systems”, *East Asia Forum*, November 20, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/11/20/china-russia-cooperation-on-missile-attack-early-warning-systems/>.

⁷⁶ Tong Zhao, *Narrowing the U.S.-China Gap on Missile Defense: How to Help Forestall a Nuclear Arms Race*, Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020, pp. 1–83.

⁷⁷ Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, “China’s Technology Cooperation with Russia: geopolitics, economics, and regime security”.

⁷⁸ Richard Weitz, *Assessing Chinese-Russian Military Exercise. Past Progress and Future Trends*, Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies CSIS, July 2021.

⁷⁹ Liu Zhiqing, “2005 nian Zhong’E lianhe junshi yanxi shuping” [A review of the 2005 Sino-Russian joint military exercises], in *Zhong’E guanxi de lishi yu xianshi* [Sino-Russian Relations: History and Reality], ed. Guan Guaihai, Beijing: Shehui kexue chubanshe, 2009, pp. 672–673.

coalition.⁸⁰ China has also participated in Russian strategic exercises, such as Vostok–2018 (East–2018), Tsentr–2019 (Centre–2019), and Kavkaz–2020 (Caucasus–2020). Such participation is notable, as these exercises previously often assumed that China was a potential adversary. For instance, the 2010 Vostok exercise (the largest at that time) was held in the Far East Federal District, near the Chinese border, with a focus on ground and air elements.⁸¹ The 2010 exercise was followed by an even larger similar exercise in 2014, which President Putin flew to in order to personally inspect it. In these earlier exercises, China was suggested as a potential adversary, since it remained the only credible force in the region that Russia shares a land border with while possessing a capability to fight a large-scale land war as well as hold Russian territory.⁸²

Moreover, in August 2021, Russian forces, for the first time on Chinese land, participated in a Chinese strategic exercise, called Interaction-2021, and held in north-central China. Russian forces were integrated with China’s, shared Chinese equipment, and used a joint command and control system for the first time.⁸³ China did not participate, however, in Russia’s Zapad-2021 (West) exercise, held one month later.

Naval operations in particular have assumed an increasingly vital component of Sino-Russian defence cooperation. Exercises include higher levels of platform and unit integration, along with scenarios such as anti-submarine and amphibious warfare, which points to greater interoperability and sophistication. Additionally, several exercises have been conducted in politically sensitive areas, such as the South China Sea, in 2016, and the Baltic Sea, in 2017.⁸⁴ In 2019, in the Gulf of Oman, China and Russia also conducted joint naval exercises with Iran, and, for

⁸⁰ Alexey D Muraviev, “Strategic reality check: The current state of Russia-China defense cooperation and the prospects of a deepening ‘near alliance’”, *Australian Journal of Defense and Strategic Studies*, Vol. 3, No 1, 2021, p. 32.

⁸¹ Jacob Kipp, “Vostok 2010 and the very curious hypothetical opponent”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 7, Issue 133, 2010.

⁸² Johan Norberg, *Training to fight – Russia’s major military exercise 2011-2014*, FOI-R--4128--SE, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2015, p. 62.

⁸³ Catharine Wong, “China-Russia military drill makes room for combined force against US”, *The South China Morning Post*, August 13, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3145010/china-russia-military-drill-makes-room-combined-force-against>.

⁸⁴ Ethan Meick, “China-Russia Military-to-Military Relations: Moving Toward a Higher Level of Cooperation”, *Staff Research Report*, Washington D.C.: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission March, 2017, pp. 1–37.

the third time, in January 2022, in the northern Indian Ocean.⁸⁵ In October 2021, China and Russia held their first ever joint patrol in the Western Pacific Ocean.⁸⁶

Other military exercises are also worth noting. In 2019, China and Russia staged their first joint aerial patrol over the Sea of Japan and the South China Sea, which was followed up by new joint patrol operations in 2020 and 2021.⁸⁷ Since 2016, China and Russia have also begun to conduct joint anti-ballistic missile-defense computer-simulations.⁸⁸ This should be seen in relation to the increased missile-defence cooperation mentioned above. Several anti-terrorist and local law-enforcement security exercises have also been conducted.⁸⁹

Finally, Russia functions as a source of contemporary military thinking, a feature dating back to the way Chinese military was strongly influenced by Soviet strategic ideas and operational art in the 1940s.⁹⁰ Chinese strategists and military planners seek inspiration in how to conceptualise and apply operational and tactical concepts of modern warfare by for instance studying Russia's military operations during the annexation of Crimea, in 2014, and military interventions in Syria, in 2015.⁹¹ Mutual learning on how to conduct influence operations and disinformation campaigns has also been noted.⁹²

That said, the ongoing Russian military campaign against Ukraine has revealed several shortcomings in Russian military organisation, operations and logistics, as well as its weapons, equipment and combat morale.⁹³ The Chinese military is likely surprised by the poor performance of the Russian army, which could lead to

⁸⁵ CNN, "Iran, China and Russia hold naval drills in north Indian Ocean", *CNN*, January 21, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/21/world/iran-china-russia-naval-drills-intl/index.html>.

⁸⁶ Reuters, "Russian, Chinese warships hold first joint patrols in the Pacific", *Reuters*, October 24, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-chinese-warships-hold-first-joint-patrols-pacific-2021-10-23/>.

⁸⁷ Chinese Armed Forces, "China, Russia hold annual joint aerial strategic patrol", *China Military Online*, November 19, 2021, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2021-11/19/content_10109351.htm.

⁸⁸ Ethan Meick, "China-Russia Military-to-Military Relations: Moving Toward a Higher Level of Cooperation".

⁸⁹ Alexander Korolev, "On the Verge of an alliance. Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation", *Asian Security*, Volume 15, Issue 3, 2019, pp. 233–252.

⁹⁰ Alexey D Muraviev, "Strategic reality check: the current state of Russia-China defense cooperation and the prospects of a deepening 'near alliance'", pp. 31–32.

⁹¹ Sergey Luzyanin and Zhao Huasheng eds., *Russian-Chinese Dialogue: The 2020 Model*, Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council, 2020, p. 67.

⁹² Ben Dubow, Edward Lucas and Jake Morris, *Jabbed in the back – Mapping Russian and Chinese information operations during Covid-19*, Washington D.C.: The Center for European Policy Analysis, 2021, pp. 1–72.

⁹³ Robert Dalsjö, Michael Jonsson and Johan Norberg, "A brutal examination: Russian military capability in light of the Ukraine war", *Survival*, Volume 64, Issue 3, 2022, pp. 7–28.

a reassessment of Russia's warfare competence, although broader lessons on military aspects of the war will surely also be gained.⁹⁴

Through its security cooperation with Russia, China hopes to augment its military potential. Russian arms sales and, more broadly, military-technical cooperation have enhanced Beijing's military capabilities and helped create a more favourable military balance vis-à-vis the US in the primary Asia-Pacific maritime theatre. Military exercises improve the combat skill of the Chinese military, while also functioning as a geopolitical signalling tool against the US. In addition, China looks to Russia as a source for learning about military strategy, including on the operational and tactical levels, and especially with regard to "hybrid warfare" and the applications of new technologies for military purposes.

2.4 Managing and upholding stability in Central Asia

Managing and upholding the Eurasian security environment, particularly in Central Asia, is a major incentive for Chinese engagement with Russia, and indeed constitutes a key component in the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. In general, China has three specific goals in the region, where Russia plays a valuable role.

First, addressing security issues and maintaining political stability in Central Asia has long constituted a core objective in China's strategy toward the region.⁹⁵ For most Chinese observers, this foremost means preventing the Uighur diaspora in the region from influencing and mobilising political independence movements among the Uighur population in China's Xinjiang province that can lead to instability not only in the province, but also in China as a whole.⁹⁶ China thus regularly engages bilaterally with Central Asian states to enhance border control and security cooperation.⁹⁷ With regard to Russia, Beijing sees Moscow sharing a strong mutual interest to prevent the region from becoming a breeding ground for what the Chinese more commonly refer to as *san gu shili* (the "three evils"), namely terrorism, separatism and extremism. Most of Sino-Russian cooperation in this regard happens in the SCO.

The SCO has stayed away from developing any larger "traditional security role" and instead, much on the initiative of China and Russia, focuses on strengthening

⁹⁴ Ying-Yu Lin, "What the PLA Is Learning From Russia's Ukraine Invasion", *The Diplomat*, April 22, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/what-the-pla-is-learning-from-russias-ukraine-invasion/>.

⁹⁵ Michael Clarke, *Xinjiang and China's Rise in Central Asia – A History*, London: Routledge, 2011.

⁹⁶ Zhao Huasheng, "Zhongguo yu da ouya Huobian Guanxi" [China and the Greater Eurasian Partnership] *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu*, No. 6 [International Studies], 2017.

⁹⁷ Alexander Cooley, "Tending the Eurasian Garden: Russia, China and the dynamics of Regional Integration and Order", in Jo Inge Bekkevold and Bobo Lo (eds.), *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019, pp. 113-139.

the capacity of Central Asian states to manage regional security challenges and build local governance capacity.⁹⁸ The creation of the Regional Anti-terrorist Structure (RATS), a permanent SCO organ, is a good example, as are frequently reoccurring SCO multilateral military exercises, where China and Russia are the main participating states. With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, Sino-Russian cooperation on regional security is expected to increase. The Zapad/-Interaction 2021 joint exercise was to a large extent focused on such a response, especially anti-terrorism cooperation.⁹⁹ The riots in Kazakhstan in January 2022, where Russia deployed military forces through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) at the request of the Kazakhstan government, however, manifested the low level of China's concrete security presence in the region and, in effect, the limits of Sino-Russian practical security cooperation. Nonetheless, according to Chinese assessments, cooperation with Russia allows for collaboration in managing regional security in Central Asia, a region where the SCO functions as the most appropriate platform for Sino-Russian interaction.¹⁰⁰

Second, joint efforts for greater Sino-Russian regional cooperation, were also long spurred by common concerns over US and NATO military presence and long-term US geopolitical influence in the region as part of the US Afghanistan campaign following 9/11.¹⁰¹ A shared goal has thus been to reduce American strategic influence in Central Asia. Initially, China and Russia did not object and even to a certain degree supported the US-led military intervention (Russia, for instance, welcomed US stationed troops in the region). However, over time and especially after the “colour revolutions” in the region, Chinese and Russian resentment towards American presence, which they saw as being spurred by efforts to bring about political change among Central Asian states and, more broadly, exert geopolitical pressure on China and Russia, grew stronger. With the US military retreat from Afghanistan, Chinese concerns over an American military presence have receded, but they nonetheless remain cautious over continued US activism in the region.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ The other resident regional security organisation, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, is more a traditional security organisation, with a unified command and rotating chairmanship. Member states include Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. China is not a member.

⁹⁹ The Moscow Times, “Russia, China Hold Joint Anti-Terror Drills – TASS”, *The Moscow Times*, September 20, 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/09/20/russia-china-hold-joint-anti-terror-drills-tass-a75088>.

¹⁰⁰ Li Yongquan, “Zhong’e mulin youhao hezuo tiaoyue yu Zhong’e guanxi fazhan”, [China-Russia Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation and the Development of China-Russia Relations], *Eluosi yanjiu* [Journal of Russian Studies], Issue 11, No 64, 2021, p. 12

¹⁰¹ Weiqing Song, “Feeling safe, feeling strong: China’s strategy of soft balancing through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation”, *International Politics*, (50), 2013, pp. 664–685.

¹⁰² Yu Sun, “How China views the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan”, *War on the Rocks*, May 13, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/05/how-china-views-the-u-s-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/>.

Third, China has growing economic interest in the region, which to some extent is dependent on Russian support. Central Asia and Eurasia more broadly constitute a key region in China's BRI project. However, there is a clear economic power imbalance between China and Russia, as China has emerged as the principal provider of capital and investment for the region. China is also the major trading partner for all Central Asian states. This clearly challenges Russia's perceived role as the regional great power and according to some does not bode well for Sino-Russian relations in the region, nor for their broader strategic partnership.¹⁰³

At the same time, China has so far not attempted to override Russian interests too much, but has instead worked to at least nominally include it in its economic plans for the region. While Russia cannot compete with China in terms of economic and financial resources, if China is to realise its plans for Eurasian connectivity smoothly, it remains to some degree dependent on Russia's acceptance and openness to cooperate. This is clearly manifested in the coordination of the BRI project with Russia's own regional integration project, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which the Chinese government states is a key issue of Sino-Russian cooperation in the region.¹⁰⁴ In 2015, a joint declaration was signed that called for increased coordination and collaboration between the BRI and the EEU. Since then, several additional agreements, working groups and regular ministerial talks have followed. For instance, in 2018, an agreement on trade and economic cooperation between the BRI and the EEU was signed.¹⁰⁵ In addition, China and Russia have created joint investment funds, mostly aimed towards financing joint projects between the Russian Far East (which lately also includes the Arctic) and China's northeast, although concrete achievements have been limited to date.¹⁰⁶

2.5 Economic and technology exchange

Establishing closer and more comprehensive economic and technology cooperation constitutes another important motivation in China's engagement with Russia. Chinese accounts often stress that complementariness of the Russian and Chinese economies and markets coupled with geographical proximity create favourable conditions for improved economic and trade exchanges.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Jeanne L. Wilson, "Russia and China in Central Asia: Deepening Tensions in the Relationship", *Acta Via Serica*, Vol. 6, No. 1, June 2021, pp. 55–90.

¹⁰⁴ Wang Yi, "Wang Yi on Four Areas of China–Russia Cooperation in the Future", China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 11, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t18149-13.shtml.

¹⁰⁵ Xinhua News, "China, EAEU sign agreement on trade, economic cooperation", May 18, 2018, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international_exchanges/2018/05/18/content_281476151403330.htm.

¹⁰⁶ Gaye Christoffersen, "The Russian Far East and China's Northeast: A Decade in the Shadow of the Belt and Road Initiative", *The Asan Forum*, October 15, 2021, <https://theasanforum.org/the-russian-far-east-and-chinas-northeast-a-decade-in-the-shadow-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>.

¹⁰⁷ Liu Huaqin, "2013 nian Zhong'E jingmao hezuo kuangzhuang yu qianjing zhanwang" [The status of Sino-Russian economic and trade relations in 2013 and its prospects] in *Eluosi fazhan baogao*

Generally speaking, developing economic relations with Russia serves to strengthen the bilateral relationship as such.¹⁰⁸ According to Chinese assessments, economic relations have remained underdeveloped when compared to political ties, something long described as *re zheng, leng jing* (“hot politics, cold economics”).¹⁰⁹ For instance, bilateral trade turnover during the 1990s averaged merely USD 5–7 billion and bilateral investment cooperation was close to non-existent.¹¹⁰ In order to develop the overall relationship, Chinese observers early on stressed the importance of pushing for growing economic interaction simultaneously with cultivating political ties.¹¹¹ Over the years, economic exchanges have therefore been promoted and repeatedly emphasised by the Chinese leadership. Real progress began in earnest in the mid-2000s, spurred not only by emerging energy cooperation, but also by Russia’s gradual and subsequent more pronounced policy of seeking greater economic integration with the Asia-Pacific region, and not least China, following the global financial crisis of 2008.¹¹²

From 2003 to 2014, bilateral trade more than quintupled, reaching USD 95 billion in 2014.¹¹³ In 2019, the bilateral trade turnover was USD 110 billion. Although bilateral trade for 2020 was lower, due to the effect of the global Covid pandemic, it still exceeded USD 100 billion, reaching USD 107.7 billion.¹¹⁴ In 2021, bilateral trade reached USD 146.88 billion, a record high.¹¹⁵ China is today Russia’s largest trading partner, having overtaken that position from Germany, in 2010. However, the role played by Russia for China is less significant; at the end of 2020, Russia

2014 [Yellow Yearbook of Russia 2014], Chinese Academy of Social Science, Beijing: shehui kexue wensan chubanshe, 2014. See also Andrew Radin et al., *China-Russia Cooperation. Determining factors, future trajectories, implications for the US*, pp. 263–264.

¹⁰⁸ Oscar Almén and Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, *China’s economic influence in the Arctic region. The Nordic and Russian cases*. FOI-R—5326—SE, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, June, 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Shan Yurong, “Zhong’E jingmao guanxi de xianzhuang ji zhijue yinsu fenxi” [Analysis of the state and limitations of Sino-Russian economic and trade relations] in Guan Guaihai (ed.) *Zhong’E guanxi de lishi yu xianshi* [Sino-Russian Relations: History and Reality], Beijing: shehui kexue wensan chubanshe), 2009, p. 599.

¹¹⁰ Zhang Hongxia, “Zhong’E jingmao guanxi: huigu yu zhanwang”, [Sino-Russian economic and trade relations: review and prospects], *Eluosi dongya zhongya yanjiu* [Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies], No. 5, 2013, 48-56.

¹¹¹ Li Jingjie, “Shilun Zhong’E zhanlve xiezuo huoban guanxi”, [Attempt at discussing the Sino-Russian strategic partnership], *Eluosi Dongya Zhongya yanjiu* [Russian, East European and Central Asia Studies], Vol. 2, 1997.

¹¹² See Marcin Kaczmarek, *Russia-China Relations in the post-crisis International Order*.

¹¹³ It should be clarified that the year after the global financial crisis, bilateral trade declined somewhat but then recovered in consecutive years. It was the same for 2015, the year after the Ukraine crisis, which saw a slump, but then rebounded.

¹¹⁴ Calculated from IMF Direction of Trade Statistics (DOTS), data available here: <https://data.imf.org/regular.aspx?key=61013712>.

¹¹⁵ TASS, “Trade turnover between Russia and China gained 35.8% in 2021 – Chinese Customs”, TASS, January 4, 2022, https://tass.com/economy/1387967?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com.

was only the country's eleventh largest trading partner.¹¹⁶ Government officials have declared an ambition to have bilateral trade reach USD 200 billion by 2024.¹¹⁷

Beijing, especially, seeks to develop closer energy links. While long self-sufficient in terms of domestic energy production, in 1993 China became a net importer of crude oil and in 1997 a net importer of natural gas.¹¹⁸ China is the world's largest importer of crude oil and its oil import dependency stood at 72.5 percent in 2019.¹¹⁹ Natural gas is becoming an increasingly crucial transitional energy source for China, not least as it tries to move away from reliance on fossil fuel to reach "carbon neutrality" by 2060.¹²⁰ Almost 50 per cent of Chinese oil imports originate from the Middle East and North Africa; this means that imports need to transit the Malacca Strait, giving rise to what Chinese leaders refer to as the "Malacca Strait dilemma".¹²¹ Piracy, natural disasters and, not least, US global naval dominance constitute some basic features in China's energy security concerns. As such, diversifying its oil and natural gas imports helps China satisfy its energy thirst and fuel its continued economic development, an important feature of China's overall energy security strategy.¹²²

From China's perspective, the conclusion of several major oil and natural gas projects with Russia has thus helped diversify its energy imports. The so-called Eastern Siberia Pacific Ocean Oil pipeline (ESPO), a long-discussed project finalised in 2008, provides China with crude oil. In addition, China also receives deliveries through maritime oil shipments. By the end of 2021, Russia was the second-largest supplier of crude oil to China, after Saudi Arabia.¹²³

Russia is also an increasingly important provider of natural gas, both through pipelines and its exports of liquefied natural gas (LNG).¹²⁴ In May 2014, Gazprom and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) concluded the Power of

¹¹⁶ Sergey Luzyanin and Zhao Huasheng eds., *China-Russia Dialogue: The 2021 Model*. Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council, 2021, pp. 41–42.

¹¹⁷ Xinhua, "Putin says Russia-China relations at highest-ever level", *Xinhua*, June 5, 2021. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-06/05/c_139990358.htm.

¹¹⁸ EIA, "China. International Energy Data and Analysis", *Full Report*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2015, pp. 1–36.

¹¹⁹ IEA, "Oil, gas and coal import dependency in China, 2007–2019" (last updated 18 December, 2020), Washington D.C.: U.S. Energy Information Administration, <https://www.iea.org/data-and-statistics/charts/oil-gas-and-coal-import-dependency-in-china-2007-2019>.

¹²⁰ Matt McGrath, "Climate change: China aims for 'carbon neutrality by 2060'", *BBC*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-54256826>.

¹²¹ Chen Shaofeng, "China's Self-Extrication from the 'Malacca Dilemma' and Implications", *International Journal of China Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 2010, pp. 1–24.

¹²² Øystein Tunsjø, *Security and Profit in China's Energy Policy. Hedging against Risk*. Colombia University Press, 2013.

¹²³ Russia and Saudi Arabia have for the last several years alternatively held the top position. For instance, from 2016 to 2018, Russia was China's top supplier and Saudi Arabia number two.

¹²⁴ Niklas H. Roszbach, *The Geopolitics of Russian Energy. Gas, oil and the energy security of tomorrow*, FOI-R 4623, Stockholm: Swedish Defense Research Agency, 2018.

Siberia pipeline deal, worth USD 400 billion and with an expected annual capacity of 38 billion cubic meters (bcm) per year.¹²⁵ The project had been discussed for years (disagreements over price and pipeline routes were particularly thorny topics) and the Ukraine 2014 crisis surely influenced the finalising of the agreement. In December 2019, the first natural gas deliveries entered China.¹²⁶ A second pipeline, the Power of Siberia 2, originating in western Siberia and with an annual capacity of 50 bmc, is being discussed.¹²⁷ In 2018, only around 1 per cent of Russia's natural gas exports were to China, while the EU accounted for 70 per cent. By 2021, Russia accounted for 10 per cent of China's imports, indicating a significant increase.¹²⁸

LNG imports are also becoming more important. Chinese investors have for instance contributed to and helped finance a large project in the Russian Arctic, the Yamal LNG Terminal project, in which CNPC and China's Silk Road Fund have also obtained shares.¹²⁹ CNPC has committed to importing no less than 3 million tons of LNG annually over a 20-year period (amounting to 18 per cent of the total capacity). The project is operational and has begun shipping to Asian and European markets, including China. Chinese investors are also engaged in a similar project, the Yamal LNG 2 Project, which is expected to become operational by 2030. Moreover, also in the Arctic region, China has shown interest in utilising the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a potential commercial shipping route between China and Europe, which includes jointly working with Russia to establish a "Polar Silk Road" as part of China's broader BRI aspirations, thus further incentivising a potential Arctic economic partnership.¹³⁰

China (and Russia, for that matter) are also pushing for developing other dimensions of the economic and trade interaction. Cooperation in agriculture has

¹²⁵ The pipeline supplies gas from the Chayandinskoye field in eastern Siberia to domestic consumers in Russia's Far East and to China.

¹²⁶ Gazprom, "Power of Siberia", (Information of the Project), accessed 2021-09-13, available here: <https://www.gazprom.com/projects/power-of-siberia/>.

¹²⁷ The project has suffered several setbacks, but a major step forward has been to opt for a pipeline route via Mongolia instead of, as previously discussed (and which was the Russian preference), to Xinjiang via the Altai Mountains. The new proposed route will make the project less capital-intensive, as the pipeline will use existing operational fields in western Siberia and Yamal. The project seems to be moving forward with, for instance, Gazprom's initiating a feasibility study in Mongolia for the pipeline in 2020. See Reuters, "Gazprom starts work on Power of Siberia-2 pipeline to China", *Reuters*, May 18, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-china-gazprom-idUSR4N2CB012>.

¹²⁸ Erica Downs, "Q&A | China-Russia Energy Relations: Will New Oil and Natural Gas Deals Help Russia Weather Economic Sanctions?", Columbia SIPA, Center on Global Energy Policy, March 16, 2022, <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/research/qa/qa-china-russia-energy-relations-will-new-oil-and-natural-gas-deals-help-russia-weather-economic>.

¹²⁹ CNPC has 20 per cent and the China Silk Road Fund 9.9 per cent. The project is a joint venture run by Russia's Novatek, with 50.1 per cent, and French Total, with the remaining 20 per cent.

¹³⁰ Oscar Almén and Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, *China's economic influence in the Arctic region. The Nordic and Russian cases*.

increased, not least due to effects of the on-going US-China trade war (initiated during the Trump administration), with China imposing sanctions on American agricultural products in retaliation for US-imposed tariffs on steel and aluminium.¹³¹ China is looking for Russia to fill some of the fallout and Russian agricultural exports reached a record high of USD 5.55 billion in 2020, up 13.7 per cent from 2019.¹³²

Financial cooperation is developing with the expansion of trade and investment exchange conducted by using local national currencies, especially in Chinese Renminbi (RMB). The Russian Central Bank has increased the portion of the RMB in its foreign currency reserves from 0.1 percent, in 2015, to 13.2 percent, in 2020.¹³³ In 2014, China and Russia signed a three-year currency swap agreement worth RMB 150 billion (approximate USD 24.5 billion), which was renewed in 2017.¹³⁴ Bilateral investment cooperation is being promoted, especially to boost greater economic integration in the border regions between the Russian Far East and China's northeast. China's northern provinces often lag behind the more prosperous and developed southeastern coastal provinces, so improving economic development and trade opportunities with Russia also serves national development needs for China. For instance, in 2009, China and Russia agreed on an ambitious programme for closer regional economic integration, the so-called "Northeast China Region and Far East and Siberia Russia Region 2009–2018 Cooperation Plan Outline". The plan listed 205 projects and items slated for joint cooperation, including border infrastructure, transport, financial investments, service and environmental cooperation.¹³⁵ Moreover, China is the largest trading partner and foreign investor in the Russian Far East. In 2019, China accounted for 80 per cent of total Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the region.¹³⁶

Finally, there are growing attempts at reaching higher levels of cooperation and sophistication in emerging technologies, innovation and science, with more government-level interaction, joint investment and funding schemes, and greater interaction between private enterprise and corporates, as well as the scientific and

¹³¹ Elizabeth Wishnick, "Sino-Russian Consolidation at a Time of Geopolitical Rivalry", *China Leadership Monitor*, 2020, <https://www.prleader.org/elizabeth-wishnick>

¹³² TASS, "China, Russia set new record for agricultural trade in 2020", *TASS*, January 28, 2021, <https://tass.com/economy/1250071>.

¹³³ Alexander Gabuev and Temur Umarov, "Will the Pandemic Increase Russia's Economic Dependence on China?" Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, July 8, 2020, <https://carnegie-moscow.org/2020/07/08/will-pandemic-increase-russia-s-economic-dependence-on-china-pub-81893>.

¹³⁴ Mrugank Bhusari and Maia Nikoladze, "Russia and China: Partners in Dedollarization", *Blog*, Washington D.C.: The Atlantic Council, February 18, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/econographics/russia-and-china-partners-in-dedollarization/>.

¹³⁵ China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Zhongguo Waijiao 2010* [China's Diplomacy 2010], p. 169.

¹³⁶ Sergey Luzyanin and Zhao Huasheng, *China-Russia Dialogue: The 2020 Model*, p. 61.

research community.¹³⁷ For instance, China’s Huawei has been invited to help develop Russia’s 5G infrastructure and AI-ecosystem development.¹³⁸ There have already been experimental trials in Moscow to test Huawei’s 5G equipment. Should Huawei become a successful stakeholder in Russia’s 5G infrastructure, this could have major implications for the country’s technological developments and security. At the same time, Russian authorities will surely remain cautious and try to ensure that Russia does not become overly dependent on and vulnerable to Chinese technology in such critical and sensitive infrastructure as telecommunications.¹³⁹

The sanctions regime placed on Russia following Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has created some uncertainties for Chinese commercial engagement with Russia. While the Chinese government calls for retaining normal trade exchanges, Chinese companies are maintaining a wait-and-see approach, particularly concerning future projects and investments.¹⁴⁰ That said, economic and trade cooperation remains a main component in China’s economic engagement with Russia. Not only is there a certain complementarity between the two economies (notably in the resource sectors) but this more broadly serves to further strengthen the overall relationship, as such, as this also helps foster improved political ties.

2.6 Coordination on global affairs and governance

The last main motivation for China in its engagement with Russia concerns coordination on global affairs and governance. China shares similar views with Russia regarding the Western-led international order. China sees in Russia a suitable partner in reshaping global governance to reflect an international order that more directly reflects Beijing and Moscow’s preferences.

Generally speaking, China, together with Russia, has worked for years to promote a multipolar order, or what is often referred to as the “democratisation of international relations”.¹⁴¹ In essence, this refers to reducing the influence of Western

¹³⁷ Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, “China’s technology cooperation with Russia: geopolitics, economics and regime security”.

¹³⁸ Dimitri Simes, “Huawei plays a star role in the new China-Russia AI partnership”, *Nikkei Asia*, February 4, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/Huawei-plays-star-role-in-new-China-Russia-AI-partnership>.

¹³⁹ Alexander Gabuev, “Huawei’s Courtship of Moscow Leaves West in the Cold”, *The Financial Times*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/f36a558f-4e4d-4c00-8252-d8c4be45bde4>.

¹⁴⁰ Alicia García-Herrero, “China’s Contorted Response to Russia Sanctions”, *China Brief*, Volume: 22 Issue: 7, 2022, https://jamestown.org/program/early-warning-brief-chinas-contorted-response-to-russia-sanctions/?mc_cid=a9ebda5d5d&mc_eid=4cc20f2e15.

¹⁴¹ Feng Zhongping and Huang Jing, “China’s strategic partnership diplomacy: engaging with a changing world”, *ESPO working paper* no. 8, June, 2014, Madrid: Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior, (FRIDE), pp. 4–19.

states and in particular the US, for instance in international and regional institutions and on global governance, and increasing the influence of other states, in effect major powers such as China and Russia.

Of particular importance for Beijing and Moscow is their opposition to liberal Western norms and principles, including what is perceived as a Western interventionist human rights agenda and its promotion of democracy.¹⁴² Instead, as already noted above, both nations claim that they themselves are defenders of the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference, and view external (notably perceived US) meddling into domestic affairs as a core national security threat. China and Russia see the UN structure and especially the UNSC as the most important international body, and uphold a position where international law and the principles of state sovereignty, non-interference and territorial integrity are viewed, at least rhetorically, as foundational for guiding state-to-state relations. Their common vision is often expressed in numerous joint declarations, statements and agreements adopted at summits and other high-level meetings. In 1997, for example, China and Russia signed a joint statement on a multipolar world and have on several occasions since then formulated further statements that stipulate their common understanding and vision of global affairs.¹⁴³

This commonality of basic preferences is manifested most directly within the United Nations framework and especially in the UNSC, with regard to international crisis management and global security issues. Permanent membership in the UNSC ascribes both states influence in shaping the global security agenda and aligning it with their normative preferences. In concrete terms, Beijing and Moscow are increasingly aligned in their common voting behaviour on issues regarding interventions and interference in the domestic affairs other nations. While in the past China often abstained on UNSC resolutions, it now much more openly takes a similar stand to Russia's. For instance, China and Russia have vetoed six UNSC resolutions condemning Syria (as of 2019). UNSC voting behaviour is clearly a manifestation of China and Russia's disapproval of the intervention of outside powers in other states.¹⁴⁴ On the North Korea denuclearisation issue, China and Russia manifest similar standpoints and policies, albeit with somewhat different motivations. China sees itself as a powerbroker on the issue and is mainly concerned that North Korea remains a buffer zone against the

¹⁴² Marcin Kaczmarek, "Convergence or divergence? Visions of world order and the Russian-Chinese relationship", *European Politics and Society*, Vol 20, No. 2, 2019, p. 208.

¹⁴³ For instance, three such documents were adopted in 2008, 2011 and 2017. In addition, more specific issue-related documents have been declared, such as, in 2016, on international law and on strategic stability.

¹⁴⁴ Deborah Welch Larson, "An equal partnership of unequals: China's and Russia's new status relationship".

US-South Korea security alliance. For Russia, the issue constitutes a chance to demonstrate its great-power credentials in East Asia.¹⁴⁵

Similar principles guide Beijing and Moscow in their alignment on broader issues pertaining to global governance. For instance, both states share similar views on cyberspace and promote “internet sovereignty”, a notion that nation-states should have exclusive control over cyberspace content and the infrastructure architecture of national information technology.¹⁴⁶ Similar positions can be seen, for instance, on international norms and regulations regarding outer space.¹⁴⁷

Beyond the UN system, China and Russia also cooperate in regional venues and other international groupings that deal more explicitly with other issues than “traditional” hard security, such as global trade and investment, health and environmental issues. Included in these venues are the G20, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building in Asia (CICA), and the Asia-Europe Forum (ASEM). There are also more “narrow” venues, such as the SCO, BRICS and the China-Russia-India trilateral meetings, which serve similar purposes. For instance, BRICS is used to promote deeper economic and financial cooperation (for example by creating the BRICS New Development Bank) among member states, as an alternative to more Western-led institutions, but that from a Chinese perspective are also a means to strengthening collaboration with Russia on global governance issues.¹⁴⁸ The BRICS group has had mixed concrete results since its formal inception in 2009. Amid current tensions in the relations between the West, China and Russia, however, Beijing and Moscow see new urgency in further developing and strengthening the block as a counterweight to Western-led economic institutions, including such measures as expanding the acceptance of formal applications from Argentina and Iran to become full members.¹⁴⁹

In sum, China and Russia have certain common interests on global affairs and on global governance. Russia constitutes a helpful partner in China’s ambition to reshape the current Western-led global order to better reflect Beijing’s preferences.

¹⁴⁵ Elizabeth Wishnick, “The Impact of the Sino-Russian Partnership on the North Korean Nuclear Crisis”, *NBR Special Report #78*, Washington D.C.: The National Bureau of Asian Research, March, 2019.

¹⁴⁶ Dennis Broeders, Liisi Adamson, and Rogier Creemers, “Coalition of the unwilling? Chinese and Russian perspectives on cyberspace”, *Policy Brief*, Hague: The Hague Program for Cyber Norms, November 2019.

¹⁴⁷ Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, “China’s technology cooperation with Russia: Geopolitics, economic and regime security”.

¹⁴⁸ Guan Leiling, “Quangqiu jingji zhili tixi tiaozheng tiaozhengzhong de Zhong’E guanxi” [Sino-Russian Cooperation and the Adjustment of Global Economic Governance] in Liu Yuanchun (ed.) *Eluosi jingji yu zhengzhi fazhan yanjiu baogao 2016* [Research Report on Russia’s economic and political development 2016], Beijing: zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2017.

¹⁴⁹ Nian Peng, “Great power conflict fuels BRICS expansion push”, *The Diplomat*, July 13, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/great-power-conflict-fuels-brics-expansion-push/>.

3 Challenges

This chapter presents and investigate the challenges and potential sources of friction that could impede or even adversely affect the bilateral relationship. Four key challenges are listed and detailed: history and mutual mistrust, competing regional interests, different views regarding the coming global order and limitations of economic exchange.

3.1 History and mutual mistrust

Historical legacies and mutual suspicions have always influenced the bilateral relationship and continue to do so until the present. According to Fu Ying, Sino-Russian historical interactions “were often riven by rivalry and mistrust”.¹⁵⁰ Russia played a role as one of the foreign aggressors in what the Chinese call the “century of humiliation” and, as noted above, the Soviet Union became China’s most pressing external security threat during the latter part of the Cold War. The impact of the ideological competition and especially the perception of the Chinese that the Soviet leadership treated them unequally has left a long-lasting impact on the Chinese leadership.¹⁵¹ Moreover, contacts on the societal level have long been relatively underdeveloped, with cultural differences between the two sides. The mix of factors such as these is often heralded by the Chinese Russia-expert community as one of the most critical underlying sources constraining the realisation of a more genuine sense of communality between China and Russia.¹⁵² This also impacts how far and deeply their bilateral cooperation can extend.

A particularly important factor exacerbating these challenges is the changing bilateral balance of power between China and Russia. On the Russian side, segments of the Russian elite and the broader population express various concern over the long-term consequences of China’s rise for Russia.¹⁵³ China was long viewed as a backward country, often trailing behind other Asian nations such as Japan and South Korea in levels of development. Coming to terms with China’s rapid transformation into an emerging global great power has therefore been difficult for Russians to fully comprehend. It has been especially difficult for the Russian elite to find itself in a “junior position” to China, a stark contrast to how

¹⁵⁰ Fu Ying, “How China Sees Russia: Beijing and Moscow Are Close, but Not Allies”

¹⁵¹ Sergey Radchenko, “The Sino–Russian relationship in the mirror of the Cold War”, *China International Strategy Review*, volume 1, 2019, pp. 269–282.

¹⁵² See for instance Guan Guihai, “30 nian hedong, 30 nian hexi – Zhong’E zhijian de jiaose renting chabie”, [The coming and going of things – The different identities of China and Russia], *Nanfengchuan* [Southern Window Magazine], July Issue, 2007, pp. 38–39.

¹⁵³ Anastasia Solomentseva, “The ‘Rise’ of China in the Eyes of Russia: A Source of Threats or New Opportunities?”, *Connections*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Winter 2014, pp. 3–40.

the situation was during the Cold War.¹⁵⁴ Moreover, the issue of being in a junior position goes beyond the bilateral relationship; for Russia, as it finds itself increasingly dependent on China, this issue also implies a threat to its strategic position in global affairs.¹⁵⁵

As the relative balance of power between China and Russia continues to tilt in China's favour, it can be expected that the level of mutual mistrust and suspicion, especially on the Russian side, will continue to grow. China's growing conventional military power has long been a source of concerns in Russian military circles, not least how this might affect the Russian Far East.¹⁵⁶ China is the only land power that can threaten Russia with a land invasion from the east. Russian strategic and military planners have therefore long considered one of the main goals for its military to prepare for a stronger China.¹⁵⁷ For instance, although the border dispute is settled, lingering mistrust remains in Russia that over time, when China becomes even stronger, it will dishonour its commitments (to respect the border treaties) and reclaim what from a Chinese historical perspective is perceived as territory belonging to China. Concern over Chinese immigration into the Russian Far East remains a source of tension, as does the notion that growing Chinese investments are gaining ever greater access to not only the region's rich natural resources but also its agricultural land.¹⁵⁸ This does to a certain degree inhibit closer regional economic, trade and investment cooperation, when there are worries that greater Chinese involvement will infringe on Russian economic, social and, in the end, political control of the Russian Far East.

In addition, Chinese assessments commonly portray Russia as being, in essence, culturally more part of the West than the East, despite Moscow's so-called turn to Asia.¹⁵⁹ Finally, notwithstanding the closer military cooperation detailed above, Sino-Russian defence cooperation remains plagued by highly nationalistic and protectionist military-industrial complexes. Intellectual property theft by China remains an issue, albeit not as severe as in the past.¹⁶⁰ Espionage by both sides, although not often reported publicly, does occur, as in the high-profile case of a

¹⁵⁴Alexander Gabuev, "Russia and China: Little Brother or Big Sister?", *Commentary*, Carnegie Moscow Center, May 7, 2016, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/64006>.

¹⁵⁵Bobo Lo, *The Wary Embrace*.

¹⁵⁶That said, Russia of course still relies on its much larger nuclear weapons arsenal to deter any Chinese potential military attack.

¹⁵⁷Katarzyna Zysk, "Managing Military Change in Russia", in Jo Inge Bekkevold, Ian Bowers and Michael Raska (eds.), *Security, Strategy and Military Change in the 21st Century*, New York: Routledge, 2015, p. 161.

¹⁵⁸Paul Stronski and Nicole Eng, *Cooperation and Competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic*, Washington D.C: Brookings Institute, 2018.

¹⁵⁹Li Yonghui, "2019 nian eluosi xiang dongkan zhengze shishi pingshu" [Review on Russia's "looking East" Policy in 2019], in Sun Zhuangzhi (ed.), *Eluosi fazhan baogao 2020* [Yellow Yearbook on Russia, 2020], Beijing: Shehui kexue wensan chubanshe, 2020, 2020, p. 223.

¹⁶⁰Alexander Gabuev, "Unwanted but Inevitable: Russia's Deepening Partnership with China post-Ukraine".

leading Russian Arctic scientist accused of spying for China recently revealed.¹⁶¹ Such conditions suggest that both sides continue to be challenged by issues of mutual trust.

At the same time, and somewhat counterintuitive, China remains cautious in its approach to Russia, as the latter remains a global nuclear power and has a proven willingness to use military force and non-kinetic means to achieve its political goals. This means that Russia will retain a certain degree of strategic autonomy, putting certain limits on how far China can push it into concessions. Related to this, according to a former Chinese military attaché to Russia, Wang Haiyun, is that Russia has a strong strategic culture of expansionism, which calls for strategic cautiousness.¹⁶² For all the talk of Russia's not being on the same level as the Soviet Union, in the eyes of many Chinese Russia experts it remains a great power that can shape and influence global politics, evidenced by its push-back against the US and NATO in Europe and its advancement of its strategic positions in the Middle East.¹⁶³

That said, Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine could lead to a Chinese reassessment of Russia's military power and ability to conduct war, as the Russian underperformance in Ukraine has likely surprised even Chinese military observers.¹⁶⁴ More broadly, Chinese Russia scholars, such as Feng Yujun at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), are questioning Russia's long-term national development trajectory, including its ability to pursue economic modernisation and technological innovation, and resolve political governance challenges (such as corruption) and negative demographical and human capital trends. These weaknesses thus leads to real possibilities of long-term stagnation for Russia.¹⁶⁵

3.2 Competing regional interests

Somewhat paradoxically, regional interaction between China and Russia constitutes both a success and critical source of potential long-term disturbance to the bilateral relationship. There are several "regional theatres" that are indicative

¹⁶¹ Mary Ilyshina, "Russia accuses leading Arctic researcher of spying for China", *CNN*, June 17, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/17/europe/russia-china-spying-allegation-intl/index.html>.

¹⁶² Wang Haiyun, "Xin shiqi Eluosi waijiao zhanlv zuoxiang ji Zhong'E guanxi shenhua" [Russia's diplomatic strategic trend and Sino-Russian relations deepening in the new era], *Eluosi xuebao*, [Journal of Russian Studies], No. 10, Vol. 2, 2012, pp. 5–10.

¹⁶³ Liu Fenghua, "2019 nian Eluosi waijiao zongti xingshi" [The overall situation of Russia's foreign policy in 2019], in Sun Zhuangzhi (ed.) *Eluosi fazhan baogao 2020* [Yellow Yearbook of Russia, 2020], Beijing: Shehui kexue wenshan chubanshe, 2020.

¹⁶⁴ David Finkelstein, "Beijing's Ukrainian battle lab", *War on the Rocks*, May 2, 2022, <https://war-ontherocks.com/2022/05/beijings-ukrainian-battle-lab/>.

¹⁶⁵ Feng Yujun. "Eluosi de jingji de zhengzhi shehui genyuan ji guojia fazhan qianjing" [Political and Social Roots of Russian Economy and Prospects for National Development], *Ouya jingji* [Eurasia Economy] Vol 1, 2022, 1–11.

of such dynamics, with Central Asia and the Arctic constituting perhaps the two key regions where interests could collide most critically. China-Russia interaction, however, also plays out in the larger Indo-Pacific region, the Middle East, Africa and in Europe. What broadly unites all these regions is the growing influence of China and how this can pose challenges for Russia in remaining an independent actor that is able to influence developments vis-à-vis China in a manner that is favourable to its own interests.

Although China and Russia have managed by and large to establish a functional and cooperative relationship in Central Asia, it stands out as one of the most challenging regions for further interaction in Sino-Russian relations. A persistent feeling remains among Chinese analysts that Russia very carefully guards its interests in Central Asia and does not want to allow China to challenge it as the premier power in the region.¹⁶⁶ In the post-Cold War period, their division of labour, where Russia manages security and China handles economic affairs in the region, has on balance smoothed potential tensions in the relationship.¹⁶⁷ At the same time, China's greater economic presence, particularly through the BRI, could further diminish Russia's economic role. In addition, as noted above, a greater Chinese interest in security and indeed activism could change the current division of labour. This includes a number of things. For example, China is making inroads as a competitor to Russia in arms exports to Central Asia.¹⁶⁸ It is also engaging with Central Asian states in bilateral regional security initiatives and mechanisms, not only such measures as training military personnel, but also increasing bilateral military exercises and other training activities, albeit mostly focused on local border security and antiterrorism drills. China has also created multilateral regional initiatives, such as the China-Central Asia Foreign Ministers Mechanism (C+C5), which allows for direct communication with the Central Asian states, but without Russian participation.

Nonetheless, even if China occupies an even stronger economic foothold and gains a larger security presence, the need for regional collaboration on key challenges, many of them of common concern, would still lead Beijing and Moscow, on the whole, to emphasise cooperation over conflict. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan seems to have created new incentives for Beijing and Moscow to ramp up their regional collaboration, although questions remain as to how

¹⁶⁶ Andrew Radin et al., *China-Russia Cooperation. Determining factors, future trajectories, implications for the US*, p. 261.

¹⁶⁷ Nadège Rolland, "A China-Russia Condominium over Eurasia", *Survival*, Volume 61, Issue 1, 2019, pp. 7–22.

¹⁶⁸ Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, "In Russia's Shadow: China's Rising Security Presence in Central Asia", *Kenan Cable*, No. 52, 2020, Washington D.C: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

substantial cooperation actually can become.¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, Central Asian states have been skillful at playing the region's great powers, Russia, China and the US, against each other, which has bolstered these states' ability in strategic manoeuvring and setting limits on the involvement of external powers. This also affects how Beijing and Moscow approach the region, with implications for Sino-Russian dynamics in Central Asia.¹⁷⁰

Interaction in the Arctic constitutes a new evolving dimension in the bilateral relationship. The Arctic constitutes a core national interest for Russia. Moscow has critical security, economic and social interests there and sees itself, culturally and historically, as an Arctic great power.¹⁷¹ China, driven primarily by growing commercial opportunities in the Arctic, has incrementally increased its interest and presence. China defines itself as a "near-Arctic state", whereby it claims its right to greater Arctic economic involvement, including a larger voice in Arctic governance.¹⁷² While Russia generally welcomes China in the Arctic, as evident in the Yamal LNG project mentioned earlier, hesitation and concern are evident in Russian circles. Russia was long reluctant to accept China as an observer in the Arctic Council (AC). Segments of the Russian elite, notably in the security establishment, voice concern over China's long-term intentions. Russia welcomes Chinese capital and investments, but is reluctant to open up forms of Chinese ownership that grant it strategic influence in the Arctic.¹⁷³ While China and Russia have reached a broad consensus on the benefits of cooperation, issues of control could imply greater challenges going forward.¹⁷⁴ The sanctions regime placed on Russia after Moscow's illegal annexation of Crimea, in 2014, forced Moscow to move closer to China, but Russia would prefer a more balanced approach, rekindling a working partnership with not only Western countries and companies, but also with Asian states, such as Japan and South Korea. Similarly, China does not wish to be tied only to Russia for its entry into the Arctic but hopes to work with all Arctic states and stakeholders.¹⁷⁵ The ongoing war in Ukraine, however, is

¹⁶⁹ Elizabeth Wishnick, "Prospects for Sino-Russian cooperation in Afghanistan", *War on the Rocks*, November 8, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/prospects-for-sino-russian-coordination-in-afghanistan/>.

¹⁷⁰ Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, Oxford University Press, 2012.

¹⁷¹ Pär Gustafson, "Russia's ambitions in the Arctic towards 2035". *FOI Memo 7624*, Stockholm: Swedish Research Defence Agency, 2021.

¹⁷² China State Council, "Full text: China's Arctic Policy", January 2, 2018, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm.

¹⁷³ Christopher Weidacher Hsiung and Tom Røseth, "The Arctic dimension in Sino-Russian relations", in Jo Inge Bekkevold and Bobo Lo (eds.) *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019, pp. 167–187.

¹⁷⁴ Rebecca Pincus, "Three-Way Power Dynamics in the Arctic", *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Spring 2020, pp. 40–63.

¹⁷⁵ Yang Jian, "China's Economic Initiatives in the Arctic", *Global Asia*, Vol.15 No.4, December 2020. https://www.globalasia.org/v15no4/cover/chinas-economic-initiatives-in-the-arctic_yang-jian.

having a severe spillover effect on the Arctic region, as all other Arctic states have declined to engage with Russia in the Arctic Council. Several major Western oil companies have stopped ongoing and upcoming projects in the Russian Arctic. Should these conditions prevail, and if it wishes to realise its stated ambitions to develop the Arctic region, Russia could find itself with little choice than to invite greater Chinese participation.¹⁷⁶

Divergent interests in other regions are also noticeable. In the Indo-Pacific region, China and Russia have developed partly different relationships with a number of countries. From a China-Russia perspective, most notable is that Russia has tried to build close relations with several states whose relations with China are strained, or even contested. Russia has maintained a close strategic relationship with India that dates back to Cold War times. China-India relations, on the other hand, are increasingly tense. An unresolved border dispute remains a key issue, as well as broader questions of regional influence and dominance in the Indo-Pacific maritime theatre.¹⁷⁷ Maintaining close relations with New Delhi has long served Moscow's intention to "balance" China's growing footprint. Russia, for instance, has developed a high-level strategic and defense relationship with India and provided New Delhi with advanced weapons systems that may be intended to deter China. This has not always been to China's liking.¹⁷⁸ Russia has also invited India to participate in its energy resource development, including in the Arctic. At the same time, the actual content of their bilateral relationship remains rather "thin". Bilateral trade remains undeveloped and the once-heralded arms-trade relationship is losing momentum. More problematic, however, is that India is increasingly leaning towards the US and other Western nations in its attempt to counterbalance China, by far India's most pressing external challenge.¹⁷⁹ India is part of the Quad; has purchased US weapons systems; and developed a closer security partnership with the US. The Indian "lean to the West" will likely impact how far Russia is willing to build ties with India and likely strain India-Russia relations.¹⁸⁰

Russia has also aimed to build close ties with Japan, another Chinese adversary in Asia. In the eyes of Russia, economically developed and technologically sophisticated Japan constitutes a suitable partner in its quest to for instance modernise its Far East and develop the Arctic. As with India, cultivating closer ties with

¹⁷⁶ Oscar Almén and Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, *China's economic influence in the Arctic region. The Nordic and Russian cases*.

¹⁷⁷ Vijay Gokhale, *The Long Game: How The Chinese Negotiate With India*, Penguin Random House India, 2021.

¹⁷⁸ Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, "A tenuous trilateral? Russia-India-China relations in a changing world order", *UI Brief* No. 1, Stockholm: Swedish Institute of International Affairs, March 2019.

¹⁷⁹ Tanvi Madan, "India is not sitting on the geopolitical fence", *War on the Rocks*, October 27, 2021. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/india-is-not-sitting-on-the-geopolitical-fence/>.

¹⁸⁰ Ian Hill, "Why is Russia worried about the Quad?", *The Strategist — The Australian Strategic Policy Institute Blog*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/why-is-russia-worried-about-the-quad/>.

Tokyo also serves Russian interests in reducing its dependence on China.¹⁸¹ However, unless the two sides can find a way to resolve the Kuril Islands/Northern Territories territorial dispute and manage the growing US-Japan security alliance, genuine rapprochement between Japan and Russia will be unlikely.¹⁸² As Japan condemned Russia for its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and supported the sanctions regime, the prospects for such a rapprochement seem more unlikely than ever. Finally, regarding Vietnam, Russia has developed a close bilateral relationship, as with India, stretching back to the Cold War. Moscow has provided Hanoi with weapons systems, notably submarines, which can be used to contest China in the South China Sea, where China and Vietnam have overlapping territorial claims. In addition, Russian oil companies are engaging in ongoing oil exploration projects in the disputed waters, drawing the attention of Beijing.¹⁸³

China-Russia relations also play out in the Middle East and in Africa. In the Middle East, Russia holds certain leverage and acts much as an external great power. China has increased its economic and financial presence over the years and has broadly similar views to Russia's on the issues and developments in the region. Generally, China has been comfortable with letting Russia take the lead on many of the region's security issues, such as Syria. That said, with expanding economic ties and trade connections, Beijing could also step up its security presence to secure its investments and assets. This could also challenge Russia's position in the Middle East, as it has done in Central Asia.¹⁸⁴ In Africa, China and Russia seem to have largely converging interests, if not direct cooperation. China has a much larger economic presence, whereas Russia relies on other tools, such as arms sales, to gain influence. Nonetheless, there are areas of potential friction, for instance arms sales competition and wider issues over which of the two will best serve the interest of African nations and wield the greatest strategic presence and influence on the continent.¹⁸⁵

Finally, there is Europe. China and Russia both see the EU as plagued by internal crisis and an inability to act as an independent global actor and engage in parallel

¹⁸¹ Bjørn Elias Mikalsen Grønning, "The Japan–China–Russia Triangle and Security in Northeast Asia", in Jo Inge Bekkevold and Bobo Lo (eds.), *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019, pp 243–265.

¹⁸² In addition, Japan and Russia have yet to conclude a formal peace treaty following the end of the World War II hostilities, further complicating the very basis of a genuine rapprochement.

¹⁸³ Nikola Mikovic, "Russia and Vietnam: An alliance of convenience", *The Interpreter*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/russia-and-vietnam-alliance-convenience>.

¹⁸⁴ Jo Inge Bekkevold, "China, Russia and the Great Power Contest in the Middle East", in Jo Inge Bekkevold and Bobo Lo (eds.), *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019, pp 141–166.

¹⁸⁵ Vita Spivac, "Russia and China in Africa: Allies or Rivals?", *Commentary*, Carnegie Moscow Center, October 25, 2019, <https://carnegie-moscow.org/commentary/80181>.

efforts to weaken the transatlantic link.¹⁸⁶ For Russia, Europe (notably central and eastern Europe) constitutes a core interest, related foremost to security issues. China's interests, on the other hand, are predominantly connected to trade and economics. It is therefore in the interest of China that EU-Russia relations remain largely stable, so as not to impact negatively on China's important trade and investment links with Europe, in particular as Europe serves as a core part of its larger BRI project.

It should also be noted that China has developed a certain interest in attracting Central and East European countries closer to itself, mainly through offering loans and financial support for infrastructure and transportation projects, in part as ways to keep the EU divided in reaching a consensus on key issues related to China.¹⁸⁷ The so-called 17+1 multilateral mechanism between China and central and eastern European states is another venue in which China attempts to foster better ties with this part of Europe, although the levels of investment have so far fallen short of expectations.¹⁸⁸ Moreover, in May 2021, Lithuania dropped out of the format, citing the limited economic benefits entailed, but also likely due to growing political strains between Beijing and Vilnius. Moscow seems to have remained largely silent on such developments. Should Beijing court Europe in a way that collides with Moscow's interests and policy in the region, especially in Central Europe or the Baltic and Black Seas, this could lead to friction.

That said, with Russia's war against Ukraine, China's economic engagements with Europe are being put to the test. China appears to be willing to take certain reputational and even economic costs for its tacit support of Russia. The EU has also proven more united and resolute in its response to Russia than Chinese leaders expected. Whether this will more fundamentally affect China-Russia relations in Europe remains to be seen. But with regard to China-Europe relations, a more strained relationship is likely. Beijing has hoped to separate the war in Ukraine from the issue of maintaining a workable economic and trade relationship with Europe. This sits poorly, however, with how European leaders see China-EU relations developing, as evident by the latest EU-China summit, in May 2022, where the EU wanted to discuss the Ukraine war but Chinese leaders sought to avoid the topic as much as possible.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ Michał Bogusz, Jakub Jakóbcowski and Witold Rodkiewicz, *The Beijing-Moscow axis. The foundations of an asymmetric alliance*, OSW Report, Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, November 2020, pp. 88-89.

¹⁸⁷ Erik Brattberg, Philippe Le Corre, Paul Stronski, Thomas de Waal, *China's Influence in Southeastern, Central, and Eastern Europe: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries*, Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2021.

¹⁸⁸ Marcin Kaczmarski, "The Sino-Russian Relationship and the West", *Survival*, Volume 62, Issue 6, 2020, pp. 199-212.

¹⁸⁹ China File, "Europe's China Policy Has Taken a Sharp Turn. Where Will It Go Next?", *China File Conversation*, April 14, 2022. <https://www.chinafile.com/conversation/europes-china-policy-has-taken-sharp-turn-where-will-it-go-next>.

3.3 Different views on the coming global order

While China and Russia share similar views on global affairs, as noted above, different approaches and somewhat different stakes in the international system could potentially lead to friction in a more long-term perspective. Broadly speaking, Russia assumes a more combative approach, describing itself as a global great power while emphasising its military prowess and readiness to resist the US. China, on the other hand, emphasises the economic dimension and promotes itself as a staunch believer in and indeed engine of continued economic globalisation, including cultivating links between itself and the US and the West. Simply put, for its great power interests, Russia considers the current international order as being less beneficial than China does.¹⁹⁰

Concretely, China has a greater stake in a well-ordered and functioning system, albeit one that should reflect China's interests and vision to a greater extent than is currently the case. As the world's second biggest economy, China has greatly benefitted from integration into the global economic system, which to a significant degree has helped fuel its economic modernisation since reform and the opening era began in the late 1970s. This also constrains Beijing from acting in an overly provocative manner. In other words, while China certainly wants to reform and reshape the global economic system, it nonetheless aspires to keep the system running and functional.¹⁹¹

While such divergent positions have not yet led to frictions in the bilateral relationship, they nonetheless amount to certain limitations in order to coordinate policies, and perhaps more instructively, promote a jointly acceptable "post-American" world order.¹⁹² Broadly speaking, Chinese assessments offer a mixed view of Russia as a global actor, and therefore its role for China. Some Chinese analysts are sceptical and echo the common Western perception of Russia as more of a regional power than one of global consequence.¹⁹³ Chinese accounts have for some time already assessed that Russia lags behind China regarding global governance participation. For instance, some note that whether on global economic, financial, trade, climate and even to some extent on security matters, Russia lags behind China.¹⁹⁴ Others are more uncertain and still see a strong and potent power,

¹⁹⁰ Marcin Kaczmarek, "Convergence or divergence? Visions of world order and the Russian-Chinese relationship", p. 215.

¹⁹¹ Deborah Welch Larson, "An equal partnership of unequals: China's and Russia's new status relationship".

¹⁹² Bobo Lo, "The Sino-Russian partnership and global order", *China International Strategy Review*, 2, 2020, p. 315.

¹⁹³ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global. The Partial Superpower*, p. 83.

¹⁹⁴ Feng Yujun, "Eluosi zhanlve zouxiang yu Zhong'E guanxi", [Russia's strategic direction and Sino-Russian relations], *Da jiang tang*, No. 8, 2016, p. 65.

especially in foreign affairs and manifested through its military capabilities and willingness to use force to achieve geopolitical goals.¹⁹⁵

At the same time, Chinese assessments indicate that Russia's behaviour on the international stage can have a potentially colliding, or at minimum a complicating impact on China's foreign security goals. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, in 2014, broke with China's long-held and core principle of non-interferences in the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, although a common assessment is that China has showed implicit support for Russia's actions.¹⁹⁶ The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in 2022, has to a larger extent tested China's position with regard to the central issues of stability and predictability of the international system. The Chinese leadership has so far seemed to accept greater global economic uncertainty and even potential damage to its own economy from standing by Russia in the war. Whether this indicates a more fundamental shift in the Chinese calculus regarding how the global order should be "reformed" remains to be seen.

Perhaps more consequential is that China is a long-term peer competitor of the US, while Russia's relative global importance could wane. As China's material power grows even stronger, it will likely try to configure the international order even further to reflect its own interest more directly. China has already assumed a greater role within leading international bodies, such as the UN, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Trade Organization (WTO), and is a leading player in the G20 constellation. Additionally, Beijing has constructed new regional and international institutions and mechanisms, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and, not least, the BRI, to enhance its global influence. As noted above, Russia has tried to offer its own alternatives, such as the EEU, but the question is whether Russia can truly compete with China's much more vast resources. As one Chinese scholar asserts, in the end, Russia will have to respond to and cope with a much more globalist and influential China. And China will have to deal with a Russia that does not always share its vision of a coming global order that is a much more China-centric world than currently is the case.¹⁹⁷

3.4 The limitations of economic exchange

A final challenge regards the economic dimension. While trade, investments and financial cooperation have improved markedly during the past decade, the Sino-Russian economic relationship is fraught with certain challenges and limitations.

¹⁹⁵ Andrew Radin et al., *China-Russia Cooperation. Determining factors, future trajectories, implications for the US*. See especially Appendix C.

¹⁹⁶ Gilbert Rozman, "Tracking Russia's 'Turn to the East' over a Decade", *The Asian Forum*, October 15, 2021, <https://theasianforum.org/tracking-russias-turn-to-the-east-over-a-decade/>.

¹⁹⁷ Tang Shiping, "China and the Future International Order(s)", *Ethics & International Affairs*, 32, No. 1, 2018, pp. 31–43.

First of all, Sino-Russian overall bilateral trade remains low compared with other major trading partners that both countries have. As noted above, Sino-Russian bilateral trade in 2021 stood at USD 146.88 billion. However, China's trade with the US was USD 559 billion in 2020.¹⁹⁸ Russia's trade with EU stood at USD 173 billion in 2020 and China's trade with EU accounted for USD 586 billion for the same year.¹⁹⁹ Additionally, bilateral investments remain low. Since reaching total Chinese investment of USD 4.5 billion, in 2014, investment has indicated a declining pattern.²⁰⁰ EU is a much larger foreign investor in Russia. During the period 2009–2017, EU owned between 55 to 75 per cent of the Russian FDI stock. In addition, China still prefers to invest in Western industrial countries with its higher level of sophistication.²⁰¹ And despite the fact that there are emerging signs of cooperation in technology and innovation, from China's perspective, Russia cannot replace the role of more advanced industrial nations as a key market, technology provider and investor.

Second, Chinese accounts have long pointed out the difficulties in engaging economically with the Russians.²⁰² The business and investment landscape in Russia is challenging and comes with high risks and uncertainties. Central-local politics and corruption problems constrain the investment appetite. Poorly developed infrastructure and logistical networks, for instance in the Russian Far East, where Chinese engagement holds great potential, also hamper China's drive for closer cooperation. Russian authorities have made efforts to attract more foreign investment in the Russian Far East, for instance by creating special economic zones.²⁰³ Chinese investment there has so far been rather limited, however, although China remains Russia's largest trading partner and foreign investor in the region, as noted above.

Third, a key underlying hurdle involves Russian concerns and hesitation with deeper economic integration with China, and in particular in strategic areas and industries. Russia, as is the case for many other countries, worries that Beijing can use its growing economic power and wealth as potential leverage to extract concessions. As Russia grows more dependent on China for its economic well-being, Moscow does not wish to find itself in a vulnerable position, where China

¹⁹⁸ United States Census Bureau, "Trade in Goods with China", available here: <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5700.html>.

¹⁹⁹ European Commission, *Country profiles*. For China-EU trade, see: <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/china/>; For EU-Russia trade see: <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/russia/>.

²⁰⁰ Oscar Almén and Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, *China's economic influence in the Arctic region. The Nordic and Russian cases*, pp. 65–66.

²⁰¹ Marta Domínguez-Jiménez and Niclas Frederic Poitiers, "An Analysis of EU FDI inflow into Russia", *Russian Journal of Economics* 6, 2020, pp. 144–161.

²⁰² Lu Nanquan, *Zhong 'E jingmao guanxi xianzhuang yu qianjing* [Current state and prospect of Sino-Russian trade relations], Beijing: Zhongguo shehuikexue chubanshe, 2011.

²⁰³ Gaye Christoffersen, "The Russian Far East and China's Northeast: A Decade in the Shadow of the Belt and Road Initiative".

could potentially coerce Russia. The economic relationship is already unbalanced, as China is Russia's largest trading partner, whereby the energy relationship in particular is turning Russia into a "raw material appendage" of China.²⁰⁴

Russian concerns have manifested themselves in a reluctance to invite Chinese partners into upstream energy projects and a resistance to Chinese ownership. Such concerns have impeded the progress and implementation of joint economic projects, and economic cooperation in general. Local and regional cross-border integration have been particularly impacted. In the Russian Far East, Moscow still puts security before economics, despite what the central government says about the pressing need to develop the region economically and socially. In practice, this means that foreign investment and commercial projects remain hampered under national security concerns that override economic needs. Ultimately, this leaves the region stuck in a state of unrealised potential and underdevelopment, often pointed out in Chinese accounts.²⁰⁵ For instance, the "Northeast China Region and Far East and Siberia Russia Region 2009–2018 Cooperation Plan Outline" mentioned above was fraught with severe implementation problems. At the end of the project, of the over 200 announced projects, less than 10 per cent were progressing.²⁰⁶ Similar Russian hesitation is evident in the Arctic, despite growing cooperation on energy issues.²⁰⁷

Fourth, ambitions to achieve greater integration and collaboration on the Eurasian landmass have also proved slow to realise. China has been proposing the establishment of a free-trade area in Central Asia for years, notably through the SCO, which Russia has resisted, however, likely due to political reasons. Similar hesitation is noticed more extensively concerning China's BRI. Officially, Russia expresses interest in cooperation on the initiative, mainly through coordination with its own project, the EEU as mentioned above. At the same time, Chinese analysts observe a degree of caution and considerable wariness on Russia's part as it realizes that it cannot compete with China's economic muscles. Moreover, Chinese analysts also remain sceptical over how well Russia can actually implement its EEU project and turn it into a well-functioning regional project.²⁰⁸

The Russian war against Ukraine could potentially change some of these conditions, particular as the sanctions and Western isolation of Russia cripples the

²⁰⁴ Michał Bogusz, Jakub Jakóbcowski and Witold Rodkiewicz, "The Beijing-Moscow axis. The foundations of an asymmetric alliance", pp. 52–58.

²⁰⁵ Li Yonghui, "Pujin 20 nian yatai zhanlve yu xinguan feiyan yiqing hou ouya diqu xiqu de gouzhan" [Putin's 20-Year Asia-Pacific Strategy and the Establishment of Eurasian Order after COVID-19], *Eluosi xuebao* [*Journal of Russian Studies*], Vol. 10, No. 58, 2021, pp. 11–12.

²⁰⁶ Jonathan Hillman, *China and Russia: Economic Unequals*, Report, Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies CSIS, July 2020, p. 4.

²⁰⁷ Elizabeth Wishnick, "Will Russia Put China's Arctic Ambitions on Ice?" *The Diplomat*, June 5, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/will-russia-put-chinas-arctic-ambitions-on-ice/>.

²⁰⁸ Wang Weiran and Wang Jingliang, "The Prospects of the Eurasian Economic Union", *Contemporary International Relations*, Vol. 25, No. 5, September/October 2015, p. 103.

Russian economy further. If that were the case, the extent to which Russia had already become economically and financially dependent on China would likely be further reinforced. This would be less by active choice and more of necessity because Russia would be left without any other options than tying itself to China even closer. The question is of course whether China will seek to take advantage of such an opportunity. China will want to maintain regular trade and economic exchanges with Russia, surely, but without damaging its more important economic and trade links, with Europe and the US. Chinese companies have trodden carefully so as not to be targeted by secondary sanctions from the US and EU. For instance, Chinese manufacturers reportedly do not provide parts and components to the Russian aircraft industry. Chinese banks and financial institutions are largely following the Western sanctions regime.²⁰⁹ A tactical scaling back of certain economic exchanges can be envisioned. For instance, it is reported that Huawei is suspending its operations in Russia, at least temporarily.²¹⁰ If Huawei (and other important Chinese commercial actors) scale down or even withdraw from their engagement in Russia this would be a severe blow to it. It has also been reported that China has not approved any new BRI projects with Russia since Russia invaded Ukraine. That said, China has largely maintained normal trade relations with Russia and had notably increased its oil and gas imports by 72 per cent in June 2022, compared to a year earlier; in the first five months of the same year, it had doubled exports of microchips and other electronic components.²¹¹

²⁰⁹ Alicia García-Herrero, “Early Warning Brief: China’s Contorted Response to Russia Sanctions”, *The Jamestown Foundation*, March 30, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/early-warning-brief-chinas-contorted-response-to-russia-sanctions/>.

²¹⁰ Iris Deng, “Huawei suspends some Russian operations, reports say, trading carefully amid sanctions risks as it weighs options”, *South China Morning Post*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/tech/big-tech/article/3173969/huawei-suspends-some-russian-operations-reports-say-trading>.

²¹¹ For a good summary and regular updates on China’s position on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, see U.S-China Economic and Security Review Commission, “China’s Position on Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine. Key Events and Statements from February 21, 2022, through July 27, 2022”, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-position-russias-invasion-ukraine>.

4 Future role exploration

This chapter explores the future developments that China's relationship with Russia may experience by sketching three different roles that Russia could assume in relation to China by 2030. The roles are Russia as a formal ally, as a competitor to China, and as a strategic supporter. The analysis examines how the motivations and challenges detailed in the previous chapters shape different trajectories leading up to the three role sketches. The scenarios also attempt to estimate the likelihood of the roles by discussing their costs and benefits for China. Their order of appearance is from least to most likely.

4.1 Formal ally

The first role envisions Russia as a formal ally of China.²¹² The theme of China and Russia forging a military alliance is arguably one of the most debated issues in the China-Russia literature, dating back to at least the mid-1990s, when in 1996 Beijing and Moscow formed their strategic partnership. Most assessments commonly reject the idea. However, the heightened perceptions of American hostility to both China and Russia noted above is having a major impact for improving China's ties with Russia, not least those pertaining to closer strategic and military cooperation, leading observers to ponder the plausibility of an alliance more seriously.²¹³

First, Chinese and Russian leaders and officials have upgraded their rhetoric. At the Valdai Club meeting, in October 2020, President Putin, when asked about a potential alliance with China, answered that, "It is possible to imagine anything... We have not set that goal for ourselves. But, in principle, we are not going to rule it out, either".²¹⁴ While Putin and other officials have also previously used similar language, it marked the first time that such an open and direct reference to a Sino-Russian alliance was made.

²¹² Alliance here refers to a rather straight-forward conceptualisation where two or more states engage in security cooperation to augment each other's (mainly military power) and commit to formal mutual support against external actor(s) in order to increase their own security. A common definition of the concept, however, remains contested, not least in relation to other forms cooperative security constellations such as coalitions, alignments, entente and so forth. For one study that problematized for instance the difference between alliance and alignment, see Thomas S. Wilkins, "'Alignment', not 'alliance' – the shifting paradigm of international security cooperation: toward a conceptual taxonomy of alignment", in *Review of International Studies*, 38, 2012, pp. 53–76. See also Glenn Snyder and his landmark study on alliances. Glenn Snyder, *Alliance Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.

²¹³ See for instance Alexander Korolev, "On the Verge of an alliance. Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation".

²¹⁴ Vladimir Putin, quoted in "Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club", *President of Russia*, October 22, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64261>.

The Chinese have traditionally been more cautious. However, certain statements can also be noted from the Chinese side. In April 2018, China's Defense Minister Wei Fenghe, when on a trip to Russia, described his trip as a signal to "let the Americans know about the close ties between the armed forces of China and Russia".²¹⁵ China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, when addressing a reception to mark the 20th anniversary of the signing of "The Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation", in June 2021, said that Russia is "not an ally but better than an ally".²¹⁶ At the recent meeting between Xi and Putin, in Beijing, 4 February 2022, the two sides issued a joint declaration proclaiming that the relationship has "no limits" and "no forbidden areas" of cooperation.²¹⁷

Chinese and Russian official strategic documents depict the other side as having a leading strategic importance. In China's 2019 Defense White Paper, it is stated that "the military relationship between China and Russia continues to develop at a high level" and enriching the comprehensive strategic partnership. Chinese and Russian militaries have since 2012 held 7 rounds of strategic consultations and aim to engage in ever expanded military cooperation at all levels.²¹⁸

Leading voices in the Chinese and Russian expert communities are explicitly discussing the prospects of alliance-like constellations. Vassily Kashin, a leading Russian military analyst, has described China-Russia military cooperation as a "tacit alliance".²¹⁹ Former close adviser to President Putin, Sergei Karaganov, has described the relationship as a "quasi alliance".²²⁰ In China, Professor Yan Xuetong, at Tsinghua University, and one of China's most prominent international relations scholars, has long advocated for an alliance-like formation with Russia.²²¹ More broadly, some observe that China is revising its long-cherished

²¹⁵ Wei Fenghe quoted in Thomas Grove, "Russian Troops Gear Up for Massive War Games With Chinese Military", *The Washington Post*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-troops-gear-up-for-massive-war-games-with-chinese-military-1535466282>.

²¹⁶ Wang Yi, "Wang Yi Attends the Reception Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of the Signing of the China-Russia Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation", China Foreign Ministry, June 11, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1891376.shtml.

²¹⁷ President of Russia, "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development".

²¹⁸ See China State Council, *China's National Defense in the New Era*, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm.

²¹⁹ Vassily Kashin, "Tacit Alliance: Russia and China Take Military Partnership to New Level".

²²⁰ Sergei Karaganov, "China and Russia are quasi allies...on strategic affairs Russia and India have serious conversations only at the top level", *Russia in Global Affairs*, March 2, 2018, <https://eng-globalaffairs.ru/articles/china-and-russia-are-quasi-allies-on-strategic-affairs-russia-and-india-have-serious-conversations-only-at-top-level/>.

²²¹ Aizhan Kazak, "Time ripe for China and Russia to form an alliance – Chinese expert", *Russia Beyond*, March 17, 2017, <https://www.rbth.com/international/2017/03/17/china-russia-alliance-expert-721688>.

non-alignment policy in favour of cultivating its own version of an “alliance-type” partnerships.²²²

Second, it can be argued that the practical and actual content of defense and security cooperation has recently reached new levels. There are regular and frequent high-level meetings and a strategic consultation mechanism. Military-to-military exchanges and cooperation exist on virtually all levels.²²³ As noted above, the arms-trade relationship has long constituted a core element but has now also shifted qualitatively to include not only more advanced Russian arms sales to China, but also joint design and production projects, and Chinese exports to Russia. Military exercises are more complex, with enhanced interoperability. For instance, in the Zapad/Interaction 2021 exercise mentioned above, various specialised PLA units, such as engineers and logistics personnel, were directly embedded in Russia’s mechanised assault groups, while the Chinese let the Russians operate their equipment, apparently with increased scope of transparency.²²⁴ Finally, emerging cooperation in sensitive domains, such as cyberspace, outer space and emerging technologies could make the military-technological interaction more sophisticated and dynamic. Russian efforts to help China develop an early warning missile system can mark the beginning of more comprehensive attempts at collaboration on strategic issues such as missile defense.²²⁵

Major shifts of the balance of power in the international system or high levels of perceived threat perceptions can determine the formation of alliances.²²⁶ For some observers, the incentives for China and Russia to move into a full-fledged alliance will therefore be determined largely by external stimulus in the form of high-tension tensions with the US.²²⁷ In fact, according to most Chinese observers, the key

²²² Patricia M. Kim, “China’s Search for Allies. Is Beijing Building a Rival Alliance System?” *Foreign Affairs*, November 15, 2021. See also Liu Ruonan and Liu Feng, “Contending Ideas on China’s non-alliance strategy”, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Volume 10, Issue 2, Summer 2017, pp. 151–171.

²²³ Alexander Korolev, “On the Verge of an alliance. Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation”.

²²⁴ Yu Bin, “Afghan Endgame and Guns of August”, *Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-Journal of Bilateral Relations in the Indo-Pacific*, Vol. 23, No. 2, September 2021, <https://cc-pacforum.org/2021/09/afghan-endgame-and-guns-of-august/>.

²²⁵ Vassily Kashin, “Chinese–Russian ballistic missile cooperation signals deepening trust”, *The East Asia Forum*, February 20, 2020. <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/02/20/chinese-russian-ballistic-missile-cooperation-signals-deepening-trust/>.

²²⁶ For a treatment of balance of power and alliance formation, see for instance Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. Stephen Walt, in his famous exploration of alliance formation instead claimed that it is the perception of threat and not the actual capabilities that determine alliance formations. See Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, New York, Cornell University, 1987.

²²⁷ Jo Inge Bekkevold, “Sino-Russian relations in an era of Sino-US rivalry” in *US–China Foreign Relations. Power Transition and its Implications for Europe and Asia*, Robert S. Ross, Øystein Tunsjø and Wang Dong (eds.), New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. 145-163. *Power Transition and its Implications for Europe and Asia*, eds. Robert S. Ross, Øystein Tunsjø, Wang Dong, New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. 145-163.

factor that could lead to a formal alliance is whether the relationships between the US and Russia and between China and the US simultaneously deteriorate dramatically, to the extent of an outright confrontation or even military conflict.²²⁸ A confrontation between Russia and NATO, for instance due to escalation regarding the war Ukraine or heightened crisis over Taiwan between China and the US could be likely paths. Some have suggested that China and Russia may develop joint operational plans for contingencies in Central Asia and on the Korean Peninsula.²²⁹

There are additional factors that can push towards making a formal alliance easier, if not directly realised. As mentioned above, new and emerging security challenges in Central Asia following the US retreat from Afghanistan compel China and Russia to work closer on security matters in the region. China and Russia continue to converge more normatively on issues of global governance, especially on cyberspace, space and technology. The normative convergence and certain commonalities regarding political systems and governance are already noted above.²³⁰ Especially the personal linkages between the two top leaders Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin are often emphasised. For instance, according to Russian China specialist Artyom Lukin, Xi and Putin share a strong affinity for realpolitik with regard to international politics, combined with conservative and nationalistic authoritarianism in domestic politics.²³¹ Xi represents a more authoritarian, anti-American and disruptive approach to regional and global orders, which Putin also wants to replace with a less US-dominated feature.²³²

But convergence goes beyond leadership personalities. According to Gilbert Rozman, long-time China-Russia watcher, similarities in national identity play a substantial part, as the two countries share a common legacy of having had a communist political system.²³³ Moreover, according to some Chinese scholars, in China there is currently a growing trend of a revival of traditional and conservative ideas, which influences ideas of and practices in political governance and state-society interactions more extensively.²³⁴ Similar tendencies are also at play in

²²⁸ Andrew Radin et al., *China-Russia Cooperation. Determining factors, future trajectories, implications for the US*, p. 267.

²²⁹ Alexander Gabuev, "Russia Is Moving Deeper Into China's Embrace", *The Moscow Times*, September 11, 2018, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/09/11/russia-is-moving-deeper-into-chinas-embrace-op-ed-a62839>

²³⁰ Some (notably neo-realists) claim that regime type and ideology do not constitute a necessary basis for alliance formation, while others hold that sharing political systems and common ideology indeed has causal effects. See, for instance, Mark L. Hass, "Ideology and alliances: British and French Balancing Decisions in the 1930s", *Security Studies*, 12:4, 2003, pp. 34–79.

²³¹ Artyom Lukin, "The China-Russia entente and its future", *International Politics*, 58, 2021, pp. 363–380.

²³² Gilbert Rozman, "Tracking Russia's 'Turn to the East' over a Decade".

²³³ Gilbert Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order. National Identities, Bilateral Relations and the East versus the West in the 2010s*.

²³⁴ Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019, pp. 134–136.

Russia.²³⁵ While China and Russia are distinctive cultures in many regards, certain overlaps in traditional values and norms can influence their modern politics and international conduct in some similar ways.²³⁶

In addition, such commonalities are reinforced, and mutual support is becoming increasingly useful, as both China and Russia face growing international scrutiny and criticism for their domestic politics and foreign actions. China's more assertive conduct in the South China Sea, its so-called "wolf warrior diplomacy", treatment of the Uighur minority in Xinjiang and crackdown on political and social rights in Hong Kong have resulted in an international backlash against it.²³⁷ Similar reputational costs are observable for Russia through its military actions in Syria, intervention in the US 2016 election and a wide range of influence operations and alleged cyberattacks (this applies to China, too, but perhaps to a lesser degree) and not to mention its aggression toward Ukraine.

The scenario of Russia as a formal ally to China by 2030 should by no means be dismissed, but there are nonetheless several obstacles and factors that likely hamper the development of a full-fledged formal military alliance. The role of alliance is considered the least likely of the three roles.

Neither China, nor Russia, for that matter, has any real appetite for a formal commitment that would entail aiding the other side in a military conflict, especially in a scenario where none of the parties have any substantial and vested security interests.²³⁸ The "Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation" from 2001 does stipulate (article 9 in the document) that the two sides shall initiate

²³⁵ Paul. F. Robinson, "Russia's Emergence as an International Conservative Power. Russian Conservatism: An Ideology or a Natural Attitude?", *Russia in Global Affairs*, Vol. 18, No.1, January-March, 2020.

²³⁶ Kim Taehwan, "Authoritarian Sharp Power: Comparing China and Russia", *The Asan Forum*, June 18, 2018, <https://theasanforum.org/authoritarian-sharp-power-comparing-china-and-russia/>.

²³⁷ Peter Martin, "Why China is alienating the world. Backlash is building – but Beijing can't seem to recalibrate", *Foreign Affairs*, October 6, 2021.

²³⁸ In the alliance theory literature, this is commonly referred to as entanglement. This basically means that a state can be dragged into an armed conflict by one or more of the alliance's members over issues of not necessarily shared national interest. The state will nonetheless honour its alliance commitments as the preservation of the alliance is deemed more important than the cost of fighting. The flip side of this notion is referred to as abandonment. Abandonment can take various shapes but in essence means that the state will not honour its alliance commitments. It can be assumed that China and Russia also harbour concerns over abandonment, although perhaps to a less extent than entrapment. For a theoretical discussion on the costs and benefits of alliances see Glenn H. Snyder, "Alliance Theory: A neorealist first cut", *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 44, no 1, 1990, pp. 103-123. For a critical view of the associated risk with entanglement, see Michael Beckley, "The Myth of Entangling Alliances Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts", *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 4, Spring 2015, pp. 7-48.

“contacts and consultations” in the event of a security threat to one of the contracting partners.²³⁹ But this is not the same as for instance the mutual defence obligations stipulated in the NATO Treaty (Article 5).²⁴⁰

In addition, experience of past formal alliances does not help to shape positive memories of such interactions.²⁴¹ While there is an ongoing debate in Chinese circles about China’s non-alliance strategy as noted before, China would be very reluctant to abandon its long cherished non-alignment principle. Chinese leaders repeatedly note that alliances are reminiscent of “Cold War mentality” and lead to zero-sum competition. The fact that China has not provided Russia with any substantial military aid or support during the ongoing war in Ukraine suggests the limits of the commitments Beijing is willing to make.

As noted above, certain voices in the Chinese academic and expert community have voiced that China should seek a formal alliance with Russia, but such proponents remain in the minority in China; such views are not shared by most foreign and security policy specialists, including China-Russia experts.²⁴² There is also the question of who would “lead” in any potential alliance. While this in theory does not need to be a problem, most alliance formations at minimum involve an informal leadership position for one of the contracting parties. With regard to China-Russia, it is likely that China would assume such a role and the question is of course whether Russia would accept this. It should also be added that the military elites and military-industrial complexes in both countries remain heavily nationalistic and strongly guard their own military know-how, capabilities and technologies, making it challenging to reach the required levels of interoperability and integration of command structures.

Moreover, from China’s perspective, it can be questioned what additional military benefits a formal military alliance would give to China. Should present trends remain, China’s military capabilities are set to surpass those of Russia in the

²³⁹ The exact wording of article 9 in the document is: “When a situation arises in which one of the contracting parties deems that peace is being threatened and undermined or its security interests are involved or when it is confronted with the threat of aggression, the contracting parties shall immediately hold contacts and consultations in order to eliminate such threats.” See China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation”, 2001, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/200107/t20010724_679026.html; For article 5 in the NATO Treaty see, NATO Homepage, The North Atlantic Treaty, Last updated: 10 Apr. 2019 14:16, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm.

²⁴⁰ For article 5 in the NATO Treaty see, NATO Homepage, The North Atlantic Treaty, Last updated: 10 Apr. 2019 14:16, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm.

²⁴¹ China and Russia have entered a formal alliance three times in the past; each of them have ended in breakups: in the 1890s, between the Tsarist empire and the Qing dynasty; the non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and the Republic of China (the nationalists under Jiang Kai-shek) in the mid-1940s; and, of course, the Sino-Soviet alliance formation of the 1950s.

²⁴² See, for instance, Sergey Luzyanin and Zhao Huasheng, *China-Russia Dialogue: The 2021 Model*.

coming decades (excluding nuclear weapons) and reach similar levels to those of the US, although not in all areas. In other words, a formal alliance would send a strong deterrence signal, but in terms of what the Russian military could provide China in the event of a military conflict remains an open question. The under-performance of the Russian military in the ongoing war in Ukraine likely feeds into such an assessment.

Finally, a formal alliance could lead to a counter-response by the US and its allies and strategic partners in Asia and beyond. For China, an even tenser Asian security environment would complicate its efforts to build a China-led interdependent economic and trade community with major Asian communities such as the Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN), and be even more difficult with Japan and South Korea, which also have strong security linkages with the US. In addition, while relations with the West and in particular the US are currently marked by considerable tension and mistrust, Beijing is still careful not to overly strain its ties with the West. China's integration and embeddedness in the current liberal international economic order has vastly benefitted its economic growth and development and it remains dependent on cordial relations with the West for trade, commerce and technology exchange.

4.2 Competitor

The second role considered assumes that Russia is playing a competitive role in relation to China. Russia as a competitor does not entail a situation where the two countries are out-right antagonists, to say nothing of an open military conflict. While it is conceivable that heightened strategic competition, including even certain levels of direct security tension, could arise between China and Russia, this scenario plainly envisions a more competitive relationship than currently.²⁴³

Nonetheless, it makes good sense to envision a situation that is in stark contrast to the current state of affairs between China and Russia, where the two powers are standing more at odds against each other. The quite turbulent history of Sino-Russian interaction does suggest that things can go from good to bad quite radically. China and the Soviet Union began the 1950s as formal allies but ended up in a bitter strategic and ideological competition, manifested most visibly in the 1969 border clash and the subsequent military build-up along their common

²⁴³ The role of competitor is therefore not the same as rivalry. In essence, a rivalry would mean an open and direct confrontational relationship, including a strong military component, for instance similar to the situation between China and the Soviet Union during the 1960s and 1970s. In comparison, the role as competitor is a "lighter version" that does include strong elements of competition and friction, but not necessarily out-right confrontation. The reason why a scenario of rivalry is not examined here is because this is seen as highly unlikely by 2030, while Russia becoming a competitor to China within that time period seems more probable.

border, as mentioned above. In fact, several of the factors highlighted above could lead to growing friction, either by themselves or in combination and intertwined.

Several developments could lead to a competitive Russia. First, US power and global influence may have declined to the degree that China and Russia lose their “shared common threat”. As the US factor recedes in its importance for bringing China and Russia closer together, many of the deep-rooted tensions and underlying problems noted above will be unearthed, leading the two sides to compete more openly and directly. In other words, in this situation China does not need Russia as a counterbalance to the US and its allies to the same extent and is therefore freer to advance its own interests and disregard those of Russia.

Second, as China’s power and global influence grow even more relative to Russia’s, Moscow will more directly assume the role of “junior partner” in the bilateral relationship, a role it must accommodate to but by no means accept. The terms of the bilateral relationship have become largely determined by China, as Russia finds itself dependent on it, not least in terms of trade, finance and, to a larger degree, technology. This will not only marginalise Moscow’s role in the bilateral relationship but also challenge its strategic autonomy. In particular, greater Chinese influence in regional areas could make Russia increasingly wary of China.

The most crucial area would likely be in Central Asia. It is not unimaginable that China’s presence and strategic influence in Central Asia will grow so dominant that it will have marginalised Russia’s position in the region. China not only constitutes the economic and financial powerhouse there, but could also, if not replace, then at a minimum parallel, Russia’s traditional role as main security provider. As noted above, there are indications that China is already increasing its political and security presence, as well as its activism, in Central Asia; this is notably through bilateral arrangements and regional multilateral engagements that do not include Russian participation. Similarly, China’s Arctic ambitions and presence can increase to an extent where China does not feel it needs to adhere to Russian concerns nor interests. Long-held Russian concerns over the Chinese position regarding the so-called “lost territories” mentioned above could resurface more forcefully. In the Chinese mindset, Russia was as equally bad a perpetrator as other Western nations when it carved out Chinese territory in the mid-19th century. While the Chinese government does not currently make any territorial claims and remains committed to adhering to the border agreements that have been signed, certain nationalistic segments of China’s population hold that it should reclaim its lost territory once it has become more powerful, or ignoring Russian concerns in the Arctic and Central Asia. Russian concerns over such opinions are of course fuelled by the bolder and indeed more confident and nationalistic

Chinese foreign policy behaviour observed under Xi Jinping.²⁴⁴ This can also affect Russia over time. For instance, prominent Russian sinologist Alexander Lukin has suggested that there is a growing awareness and debate in Russia over China's more assertive foreign policy and that this has already had a negative effect on Russian views on China.²⁴⁵ Contrary, a domestic political crisis or severe economic downturn in China could also influence Chinese foreign policy to become more bellicose, including its approach to Russia.²⁴⁶

Third, changes in Russia's domestic political situation could lead to an outcome where Russia assumes the role of competitor. While this is presently hard to imagine, one should at least consider a "post-Putin" Russia which could include a more "Western-inclined" political leadership, with a more democratic and liberal governance system. This would be at the same time as the Chinese political system remained autocratic, or, given current developments during Xi Jinping's tenure, even move further towards authoritarian tendencies.²⁴⁷ The "similarities" in terms of the political systems and normative factors discussed above could in such cases lose their attraction as binding elements. At the same time, while perhaps even more difficult to image now, Russia could rebuild parts of its power and instead become a relative independent actor, balancing its relations to both China and the US and Europe simultaneously. Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this was an idea entertained by some leading Russian scholars.²⁴⁸

Regardless of the development trajectories sketched here, a major recalculation by Russia would likely entail a fundamental change in Russia's China policy, away from cooperation and toward competition. Moscow could work for a rapprochement with Europe and the US. In effect, Russia would join, even if not directly, US-led efforts to counter the continued rise of China, and would at least work to complicate China's regional and global ambitions. Russia would also seek to engage positively with Asian states, especially such states that themselves have a conflictual relationship with China, notably Japan, India and, to some extent, Vietnam. In other words, Russia would try to create a policy of containment similar to the Soviet strategy towards China during the 1970s. During the early 1990s the Chinese leadership worried about the prospect of a broad US-Russia encirclement as Russia's newly elected president Boris Yeltsin sought to join the "Western

²⁴⁴ Yan Xuetong, "Becoming Strong. The New Chinese Foreign Policy", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/United-States/2021-06-22/becoming-strong>.

²⁴⁵ Alexander Lukin, "Have We Passed the Peak of Sino-Russian Rapprochement?", *The Washington Quarterly*, Volume 44, Issue, 3, 2021, pp. 155–173.

²⁴⁶ This was for instance the case, albeit an extreme one, during the "lead up" to the Sino-Soviet split when Mao Zedong for domestic reasons (consolidating his own power and purging enemies in the CCP) used anti-Soviet propaganda and policies, leading to an increasingly fraught relationship with the Soviet Union.

²⁴⁷ Jude Blanchette, "Xi's confidence game", *Foreign Affairs*, November 23, 2021.

²⁴⁸ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Asia Strategy: Bolstering the Eagle's Eastern Wing", *Russie.Nei Vision*, No 94, June 2016, pp. 7-22.

club”, constituting a real concern for China at the time.²⁴⁹ A geopolitical encircled China with the US in the maritime sphere, Russia in the western borderlands and perhaps India in the south likely remains to be a geostrategic nightmare for China.

How likely is this scenario? One should not rule out the plausibility of this role, and in relation the formal alliance scenario discusses above, it is considered more likely. That said, several factors need to be considered.

The cost for China of a competitive relationship with Russia would be great. A confrontational Russia would mean constraints on several elements of China’s regional objectives and global ambitions. Beijing would need to refocus and rearrange its military strategy to include a larger force posture towards the Russian and Central Asian borderlands. Conventional ground forces, as well as air force deployments, would need to be upgraded. China’s naval focus would also have to include a stronger northern focus, which could see its North Sea Fleet bolstered but also more active in waters close to Russia, for instance in the Sea of Japan, or even in international waters in the Arctic Ocean. In addition, China would feel pressed to bolster its nuclear deterrent toward Russia. The military build-up toward Russia would curtail China’s Asia-Pacific ambitions in the East and South China Seas. Needless to say, Russia could respond in kind, leading to stronger militarisation of the border. Beyond the military aspect of seeing Russia as a competitor, China’s realisation of its BRI will be severely constrained. Russia will be striving to complicate and block Chinese initiatives and projects, especially those that run on the Eurasian continent, but even China’s Arctic ambitions will be made more complicated. Competition in other regions, such as the Middle East and Africa, will also develop. Finally, most of the elements concerning global cooperation, be they in the UNSC or in BRICS, will be limited, if not entirely halted.

China is very aware of what a more competitive relationship with Russia would mean for it. History informs much of the basic outlines of how China deals with Russia. Official rhetoric that heralds their relations as “at their best in history” should not only be taken as simply political messaging, but instead as reflecting a deep-seated awareness of how the historical interaction between China and Russia was at times heavily strained, even existential, creating high costs and difficulties.²⁵⁰ In essence, this is saying that certain historical events and their consequences are not to be repeated and their reoccurrence should be avoided at all costs. The material, political and strategic costs would simply be too high. In fact, if the last three decades of Sino-Russian interactions have proven anything, it is that China and Russia do seem to have found a way to not only mitigate and manage their differences but to in fact incrementally improve their relationship.

²⁴⁹ Gilbert Rozman, *Chinese Strategic Thought Toward Asia*, pp. 139–142.

²⁵⁰ Fu Ying, “How China Sees Russia: Beijing and Moscow Are Close, but Not Allies”.

Moreover, it would make little sense for China itself to change its basic Russia policy towards one that is more competitive, even as its power relative to Russia increases further and therefore can push its interests more forcefully. Russian elites seem to have come to the conclusion that China does not pose a threat. Russian China-Russia expert Alexander Gabuev refers to a 2014 Kremlin review of China-Russia relations that concluded that on several points of potential friction, notably the notion of a Chinese takeover of the Russian Far East and China's illegal copying of Russian military hardware and technology, there was no longer any substantial threat, or at least none that was not manageable.²⁵¹ At the same time, China seems to have understood how to cater to Russia's concerns over its rise and played a diplomatically skilful game in order to prevent Russia from viewing it, at the very least, as an immediate security threat.²⁵²

Finally, both Chinese and Russian elites likewise see more benefits than costs in bilateral cooperation.²⁵³ Even if Russia would turn more "Western-like" and democratic, it would still make strategic sense for it to cultivate a friendly and cordial bilateral relationship with a more powerful neighbour. Also, some argue that Russia cannot but accommodate China's rise, therefore limiting any of the room left for balancing against China.²⁵⁴ The isolation and economic stagnation facing Russia in the wake of its war against Ukraine is likely to leave Russia with even fewer choices than accommodating China. Even if Russia wanted to, it is questionable whether Moscow will have the necessary resources to assume a role as a competitor to China.

4.3 Strategic supporter

The third role envisioned, the strategic supporter, is considered the most likely role trajectory towards 2030. In essence, China's strategic partnership with Russia will generally continue to persist. This means a close strategic partnership, but without any formal alliance agreement. However, compared to the present state of relations, China will be in a much stronger position vis-à-vis Russia and thereby largely determine the dynamics of the bilateral relationship on its own terms. In addition, China will be more selective in its engagement with Russia, extorting benefits and value on a more self-interested basis. The development paths of the

²⁵¹ Alexander Gabuev, "Unwanted but inevitable: Russia's Deepening Partnership with China post-Ukraine".

²⁵² See for instance Gilbert Rozman, *Chinese Strategy thought toward Asia*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2010; Marcin Kaczmaski, *Russia-China Relations in the post-crisis International Order*. For a more comprehensive treatment of this notion, see Christopher Weidacher Hsiung, *Too Big To Fail: China's Russia Policy in the Post-Cold War Period*.

²⁵³ Craig Kafura, "What Do Russians Think About the Relationship With China?", *The Diplomat*, September 16, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/what-do-russians-think-about-the-relationship-with-china/>; Gilbert Rozman, "Tracking Russia's 'Turn to the East' over a Decade".

²⁵⁴ Robert S. Ross, "Sino-Russian relations: the false promise of Russian balancing", *International Politics* volume 57, 2020, pp. 834–854.

two countries will diverge further as China continues with its ascent to global power status while Russia struggles with economic stagnation and isolation. Russia's value for China will be tested. In that sense, this role also contains certain elements of the role of competitor. That said, Russia will remain China's most suitable partner in the coming great-power struggle with the US and therefore assume a continued important role for China.

Russia's playing the role of strategic supporter assumes a continuation of Russia's long-term trajectory as a declining power, which means it lacks the necessary economic vitalism to sustain its great power ambitions over time. Russia's war against Ukraine will likely have exacerbated this even further, leaving open the possibility of a future Russia as a highly weakened and stagnated power.²⁵⁵ Harsh economic conditions make it harder for Russia to rebuild its military capabilities, severely affecting its ability to play a great power role as currently imagined by the leadership. Russia's domestic political and social environment will likely harden, making innovation and technological advances even more difficult. Already now, Russia has seen thousands of middle-class and talented young people flee the country (those who can) due to negative sentiments over Russia's future.²⁵⁶ Trends such as these will also shape Russia's standing in international politics, potentially making Russia a less attractive strategic partner for China in its efforts at reshaping the global order and, notably, counterbalancing the US in the Asia-Pacific region. Put simply, the actual advantages of Russia's relation to China could be diminished to such an extent that its added value for China decreases.

Russia's war against Ukraine has also exposed the limits of how deeply entangled with Russia China wishes to be. China has so far diplomatically supported Russia, but has not yet been willing to provide any substantial economic or financial support. As noted above, it seems that most Chinese commercial actors are complying with the sanctions and even suspending operations in Russia, at least temporarily. Concerns over secondary sanctions hitting Chinese companies and further straining relations with the US and Europe, which are vital markets for the Chinese economy, seem to have constrained how far China is willing to support Russia. Moreover, a Western backlash against China could also be envisioned, complicating China's own regional ambitions in the Asia-Pacific, notably with regard to Taiwan.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵ Vladislav Zubok, "Can Putin survive? The Lessons of the Soviet Collapse", *Foreign Affairs*, June/July 2022.

²⁵⁶ Anton Troianovski and Patrick Kingsley, "'Things Will Only Get Worse'. Putin's War Sends Russians Into Exile", *The New York Times*, March 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/13/world/europe/russia-exiles-putin-ukraine-war.html>.

²⁵⁷ Bonny Lin and John Culver, "China's Taiwan Invasion Plans May Get Faster and Deadlier", *Foreign Policy*, April 19, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/19/china-invasion-ukraine-taiwan/>.

Some critical voices (although openly few) inside China, such as the Shanghai-based scholar Hua Wei, have questioned China's close relationship with Russia.²⁵⁸ Gao Yusheng, a former Chinese ambassador to Ukraine, has criticised Russia's invasion and described Russia as a declining power.²⁵⁹ In other words, China might consider Russia less beneficial for its practical needs and especially its strategic goals and more as a burden and even regret its support for Russia, as its alignment with Moscow runs against its own national interest.²⁶⁰ Even Yan Xuetong, mentioned earlier, has called for a more balanced Chinese Russia policy (at least during the ongoing war in Ukraine), seeking a middle ground between Russia and the US and not, as earlier, promoting a close alignment with Russia.²⁶¹

This, in other words, implies a substantial distancing from Russia, with interaction and cooperation kept to a level just above what is necessary to maintain a largely functional bilateral relationship with a neighbour that has lost its main relevance for China. Wang Jisi, a respected Chinese international relations scholar at Peking University, even cautions against assuming that the China-Russia alignment will last in the future.²⁶²

Moreover, Russia's war on Ukraine will likely lead to an even more unbalanced relationship, with China truly assuming the dominant position – thus only accelerating the ongoing trend towards a highly asymmetrical relationship. China will be more selective in its cooperation with Russia. Actual cooperation could even decrease. Border interactions and cross-border trade will continue but the overall trend of more comprehensive economic engagement has stagnated and largely been confined to Russia's providing China with natural resources, mostly oil, natural gas and agricultural products. China will export manufactured goods and increasingly high-end technology products and services to Russia, but will express little demand of that sort in return. China's reliance on Russian arms imports (even in niche domains such as engine and rocket technologies) could end, as China's indigenous defense sector is now much more advanced. As noted above, Beijing could seek to exploit Russian weakness and push for lucrative energy deals or other concessions without Russia's having little actual influence to prevent them. It remains to be seen whether China will remain sensitive about

²⁵⁸ Hua Wei, "Possible Outcomes of the Russo-Ukrainian War and China's Choice", *US-China Perception Monitor*, March 13, 2022, <https://uscnpm.org/2022/03/12/hu-wei-russia-ukraine-war-china-choice/>.

²⁵⁹ Bloomberg News, "Rare Russia Criticism within China Shows Simmering Policy Debate", May 12, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-12/rare-russia-criticism-within-china-shows-simmering-policy-debate>.

²⁶⁰ Odd Arne Westad, "The Next Sino-Russian Split? Beijing Will Ultimately Come to Regret Its Support of Moscow", *Foreign Affairs*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2022-04-05/next-sino-russian-split>

²⁶¹ Yan Xuetong, "China's Ukraine Conundrum. Why the War Necessitates a Balancing Act", *Foreign Affairs*, May 2, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-05-02/chinas-ukraine-conundrum>.

²⁶² Foreign Affairs, "Ask the experts – Will China and Russia Stay Aligned."

not exploiting its greater power resources. Chinese Russia experts often raise the critical observation that managing the power imbalance and related issues of equal partners is one of the most defining tasks in building and maintaining political trust in the relationship.²⁶³

Nonetheless, the role of Russia as a strategic supporter is assumed to be the most likely of the three roles explored in this report. On a basic level, the current rationale and fundamental foundations of the present relationship suit China well – and likely also will for the foreseeable future. The fundamental objective for China is to uphold a functional relationship with Russia, so that the overall bilateral relationship remains largely friction-free and friendly, especially along its border, where China aims to keep its strategic back safe and stable.

More concretely, China likely wants to remain independent and flexible, rejecting formal commitments. There is no need for a formal alliance, as the current partnership offers pragmatic flexibility with greater benefits than a rigid commitment would, with its associated costs. Chinese scholars Wang Dong and Meng Weizhan, at Peking and Fudan Universities, respectively, have described this as “forging a partnership without forming an alliance” (*jieban bu jiemeng*). Instead, it is possible that China and Russia form a tactical coalition on selective issues.²⁶⁴ Feng Shaolei, a respected Chinese Russia scholar, has noted that the relationship is moving from one of “being harmonious while each side remains independent” (*hetong butong*) to “remaining independent while seeking unity” (*yizhong qitong*).²⁶⁵ The joint declaration signed in February 2022 and mentioned above did indicate an ambition to raise the bilateral relationship to a higher level, noting “no limits” and “no forbidden areas” of cooperation. At the same time, China’s ambassador to the US, Qin Gang, has said that there is also a “bottom line” to the Sino-Russian strategic partnership, which he referred to by saying that cooperation still must abide by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, international law and basic norms of international relations.²⁶⁶ Moreover, the Chinese government has long proclaimed that the strategic partnership consists of “three nos”: non-aligned, non-confrontational, and not targeted at third parties.²⁶⁷

²⁶³ Xing Guancheng, “Zhong’E guanxi 70 nian duowei sikao” [Reflections on 70 years of the multifaceted Sino-Russian relationship].

²⁶⁴ Wang Dong and Meng Weizhan, “China debating the regional order”, *The Pacific Review*, Volume 33, Issue 3– 4, 2020, p. 499.

²⁶⁵ Feng Shaolei, “Daguo Eluosi de shijie sixiang” [The world view of the great power Russia] *Aisixiang*, December 24, 2021, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/130540.html>.

²⁶⁶ Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, “Transcript of Ambassador Qin Gang’s Interview with “Talk With World Leaders”, March 27, 2022, http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/dshd/202203/t20220327_10656186.htm.

²⁶⁷ China State Council, “Premier Li Keqiang’s Written Interview with Russian News Agency TASS”, September 15, 2019, http://english.www.gov.cn/premier/speeches/201909/18/content_-WS5d81cd46c6d0bcf8c4c139b0.html.

Crucially, however, continued strained relations between China and the US will form a key motivation for China to retain close ties with Russia. As highlighted above, US-China relations have deteriorated to their worst state in decades, and there is little to indicate any substantial improvement any time soon. The US public now views the China-Russia partnership as the most serious problem for the US.²⁶⁸ Relations with the EU are also becoming more strained.²⁶⁹ While far from given at this point, a conceivable new world order with a US-led “block” of Western, liberal democracies on one side and autocracies, with China and Russia as the leading main states, on the other can be imagined. China does not have many other “allies”. North Korea and Pakistan cannot offer China much global leverage so it will need to seek continued political support from Moscow. While the benefits of Russia as an arms exporter and a source of military training might decline, Russia holds similar views and positions regarding issues such as cyberspace and outer space, where China sees a suitable partner for increased global coordination and alignment pushing for alternative principles, rules and standards than the current Western, liberal-based governance order.

Russia’s diminished comprehensive power and long-term decline does limit its ability for future power projection, but it will nonetheless be able to continue to create tension and uncertainty in Europe, thus distracting the US from fully engaging in Asia to counter the rise of China, which Washington sees as its most pressing long-term security challenge. Moreover, there are emerging signs that the unity in Europe over how to deal with Russia’s war against Ukraine is becoming more divided than in the first months after the beginning of the full-scale invasion.²⁷⁰ Finally, it might be premature to totally rule out Russia as also being a major power of consequence for the future.²⁷¹

More broadly, while they cannot be taken for granted, the domestic political systems in China and Russia are likely to remain similar until 2030. As noted above, there are some basic similarities in how the political elites in both China and Russia construct their worldviews and their threat assessments. While there certainly are voices that are critical of Russia’s invasion and of China’s close relationship to Russia, as noted above, the mainstream view in the Chinese expert community

²⁶⁸ Christine Huang, Laura Silver and Laura Clancy, “China’s Partnership with Russia Seen as Serious Problem for the US”, *Pew Research Center*, April 28, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/04/28/chinas-partnership-with-russia-seen-as-serious-problem-for-the-us/>.

²⁶⁹ Janka Oertel, “Cold reality: How Europe is adjusting to China’s support for Putin”, *Commentary*, European Council on Foreign Relations ECFR, April 12, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/cold-reality-how-europe-is-adjusting-to-chinas-support-for-putin/>.

²⁷⁰ Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, “Peace versus Justice: The coming European split over the war in Ukraine”, *Policy Brief*, Brussel: European Council for Foreign Relations (ECFR), June 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/peace-versus-justice-the-coming-european-split-over-the-war-in-ukraine.pdf>.

²⁷¹ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Michael Kofman, “Russia is down. But it is not out”, *The New York Times*, June 2, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/02/opinion/russia-ukraine-war-nato.html>.

blames the US and NATO for the current crisis in Europe, and while not expressing outright support for Russia, then at least understanding.²⁷² A recent survey showed that among the Chinese, Russia is the most positively viewed country, despite its invasion of Russia; sentiments were the most negative towards the US.²⁷³

Finally, it seems likely that China's President Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin will remain in power for a foreseeable future (although a sudden leadership change should not be excluded either), further cementing the "political affinity" between China and Russia's top leadership. Crucially, China's foreign and security policy is increasingly decided by the top leadership, in effect by Xi Jinping.²⁷⁴ Xi Jinping has described how the world is seeing "great changes unseen in a century". This in many ways reflects a belief in a major redistribution of power among nations of the world. More concretely, this indicates a perception that the West is in inevitable decline and the East, notably China, is rising.²⁷⁵ Such a change also inevitably includes greater uncertainty and instability, but also potential confrontation and conflict between China and the West. And there, Russia will continue to play a role for China as its most important strategic partner.

²⁷² Paul Haenle and Tong Zhao, "How China Has Handled Its Strategic Dilemma Over Russia's Invasion", *Q&A*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 12, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/04/12/how-china-has-handled-its-strategic-dilemma-over-russia-s-invasion-pub-86875>.

²⁷³ Richard Q. Turcsanyi, Klara Dubravcikova, Kristina Kironska, Tao Wang, James Iocovozzi, Peter Gries, Veronika Vasekova and Andrew Chubb, *Chinese views of the world at the time of the Russia-Ukraine war. Evidence from a March 2022 public opinion survey*, Palacky University Olomouc and The Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS), 2022.

²⁷⁴ Suisheng Zhao, "Top-level Design and Enlarged Diplomacy: Foreign and Security Policymaking in Xi Jinping's China", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2022.2052440>.

²⁷⁵ Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*.

5 Conclusions and discussion

The overarching objective of this report was to describe and assess the nature, content and future trajectory of the Sino-Russian bilateral relationship, with a focus on China. This was conducted by performing three analytically separated but inter-related tasks.

First, the study presented and examined the benefits China hopes to achieve with its engagement with Russia. Six key motivations were discussed: maintaining stable and secure border relations, garnering support to ensure regime security, deepening military cooperation to counterbalance the US, managing and upholding stability in Central Asia, improving economic and technological exchange and enhancing coordination on global affairs.

Second, the study presented and investigated challenges that China finds present in its relationship with Russia. Four were examined: history and mutual mistrust, competing regional interests, different views regarding the coming global order and limitations of economic exchange.

Third, the report explored three role trajectories that Russia can play for China by 2030: that of a formal ally, a competitor, and strategic supporter. The last role, of a strategic supporter, was held to be most likely. Some concluding reflections follow, centring much on this last potential trajectory.

First and foremost is that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is severely testing the Sino-Russian relationship. It must be emphasised that the question of how the Ukraine war will affect the bilateral relationship in the future remains open. China's current tacit support for Russia comes at growing economic and reputational cost. Maintaining workable relations with the US and Europe is crucial for its continued economic development and modernisation efforts. The unity and relatively resolute response from the West (so far) against Russia's aggression has also had a deterring effect on China regarding its own ambitions in the Asia-Pacific, especially with regard to Taiwan. Russia's military failures (at least so far) and the long-term impacts the sanctions regime can have on the Russian economy can turn Russia into a less valuable partner for China in the future. It is also unclear how the Chinese leadership will respond if the war escalates, should Putin deploy chemical or tactical nuclear weapons, or it becomes a full-out confrontation between NATO and Russia. It is also unclear how China will act if Putin loses the war.

Nonetheless, the key conclusion is that China will continue to work with Russia to make their strategic alignment endure. China shares with Russia a strong perception of growing ideological and geopolitical threats from the West, and especially from the US. This uniting element tends to override potential sources of friction. Ultimately, Russia constitutes China's most suitable strategic partner in the emerging great-power rivalry with the US. However, Beijing will be much in the

driver's seat of the relationship. Even before Russia started its full-scale war against Ukraine, it was growing increasingly more dependent on China. This will only be exacerbated going forward.

Closer China-Russia alignment will also have great consequences for the future global balance of power. If the current trend of increased great power competition between the US against China and Russia persist, a growing division of the world into "two blocks" could very well be conceivable. China and Russia might not actively collaborate on all issues, but at a minimum coordinate actions in their own respective theatres to exploit and take advantage of opportunities created by the other side. For many smaller and middle-sized states around the world, this will pose some difficult choices in how to position themselves between the West and China and Russia. So far, many states have tried to remain neutral and balance the different great powers against each other in order not to antagonise any side too much, while also extracting benefits for themselves. But the question is for how long such balancing acts can work.

For Washington, the key strategic long-term challenge is the continued rise of China and the challenge this poses to US interests, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. While Russia's war in Ukraine has forced the US to "return" its attention to Europe, the US is likely to see the Asian region, not Europe, as its main strategic theatre. The task for Europe will be how to respond to these American priorities and how to deal with Russia and China, not only as individual actors, but also as a potential collective unity. A more intense "double-front scenario", with a prolonged conflict in Europe between Russia and the West, and in Asia over an even tenser situation between China and the US, regarding Taiwan for instance, can push Beijing and Moscow even closer towards each other.

A possibility, at least discussed before the Russian invasion against Ukraine, in 2022, was of a "reverse Kissinger", whereby the US would attempt to "lure over" Russia from China, similar to the way the US did with China toward the Soviets during the Cold War.²⁷⁶ In the wake of the Ukraine war, some have begun arguing instead of pulling China away from Russia, trying to highlight the downsides that a close partnership with Russia carries for Beijing.²⁷⁷ The concern with this line of argument is that it has seen limited success, partly because it subscribes to a misreading of the bilateral relationship. When the US approached China during the Cold War to make a bid to jointly counter the Soviet Union, there was a real and deep schism between Beijing and Moscow that the US could exploit. The current proposal misses the fact that it is the US that is the main challenge for

²⁷⁶ See, for instance, Charles A. Kupchan, "The Right Way to Split China and Russia. Washington Should Help Moscow Leave a Bad Marriage", *Foreign Affairs*, August 4, 2021, www.foreign-affairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-04/right-way-split-china-and-russia.

²⁷⁷ Ryan Hass, "Ukraine presents opportunity to test China's strategic outlook", *Blog post*, The Brookings Institute, March 1, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos-/2022/03/01/ukraine-presents-opportunity-to-test-chinas-strategic-outlook/>.

China and Russia, and not the other side. The question also arises of what the US would have to “compromise with” in order to gain Chinese support against Russia. The US has limited space to influence the relationship to such a degree as to put a real wedge between China and Russia, as some argue.²⁷⁸

Nonetheless, others highlight that it remains important to continuously probe existing frictions in the bilateral relationship and to show to both China and Russia that there are certain costs to their further alignment.²⁷⁹ The four challenges discussed in this report could very well develop to more real fissures between the two sides. China and Russia might not part sides, but differences between them could prevent or at least complicate a deepening of bilateral ties. One obvious area would be regarding the global economic order. As noted above, China has a very large stake in a stable world economy, albeit one that reflects Chinese interests better. China’s continued economic prosperity still much depends on functioning trade, investment, and technology links to the West. Russia, on the other hand, has largely become a disruptive power and its current war against Ukraine is having major negative consequences for the global economy. The Chinese communist party relies much on economic performance for its domestic legitimacy, so that long-term disruptions can backfire against it.

In addition, there are calls that liberal democracies around the world should continue to defend the liberal international order from challenges within by nationalist-populist movements and from outside by illiberal states.²⁸⁰ This includes working close together not only on issues such as liberal democracy and human rights, but also on global governance in the cyber and space domains, where China and Russia increasingly seek to challenge the current normative framework. Deepening defense cooperation and strengthening deterrence among Western allies and partners to raise the cost of aggressive behaviour also remains important, not least regarding potential actions by China toward Taiwan. Russia’s war on Ukraine has already seen a reinvigoration of the transatlantic relationship, and a further strengthening of defense and strategic cooperation between the US and its allies in the Indo-pacific region is likely.

That said, it remains imperative to continue to engage with China on issues of global significance (not least on challenges such as the climate change, health issues and rapid developments in new technologies) and prevent an already strained US-China relationship from reaching fever pitch. The dynamics of the bilateral interaction relationship is increasingly shaped by a vicious circle of

²⁷⁸ Michael McFaul, “Opinion: Trying to pry Russia away from China is a fool’s errand”, *The Washington Post*, July 21, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/07/21/why-seeking-alliance-with-russia-to-counter-china-wont-work/>.

²⁷⁹ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman. “Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership”, Washington D.C.: Center for New American Security, January 2021.

²⁸⁰ G. John Ikenberry, *A World Safe for Democracy. Liberal Internationalism and the Crisis of Global Order*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020.

“action and re-action” interaction, leading to what some conceptualise as growing China-US security dilemma dynamics.²⁸¹ Some observers are therefore calling for leaders on both sides to exercise restraint and put in some clear guardrails to if not prevent (which cannot be done), than at least skilfully manage the growing US-China strategic rivalry.²⁸²

It can also be observed that in many parts of the world, notably the “Global South”, the Chinese and Russian challenge to the Western-led global order is to some extent appreciated. Many countries have taken a neutral position with regards to Russia’s war against Ukraine, and even fewer countries are willing to support the sanctions.²⁸³ This of course has not only much to do with self-interest (many countries rely on Russian oil and gas exports), but also in part due to what is perceived as mainly a European conflict that is having global effects that are hitting hard against vulnerable states outside Europe. In addition, there is a strong sentiment in some regions, such as Africa and the Middle East, of a selfish West characterised by “double-standard behaviour”, which has constructed an international order mainly serving the interest of the developed Western world.²⁸⁴ If Western liberal democracies are to attract support from these parts of the world, their global image needs to improve and they need to make sure an open and rules-based liberal order benefits not only the West, but also the rest of the world.²⁸⁵ This is even more pressing today, since for China (and Russia), reaching out to

²⁸¹ Several international relations scholars have for some time warned of growing signs of security dilemma dynamics between China and the US. See for instance Adam P. Liff and John G. Ikenberry, “Racing toward Tragedy? China’s Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma”, *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 2, Fall 2014, pp. 52–91. As for lengthy and comprehensive treatment of the security dilemma concept, see Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan 2007. Not all of course agree on the workings of the security dilemma in the case of US-China relations, but also broader on theoretical and empirical grounds. Even Robert Jervis, one of the foundational thinkers on the security dilemma, has problematized the concept. See Robert Jervis, “Was the Cold War a security dilemma?” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 Winter 2001, pp. 36-60.

²⁸² Kevin Rudd, “Rivals Within Reason? U.S.-Chinese Competition Is Getting Sharper—but Doesn’t Necessarily Have to Get More Dangerous”, *Foreign Affairs*, July 20, 2022, https://www.foreign-affairs.com/china/rivals-within-reason?check_logged_in=1. For an interesting attempt at devising a process-oriented framework for global governance under conditions of increased great power competition, see, Dani Rodrik and Stephen Walt, “How to Construct A New Global Order”, HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series RWP21-013, May 2021, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/how-construct-new-global-order>.

²⁸³ David Alder, “The West vs. Russia: Why the global south isn’t taking sides”, *The Guardian*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/10/russia-ukraine-west-global-south-sanctions-war>.

²⁸⁴ Jenny Lundén, Göran Bergström, Peter Bull, Jan Henningsson, Johan Norberg, Peter Stenumgaard and Annica Waleij eds., *Another Rude Awakening - Making Sense of Russia's War Against Ukraine*, FOI-R--5332—SE, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2022.

²⁸⁵ Mark Leonard, “The European war project”, *Commentary*, European Council for Foreign Relations, July 1, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-european-war-project/>.

and building closer ties with the developing world is a key endeavour in reshaping the global order.²⁸⁶

The Sino-Russian relationship is complex and evolving. Attaining deeper and more thorough understanding of not only the motivations but also the challenges facing Sino-Russian relations, including as they are seen from Beijing, continues to constitute a necessary task for analysts and policymakers alike.

While far from exhaustive, some potential themes for further exploration include more in-depth studies of how the economic and technological relationship will develop in the wake of the Ukraine war or analysis of how Beijing assesses Russia's military campaign in Ukraine. Studies could also probe how the Western response, notably the sanctions regime toward Russia, is informing China's own thinking of the risks and costs of any potential military action in a future Taiwan contingency. Moreover, a fruitful complementary exploration could be to use this report as a starting point and investigate the Sino-Russian relationship along similar lines but with an explicit focus on Russia.

²⁸⁶ Shannon Tiezzi, "Wang's G20 Meetings Highlight China's Ukraine Messaging", *The Diplomat*, July 8, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/wangs-g20-meetings-highlight-chinas-ukraine-messaging/>.

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How China views and values its relationship with Russia will have major consequences not only for the bilateral relationship but also for China's relations with the rest of the world, notably with the US and Europe. This research report examines the Sino-Russian relationship with a focus on China. The report analyses China's main motivations for engaging with Russia, while also highlighting challenges that impact the nature and future development of the relationship. Additionally, the report explores future scenarios for the Sino-Russian relationship by discussing three different roles Russia can play for China: formal ally; competitor; and strategic supporter. A key finding is that Russia is assuming an increasingly important role in China's efforts to counter-balance the US. As long as Beijing perceives the US as the most pressing ideological and geopolitical security threat, Russia will continue to play a strategic role for China.