From Historical Tensions To Strategic Alignment: China-Russia Tensions Since 2022

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FROM HISTORICAL TENSIONS TO STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT: CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS SINCE 2022[1]

This article examines the evolution of China-Russia relations since the onset of the war in Ukraine. The author examines the historical context of relations between Russia and China, Russia’s pivot to Asia, China’s stance on Ukraine, and the evolving partnership despite inherent limitations. Drawing on recent developments, it assesses China’s ambivalence and strategic calculations regarding the conflict, incorporating insights from expert analyses on Beijing’s potential influence on Moscow and its broader objectives in the region.

***Key words**: China-Russia relations, Ukraine war, strategic partnership, historical context, territorial disputes, economic interdependence, diplomatic ambiguity, Global South.*

Андрійо П. Від історичної напруженості до стратегічного узгодження: відносини між Китаєм і Росією з 2022 року.

Стаття присвячена дослідженню еволюції відносин між Китаєм і Росією з початку повномасштабної війни в Україні. Автор розглядає історичний контекст двосторонніх відносин між Росією та Китаєм, включаючи поворот РФ до Азії, позицію КНР щодо України та зміцнення китайсько-російського партнерства, незважаючи на властиві обмеження. Спираючись на недавні події, автор оцінює амбівалентність Китаю та стратегічні розрахунки щодо конфлікту, включаючи висновки експертних аналітичних досліджень щодо потенційного впливу Пекіна на Москву та його ширших цілей у регіоні.

***Ключові слова**: відносини між Китаєм і Росією, російсько-українська війна, стратегічне партнерство, історичний контекст, територіальні суперечки, економічна взаємозалежність, дипломатична неоднозначність, Глобальний Південь.*

China-Russia Relations Since the Start of the War in Ukraine

In the 19th century, like Western powers and Japan, Russia participated in the “Scramble for China”; however, unlike the others, it never returned the vast territories it annexed. After a long and turbulent history of Sino-Russian relations, Mikhail Gorbachev launched the Soviet “turn to Asia” policy in July 1986 with his Vladivostok speech. Addressing the Chinese directly, he declared, “I would like to dwell on the most important issue in our relations. These relations are extremely important for

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several reasons, starting from the fact that we are neighbours, that we share the world's longest land border, and that we, our children, and grandchildren are destined to live near each other 'forever and ever'" [1; 2].

This policy was reaffirmed by President Vladimir Putin after he came to power in 2000, reinforced during the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and further intensified following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. That year, China and Russia signed lengthy and grandiloquent declarations celebrating their "no-limits friendship," prominently showcased during commemorations in Moscow marking the 80th anniversary of victory over Nazi Germany. Yet, this no-limits friendship, while rhetorically expansive, has never been formalized and contains several clear limitations — limitations that the current U.S. administration has unsuccessfully attempted to exploit.

This paper examines the China-Russia relationship and its often complex and contradictory evolution. The strategic dynamic between these two Eurasian powers has produced a partnership further solidified by Russia's aggression in Ukraine, despite Beijing's attempts to mediate the conflict. While the strength of this partnership may make it appear unbreakable, it should not preclude continued dialogue between China and the West — particularly the European Union and its member states. The EU–China summit held in Beijing on July 24, 2025, however, did not yield the expected results in this regard.

Historical Context

To understand today's Sino-Russian relationship, it is necessary to review key historical milestones. Separated for centuries by harsh deserts, dense forests, and imposing mountains, early Chinese and Russian entities had minimal direct interaction — primarily through commerce — before the 16th century. In the 13th century, the Golden Horde (with the Chagatai Khanate in Central Asia, the Ilkhanate in Persia, and Kublai's khanate (i.e., the Yuan dynasty), a Mongol khanate led by Genghis Khan's grandson Batu, conquered the Russian principalities [3]. Around the same time, another grandson, Kublai Khan, subjugated China and established the Yuan dynasty. The Pax Mongolica that followed only partially bridged the vast cultural and civilizational gap between the two regions.

The first Russian to refer explicitly to China may have been the merchant Afanasy Nikitin, in his 15th-century travelogue, *A Journey Beyond the Three Seas*. Later, Tsar Ivan the Terrible recognised the importance of developing relations with China [4]. Direct contact between China and Muscovy — and later the Russian Empire — began in the early 17th century with Russia's expansion into Siberia, the Pacific, and Central Asia.

Initial conflicts arose when Russian settlers moved into the Lake Baikal and Amur River regions, which were home to Siberian tribes under Qing imperial authority. However, the Qing dynasty, adhering to a hierarchical worldview, did not treat the Russians as equals but as "barbarians." It took nearly two centuries for Russia to establish sustained diplomatic relations with the Qing court [5].

The first formal agreements between the two powers were the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689) and the Treaty of Kyakhta (1727). These were followed by a series

of “unequal treaties,” from the Chinese perspective, including the Treaties of Aigun (1858), Beijing (1860), and Saint Petersburg (1881), as well as those in Central Asia, such as the Treaty of Chuguchak (1884) [6; 7]. These confirmed Russia’s annexation of territories that Beijing considered its own. With the construction of the southeastern branch of the Trans-Siberian Railway to link Vladivostok and Port Arthur directly, bypassing Khabarovsk, Russia took control of Manchuria and the Liaodong Peninsula.

Despite proclaiming an anti-imperialist ideology after 1917, Soviet Russia never returned the nearly two million square kilometers it annexed. Lenin, despite his revolutionary ideals and support for the Chinese revolution, did not reverse the territorial acquisitions. Stalin, resuming the imperial traditions of the Tsarist regime, maintained a pragmatic nationalist stance and balanced support for both the Chinese Nationalists and Communists during Japan’s invasion of China in the 1930s. This ambivalence ended only in 1945, when the Soviet army entered Manchuria and shifted full support to the Chinese Communist Party, paving the way for the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.

The Soviet Union was quick to recognize the new Chinese government, but the relationship was marked by underlying mistrust. Stalin saw Mao as an unreliable “margarine Communist,” and after Stalin’s death, Mao held Khrushchev and Brezhnev in contempt. He labelled the Soviet Union as “revisionist” and “social imperialist” while pressing for China’s territorial claims. In turn, the Soviets viewed China, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, as dangerously “deviationist and leftist” [8]. At its core, the conflict stemmed from a clash of egos and a struggle for leadership within the international Communist and anti-imperialist movement.

Tensions between the two powers escalated to the point of near-nuclear conflict in 1969. This confrontation began to subside only with the emergence of two pragmatic leaders — Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow and Deng Xiaoping in Beijing — who moved toward more constructive bilateral engagement. The relationship was then redefined based on “three don’ts” and “three do’s.” (The three don’ts were “not to establish alliances, not to oppose one another, and not to act against a third party,” and the three do’s were “to be good neighbours, good partners, and good friends” [9]). One central sticking point — the Sino-Soviet border dispute — was set aside by Deng as a conciliatory gesture. The issue was formally resolved through agreements signed on October 14, 2003, and July 21, 2008.

Nevertheless, the memory of the territorial annexations remains vivid in Chinese public consciousness. Beijing periodically publishes maps that depict these areas — including cities like Vladivostok (referred to as Haishenwai) — as historically Chinese territory. As British travel writer Colin Thubron notes, “Even now, the Chinese have not formally retracted their claim to the territory seized by imperial Russia north of the Amur (Heilongjiang in Chinese)... The Heilongjiang, like all the greatest waters of China, flows west-east, an axis still deep in Chinese thinking, and this geographical trajectory might suggest that the river belongs to China” [10]. Thus, the territorial question continues to be present in the collective psyche of the Chinese, while sometimes feeding an irrational fear among a minority of Russians. These psychological elements will undoubtedly continue to leave their mark on future Russian-Chinese relations.

Russia's "Eastward Turn" Toward China

Russia's pivot toward the Asia-Pacific began in the late Soviet era, under Gorbachev — most notably with his 1986 Vladivostok speech — and continued under Yeltsin [11]. Vladimir Putin, after assuming power in 2000, and Xi Jinping, who rose to power in 2012, gave this reorientation a distinctly ideological and geopolitical dimension. It gained new urgency in 2014 following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the intervention in Donbas.

During this period, bilateral relations underwent significant deepening. Several factors contributed to this evolution. Central among them is the close personal relationship between Putin and Xi, who have met over forty times — prompting some observers to describe their dynamic as a political "bromance" [12]. There is also strong ideological compatibility: both countries oppose Western liberalism and challenge American "hegemony." As nuclear powers and permanent members of the UN Security Council, they share overlapping strategic visions [13]. Economically, their roles are complementary — Russia as a resource supplier and China as an industrial and technological powerhouse. Strategically, China benefits from the geographic depth Russia provides in the north, especially as Beijing manages tensions in Taiwan and the South China Sea. This strategic alignment has led to regular joint military exercises across all three domains: land, air, and sea.

Russia's "Eastward Turn" accelerated following its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Faced with harsh Western sanctions and the loss of European energy markets, Moscow was compelled to intensify its economic, political, and ideological alignment with China.

On February 4, 2022, two weeks before the invasion, Putin and Xi signed a major declaration in Beijing titled "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on International Relations: Entering a New Era and Global Sustainable Development." In the characteristically grandiose language favoured by both capitals, the statement proclaimed that the new relationship between Russia and China was "superior to the political and military alliances of the Cold War era." It emphasised that their friendship had "no limits," that "no areas of cooperation are forbidden," and that their growing strategic coordination was neither directed against third parties nor constrained by changes in the global environment [14]. This declaration was followed by others, all equally grandiloquent, though the "no forbidden areas" of cooperation are not always mentioned [15]. Xi's state visit to Moscow from May 8 to 10, commemorating the 80th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany, resulted in the signing of several documents with the Russian president [16]. Russia welcomed some twenty heads of state and government, including Xi, as guests of honour for the May 9 military parade. Chinese troops marched through Red Square in Moscow.

Diplomatically, while clear about their political objectives, these documents contain no binding provisions that would formalize an alliance or require the signing of a treaty, creating strategic ambiguity. In a way, the two countries have become "allies without a treaty." (The 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, extended in 2021 for another 20 years, responds perfectly to the current international

situation [17]). Their relationship has thus evolved beyond a simple "axis of convenience," as British scholar Bobo Lo wrote in 2008 [18]. However, they have not yet established a formal alliance like the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, signed by Mao and Stalin in February 1950 — a painful memory for the Chinese. This text obliged the young PRC to grant the Soviet Union exclusive access to its economic and industrial activities in Manchuria and Xinjiang, signalled China's complete alignment with the USSR, and closed the door on any rapprochement with the United States.

The new type of relations between Moscow and Beijing seems better suited to the current fluidity of the international landscape.

China and Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine caused China to lose an important partner in Eastern Europe. Sino-Ukrainian relations were relatively good before the Russian invasion. Beijing had recognised the new Ukraine in January 1992, shortly after its independence. Subsequently, Sino-Ukrainian relations fluctuated depending on the Ukrainian presidents. They were excellent under the presidency of pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych, who hosted his counterpart Hu Jintao in Kyiv for a state visit. In 2013, Ukraine became a "strategic partner" of China, and its head of state visited Beijing that same year. But political ties cooled during the dramatic events of the 2014 Euromaidan protests in Kyiv. This large-scale, violent movement was in response to President Yanukovych's decision not to sign a political association and free trade agreement with the European Union, under pressure from Moscow, and instead assume closer ties with Russia. While Yanukovich fled to Russia, these events triggered Russia's annexation of Crimea and armed intervention in southern and eastern Ukraine. China adopted an ambiguous position, torn between its support for Moscow and its desire to respect the principle of non-interference in the affairs of other states. Despite a desire to maintain relations with its Russian ally, Beijing has not recognised the annexation of Crimea or other Ukrainian oblasts [12].

These political changes have not prevented Ukraine from becoming an important economic partner of China. By 2020, China had replaced Russia as Ukraine's largest trading partner. In addition to corn and aircraft engines, China purchased military equipment from Ukraine, including the hull of China's first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*. In 2016, Beijing attempted to purchase Ukrainian aerospace giant Motor Sich, which Kyiv ultimately nationalised under pressure from Washington. (This stance should not prevent Russia from supporting a possible Chinese action against Taiwan, since both China and Russia view it as a Chinese province that should be reunited with the mainland).

Chinese direct investment amounted to $150 million in 2019 and $75.5 million in the first three quarters of the following year. Loans granted by Beijing to Kyiv totalled nearly $7 billion [19] and mainly focused on the infrastructure, transportation, and energy sectors. Ukraine viewed itself as the natural gateway to Europe for China's Belt and Road Initiative via the "Northern Corridor" through Russian territory, taking advantage of the favourable customs regime established by the 2016 Deep and

Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the European Union. The Russian invasion put an end to this project [20].

Beijing appears to have been taken by surprise by the Russian invasion [12; 21]. It is unclear to what extent Putin warned Xi of this attack during his visit to Beijing in February 2022. Chinese officials also appear to have been taken aback by Russia's initial setbacks in the conflict.[2] Despite this, Beijing adopted a rather ambivalent "pro-Russian neutrality." Admittedly, the invasion contradicted the principles of international law that China claims to uphold. Yet, China's interests in maintaining the strategic partnership with Russia outweigh these contradictions. In this context, China has no interest in either a total Russian defeat or a decisive Russian victory in Ukraine. As China's top diplomat, Wang Yi, reportedly told a senior EU official during a recent European visit, "Beijing [does] not want to see a Russian loss in Ukraine because it fears the United States would then shift its whole focus to Beijing" [23]. From this perspective, the prolongation of the war serves China's strategic interests.

The Sino-Russian partnership now extends far beyond the battlefield in Ukraine, as illustrated by the growing volume of trade and deepening energy interdependence between Moscow and Beijing. More broadly, Russia continues to serve as a useful partner for China, not only in securing regime stability at home and regional stability in Central Asia but also in helping Beijing rally support across the Global South and promote an alternative to the Western-led global order. Furthermore, the methods Moscow has developed to circumvent Western sanctions may prove invaluable to Beijing in a potential Taiwan conflict.

For the West, however, China's firm stance has led to a diplomatic stalemate. In Washington's case, any peace initiative regarding Ukraine now appears unlikely given Putin's determination to continue the war and consistent Chinese support. As for the European Union, the ongoing rhetorical balance of labelling China simultaneously as a "partner for cooperation," "economic competitor," and "systemic rival" has changed little despite Beijing's charm offensive. Progress remains stalled on nearly all major international issues, including Ukraine, Russia, and North Korea. Even on trade, China has offered only marginal, largely symbolic concessions, such as on French cognac and rare earth exports. Climate, environmental issues, and public health appear to provide several areas of common ground for cooperation.

Still, opportunities for dialogue remain, even though the EU-China Summit on July 24, 2025, in Beijing, marking the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations, fell short of expectations. For the European Union, it is vital to convey a clear message to Beijing that Russian aggression in Ukraine — whether advancing or retreating – continues to represent a fundamental threat to European security [24].

China's 12-point peace plan, issued in 2023, emphasizes respect for territorial integrity; yet, Beijing has avoided directly pressuring Russia to withdraw from

[2] "A careful examination of the events suggests that China was, in fact, played… Before Russia sent troops to Donetsk and Luhansk on February 21, the Chinese policy community did not believe that Russia was going to invade Ukraine… The only prominent Chinese scholar who publicly predicted a war between Russia and Ukraine was Professor Tang Shiping from Fudan University. Based on the model about state behavior that he developed, he predicted that there was a significant probability that Russia would invade Ukraine before the end of May" [22].

occupied territories [25]. Analysts note that China has left little ambiguity in its stance on sovereignty, as evidenced by its non-recognition of Kosovo's independence or the outcomes of the Russia-Georgia war [26]. However, China is not a direct party to the conflict and views any overt condemnation of Russia as unlikely to yield peace, given Moscow's determination.

Experts suggest that China could leverage its influence as a leader in the Global South to advocate for diplomatic resolutions, potentially through the deployment of monitoring missions or UN Security Council resolutions [26]. Nevertheless, Beijing remains goal-oriented, calculating risks and opportunities, and is unlikely to act ambitiously amid uncertainties, including the unpredictable U.S. policy under President Trump [27].

Forty months into the war, divisions persist within China's strategic community on the conflict's origins and Beijing's response. Some view it as a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, aligning with China's historical empathy for invaded nations, while others see it as a response to Western encroachment post-Cold War [26]. This internal ambivalence is mirrored in China's diplomacy, which supports Russia's security concerns without endorsing territorial changes.

Beijing seeks a stable resolution but is constrained by its close ties with Russia, limiting its mediation role. A successful peace brokerage could enhance China's global image and promote multipolarity; however, China is reluctant to pressure Moscow for concessions [26]. The war's prolongation exacerbates tensions with Europe, but Beijing prioritises its partnership with Russia over aligning with Western positions [28].[3]

The partnership has deepened through joint initiatives, such as the "Friends for Peace" group at the UN, aimed at the Global South and BRICS [27]. Reports of Chinese nationals fighting for Russia highlight potential frictions, although these are unverified [30; 31]. Meanwhile, Russia's alliances, like with North Korea, underscore the broader axis [32]. Xi's visits to Moscow reveal vulnerabilities but resilience [33, 34].

Trade reached a record $250 billion in 2024 but fell 9% in early 2025 due to sanctions [35]. Alignment persists, though with divergences, as mapped in recent analyses [36]. Weaknesses include mistrust and asymmetry [37; 38; 39; 40]. Energy ties stagnate, with Power of Siberia 2 delayed [41; 42; 43]. Economic interdependence is deeper than perceived [44]. UN voting alignment has declined [45; 37]. Public opinion in Russia views China positively, but intelligence shows suspicion [46; 47]. U.S. views remain negative [48]. Trump's policies may benefit the duo [49; 50]. Payment issues persist [51].

Conclusion

The China-Russia relationship embodies deep ambivalence, rooted in historical mistrust yet driven by pragmatic strategic alignment amid shared challenges from the US and global shifts. This partnership has strengthened since Russia's invasion of

[3] This latest document, which Algeria has joined, appears primarily aimed at the Global South and the BRICS countries, where China is the only "heavyweight" capable of exerting real influence in favor of its interests. For more information, see: [29].

Ukraine, with Beijing supporting Moscow while avoiding a decisive outcome that could shift Western focus. As China's top diplomat, Wang Yi reportedly told a senior EU official, Beijing does not want a Russian loss in Ukraine, fearing the US would then target China fully [52]. Beyond Ukraine, the alliance extends to trade, energy, and rallying the Global South against Western dominance, potentially aiding Beijing in future scenarios like Taiwan. For the West, this creates a diplomatic impasse, with limited progress on key issues despite ongoing EU-China dialogues. Europe must emphasize that Russian aggression remains a core threat to its security, while exploring cooperation in areas like climate and health.

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