

# CHINESE-RUSSIAN RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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The war started by Russia in Ukraine has not radically changed the relations between China and Russia. But some pre-war trends have strengthened, likely increasing the inequality in their relationship.

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With China's support, Russia hopes to reduce the impact of the restrictions imposed on it due to the war, which increases Russia's economic and technological dependence on China and its preparedness to appease China on divisive issues.

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Russia still plays a significant role in China's global ambitions, so it is premature to see Xi Jinping's restrained support for Putin's war as a sign of distancing from Russia.

Confrontation with the West has brought China and Russia closer in recent years. On a global scale, the war in Ukraine helps to gauge the degree of polarisation in the relations between democracies and authoritarian regimes.

Russia's claims that the West, led by the United States, initiated the aggression in Ukraine and that Russia's attack on Ukraine was forced self-defence are compatible with China's pragmatic goals arising from its increasing confrontation with the US. Since the beginning of the war, the Chinese media has clearly sided with Russia, spreading Russian narratives and calling the US the real culprit of the war while painting Ukraine and the countries that support it, including the Baltic states, as puppets of the US. When covering the war in Ukraine, the Chinese media often uses propaganda produced in Russia – this also points to the fact that in terms of values, Russia is much closer to China than one might expect based on their diplomatic cooperation.

Aspiring to become a world leader in counterbalancing Western democracy and reduce its vulnerability to economic restrictions, China is intensively cultivating and

strengthening a community of like-minded countries. Russia plays an important role in China's efforts to reach this goal, which should not be underestimated by anyone wanting to see signs of deteriorating relations between the two states. From a political point of view, Russia is almost the only partner for China with a considerable diplomatic position and the ability to exert significant influence on international relations and the balance of power, including in international organisations.

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Given China's global ambitions, Russia is much more useful as a friend than an enemy, and it is not insignificant that the contrast with an aggressive and unpredictable Russia allows China to maintain the image of a fair and peaceful power while pursuing the same goals as Russia. This may be the reason behind some inconsistencies in China's official statements about the war in Ukraine. For example, last September, Li Zhanshu, the then-chairman of the CCP

Politburo Standing Committee, expressed his full support for Russia's military actions in Ukraine when he visited Moscow. However, Xi Jinping, the party's general secretary and head of state, remained quite tongue-tied when he met with Vladimir Putin just a few days later, expressing only China's readiness to cooperate with Russia for world peace and stability.

From an economic point of view, Russia is an energy supplier to China and, thanks to a land connection, would retain this role even if sea routes from other countries were blocked. Supplying energy to China reduces the impact of war-related sanctions on Russia. However, China always puts its own interests first when carrying out its plans, and although the outbreak of the war in Ukraine was probably not good news for China, it tried to quickly adapt and benefit from it, sometimes at the expense of its alleged partner, Russia.

China has a clear advantage in its relations with Russia. Although the two countries agree and work together on many issues, the Russian leadership was concerned about the growing asymmetry even before the start of the war. Russia is most concerned about foreign policy, where China's vigorous activity has begun to undermine Russia's position in international organisations and in regions that the latter considers part of its sphere of influence.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit held in Samarkand in September 2022 vividly demonstrated that the balance of power in Central Asia has begun to shift in China's favour due to the impact of the Covid pandemic and the war. Ceding positions to China in Central Asia, which Russia considers its traditional sphere of influence, is difficult for Russia, especially if it implies an increased Chinese military presence in the region. While China knows Russia may not like the strengthening of China's relations with countries in Central Asia, its goal is neither to please nor to challenge Russia but to promote its own interests.

China and Russia will continue to compete for influence in non-Western organisations such as the SCO and BRICS. The two states are united by their desire to strengthen anti-Western sentiments in the member states of these organisations and involve them in the plan to reduce the dominance of the US dollar. At the same time, Russia is anxiously watching China's bilateral relations with the countries of these organisations and making diplomatic efforts to counter trends that could undermine its position.



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Source: Sergei Bobylev / AP

Technologically lagging behind the West, Russia hopes to improve cooperation with China in the near future to help China achieve independence as a technology producer, thereby reducing Russia's own dependence on Western technology. In the long run, this carries the risk of becoming dependent on Chinese technology.

China was surprised by Western unity and determination in imposing large-scale sanctions against Russia. From the beginning, China has closely monitored the war in Ukraine and its impact on the global balance of power. On the one hand, this helps adapt to rapid changes and new challenges. On the other hand, learning from Russia's mistakes, China can make better choices and pick a more effective strategy if its confrontation with the West becomes significantly sharper and it finds itself in international isolation similar to Russia – for example, should China begin military aggression against Taiwan.

In the near future, China will continue to put its interests first and behave pragmatically in relations with Russia; it will express support for Russia in its rhetoric and use Russian war narratives to undermine transatlantic cooperation. At the same time, China will likely refrain from endorsing the war, violating secondary sanctions or recognising the occupied territories in Ukraine as part of Russia. It will also likely avoid providing military assistance at the government level. However, this does not preclude the supply of goods with dual and military purposes to Russia by private businesses.

China will very likely continue to use its leverage to force Russia to support its agenda. The more Russia is prepared to give in to China to mitigate the impact of Western sanctions, the less leeway it will have for independent decisions where China's goals differ from its own or are detrimental to them.