

CHINA–RUSSIA RELATIONS IN THE SECOND YEAR OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

The dynamics of China–Russia relations during the war in Ukraine have shown that China primarily pursues strategic interests, while Russia focuses on tactical interests.

Chinese and Russian media and ideological cooperation are likely to align the foreign policies of both countries further.

In a joint statement by the Chinese and Russian heads of state in March 2023, they pledged to deepen cooperation to ensure the security of each other’s citizens, institutions and projects abroad, a theme that inherently carries certain risks.

Although China and Russia both share opposition to the United States and its allies and are aligned in their desire to reshape the existing rules-based world order, their approaches and goals differ significantly. China’s strategy is more broadly focused on realising its global ambitions, whereas Russia’s objectives over the past year have predominantly been tied, in one way or another, to the conflict in Ukraine. For China, its partnership with Russia is viewed within a larger framework, seeking to establish a global network that operates on China’s terms. This has led to a more assertive stance by China on major security issues and some inconsistency in the position of China’s top officials and diplomats on cooperation with Russia.

On the one hand, China has been cautious about openly and fully supporting Russia and seeks to minimise any association with Russia’s aggression in Ukraine. This is because such an association would hinder the resumption of trade relations with Western countries and negatively impact China’s image as a neutral and fair country in the eyes of developing nations. Additionally, China does not recognise the occupied Ukrainian territories as part of Russian territory based on its principle of territorial integrity.

On the other hand, China understands that Russia’s loss could seriously damage its own strategic position. Therefore, China does not join anti-Russian sanctions and supports Russia in continuing the war through means not subject to restrictions. This includes significantly increasing trade volumes and supplying Russia with electronic components, spare parts and dual-use items used in attacks against the Ukrainian military and civilians.

The 12-point document “China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis”, commonly referred to as the Chinese peace plan, and China’s efforts to direct Ukraine to negotiations align with Russian interests but primarily reflect China’s ambition to redefine global security norms through its Global Security Initiative. This initiative is a strategic move by China aimed at weakening the solidarity among Western nations to diminish the United States’ influence in the Asia-Pacific and reduce potential US interference in the event of any future efforts to unify Taiwan with the mainland.

The central aim of media cooperation between the two countries is to protect and promote each other’s interests in both domestic and international information spaces.

Due to shared objectives, media cooperation between China and Russia has significantly intensified during the war in Ukraine. This coordination occurs at the ministerial level, focusing on news production and new media platforms. The central aim of media cooperation between the two countries is to protect and promote each other’s interests in both domestic and international information spaces. An outcome of this cooperation is the alignment of content and terminology. Examples include the description of the war in Ukraine as a “special operation” and the propagation of anti-Western narratives created in Russia throughout Chinese media.



Putin and Xi Jinping’s meeting in Moscow on 21 March 2023. While China and Russia share a common desire to reshape the rule-based world order, their ambitions and the scope of their plans differ significantly.

Source: Sergei Karpukhin / AP

In addition to the media and communication sector, cooperation with China has also increased significantly for academic and research institutions closely associated with Russia’s political elite. For example, in July 2022, the Russian Academy of Sciences renamed its Far East Institute. Its new name, the Institute of China and Contemporary Asia, reflects China’s growing importance to Russia since the beginning of the war. This change reflects a shift in the institute’s research activities and international engagement.

In June 2022, a research centre dedicated to studying the political theories of Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese President, was established within the Russian Academy of Sciences. This centre serves both China’s desire to export its leader’s ideology abroad and the Russian Academy’s willingness to provide a platform for this endeavour. Moreover, the Academy saw the opportunity, through the Xi Jinping research centre, to sign cooperation agreements with various Chinese state institutions and think tanks involved in

China's intelligence and influence activities abroad, such as the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). This creates an opportunity for coordinating intelligence and influence activities. However, the Russian Academy's "China turn" does not primarily indicate the growing influence of Xi Jinping's ideology in Russia's academic and political circles. Instead, it reflects the increased ideological convergence between the two countries and both sides' willingness to cooperate in this direction.

The foreword to the sixth 2023 issue of *Polis*, a political studies journal published by the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO RAN), which is associated with Russia's ruling elite, explicitly states that the concept of a "multipolar world order" advocated by Russia and the "community with a shared future" introduced by Xi Jinping as a novel framework for international relations are fundamentally identical.

Unlike a previous statement made during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, the joint statement by the Chinese and Russian heads of state during Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow on 21-22 March 2023 made no references to a "boundless friendship". This suggests that China was careful to avoid any speculation that its cooperation with Russia had no boundaries, particularly to dispel any notions that it might include, directly or indirectly, forms of military aggression. China also wants to avoid parallels between the Taiwan question and the war in Ukraine, and it refrains from criticising the West collectively, as this approach would affect not only the United States but also European countries with whom China hopes to improve relations. However, this does not indicate distancing itself from Russia; instead, it reflects China's tactical manoeuvring in relations with Europe and Russia.

A point in the joint statement by Xi and Putin that raises particular concern relates to the commitment of both countries to ensure the security of their citizens, institutions and projects abroad: "The Parties attach great importance to ensuring the security of, and protecting the rights and interests of, persons and institutions of the two countries located abroad. They will continue to promote the establishment of appropriate bilateral and multilateral mechanisms and specialised dialogue and to continuously expand formats and areas of cooperation related to ensuring the security of citizens, projects and institutions abroad."

This point, mentioned for the first time in a joint statement at the highest level, suggests that China and Russia may begin to express support for each other in matters of protecting the interests and rights of their citizens and institutions abroad in the future.

Notably, the text describes the group needing protection as "persons located abroad" (находящиеся за рубежом лица), which could be interpreted to include individuals of Russian ethnicity, regardless of their citizenship. In the Chinese version, the phrase "rights and interests" (权益, *quanyi*) is used, a term the Chinese media has employed to criticise other nations' treatment of ethnic minorities. This language could allow Russia to seek China's support for its policy of protecting "compatriots" abroad. While the statement does not mandate specific actions, it potentially heightens future security risks for countries like Estonia.