

Turning point? Putin, Xi, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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TURNING POINT? PUTIN, XI, AND THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

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KEY FINDINGS

- Putin's war in Ukraine has highlighted the resilience but also the limitations of Sino-Russian partnership. Far from being an "arc of autocracy", this is an interests-based relationship between strategically autonomous powers.
- Foreign policy coordination between China and Russia is limited by their different views of global order. Beijing is invested in a stable international system, albeit one skewed in its favour, whereas Moscow thrives on disorder and uncertainty.
- Xi Jinping aims to preserve the Sino-Russian partnership while maintaining ties with the West. But Beijing's balancing act will become harder to sustain as the war continues.
- The balance of power within the bilateral relationship has tilted sharply towards Beijing. Russia is more reliant on China than ever. The long-term outlook for the relationship is unpromising.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At their Beijing summit in February 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin proclaimed a “friendship without limits”. Yet Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, and the Chinese response to it, has exposed the limitations of the Sino–Russian partnership. Far from being an “axis of authoritarians”, this is a traditional great power relationship centred in strategic calculus. Chinese and Russian interests diverge in key respects, and the war has highlighted contrasting visions of global order and disorder.

Xi Jinping has attempted to steer a “neutral” course that preserves the partnership with Russia while protecting China’s global interests. This balancing act will become harder to sustain as the war in Ukraine drags on. Beijing’s default position is still to lean towards Moscow. For both sides, the partnership is too important to fail. But over time, its quality will erode. As China and Russia follow different trajectories of development, the commonalities between them will become fewer. The relationship will become increasingly unequal and dysfunctional, and be defined principally by its constraints.

INTRODUCTION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to the most serious conflict in Europe since the end of the Second World War. It is also the worst breach of international order since North Korea invaded the South more than seven decades ago. Against this turbulent backdrop, the Sino–Russian partnership has assumed pivotal importance. To many, it is a game-changer — not just for the outcome of the war, but for the future of global order.¹

The war in Ukraine has highlighted both the resilience of the Sino–Russian partnership and its limitations.

The invasion is a litmus test of the relationship. Will Xi Jinping back “best friend” Vladimir Putin² in his confrontation with the West, thus signalling the re-emergence of strategic and ideological bipolarity after more than three decades? Or will the war in Ukraine see a weakening of Sino–Russian comity, as Beijing belatedly recognises the downsides of associating with an international delinquent? Or perhaps recent events will have relatively little impact on their partnership, which will proceed, as before, according to its own particular logic.

It is of course risky to draw conclusions about the “Ukraine effect” on Sino–Russian relations when circumstances on the ground are still fluid and the outcomes of the war uncertain. Strategic foresight in Beijing and Moscow over Ukraine has been conspicuous by its absence, making it difficult to second-guess their longer-term intentions. Nevertheless, some patterns are taking shape, and on the basis of these we may hazard a number of judgements.

1. The war in Ukraine has highlighted both the resilience of the Sino–Russian partnership and its limitations. For all the talk about an alliance or axis of authoritarians, this remains an interests-based relationship between strategically autonomous actors. Geopolitical calculus matters far more than convergence over so-called authoritarian values.³ And foreign policy coordination is constrained by very different views of global order.
2. Xi Jinping aims to steer a “neutral” course that protects the Sino–Russian partnership while maintaining Beijing’s ties with the West.⁴ His sympathies lie almost entirely with Vladimir Putin, but China’s dependence on the international system necessitates a flexible approach. Xi’s balancing act will become harder to sustain as the war drags on, but his default position is to preserve the Sino–Russian partnership in some form.

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3. However the war unfolds, the balance of power within the bilateral relationship will tilt radically towards Beijing. Moscow's escalating confrontation with the West means that Russia is now more reliant on China, geopolitically and economically, than at any time in the two countries' history.
4. Russia represents a considerably greater threat than China to international order, and will remain so while Putin sits in the Kremlin. Some Western cooperation with Beijing is still possible, but attempts to entice it away from Moscow are counter-productive. Instead, the West must seize the Ukrainian "moment" to revitalise liberal values, norms, and institutions.

ON THE EVE — THE XI-PUTIN SUMMIT

The consensus view on the Xi–Putin summit of 4 February 2022 was that it was a landmark in the development of the Sino–Russian partnership.⁵ Observers noted that Putin was one of the few international leaders to attend the Beijing Winter Olympics, amidst a diplomatic boycott by the West. They remarked on the raft of bilateral agreements, especially in the energy sector. But most of all, they focused on the joint statement issued by the two presidents, which in the eyes of many heralded a new phase in their already substantial cooperation.⁶

Impressive visuals...

It is worth, then, analysing the joint statement for what it said — and didn't say — about the Sino–Russian partnership. There were several notable features. First, the statement went further than any of its predecessors in emphasising the closeness of bilateral ties and the convergence of views on international questions. In addition to employing phrases such as a friendship with “no limits” and “no forbidden areas of cooperation”, it asserted that the Sino–Russian relationship was “superior” to the alliances of the Cold War era.⁷



Xi Jinping meets with Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in Johannesburg, 26 July 2018 (Kremlin.ru)

Second, the statement was overtly hostile towards the West and the United States specifically. In reiterating a commitment to “indivisible” security, it attacked “ideologised Cold War approaches” and “closed bloc structures”. It explicitly

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criticised the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for the first time, as well as the AUKUS trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; the Quad security dialogue (Australia, India, Japan, the United States); and the US alliance system in general. It also stressed the destabilising impact of America’s withdrawal from various arms control agreements. Although the statement did not mention Ukraine by name, it noted that “the Chinese side is sympathetic to and supports the proposals put forward by the Russian Federation to create long-term legally binding security guarantees in Europe” — a reference to two draft agreements published by the Russian Foreign Ministry in December 2021 on US–Russia and Russia–NATO relations, respectively.⁸



A joint statement from the Xi–Putin summit of 4 February 2022 spoke of Xi’s desire for a “community of common destiny for mankind”. Pictured: Xi’s Seven Years as an Educated Youth, from the Xi Jinping Thought series (Akira/Unsplash)

Third, the statement had a more ideological feel than previous editions. The first substantive section following the preamble was a lengthy defence of the democratic credentials and practices of both countries. It insisted that there was no “one-size-fits-all template”, and inveighed against “interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states under the pretext of protecting democracy and human rights”.

Finally, the overall tone of the statement was defensive. This was reflected not only in the claim about “long-standing traditions of democracy” in China and Russia, but also in the almost unrelenting criticism of US and Western policy throughout the text. Although there were the usual references to the “redistribution of power in the world”, “the democratisation of international relations”, “multipolarity”, and a “polycentric world order”, as well as to Xi’s “community of common destiny for mankind”, the statement read more as a diatribe against the West than a celebration of Sino–Russian cooperation. It was lacking in the triumphalism that has marked many Chinese and Russian public utterances over the years.



Vladimir Putin: “Integration of Russia and Ukraine...would lead to the emergence of a rival, a global rival for Europe and the world.” (Kremlin.ru)

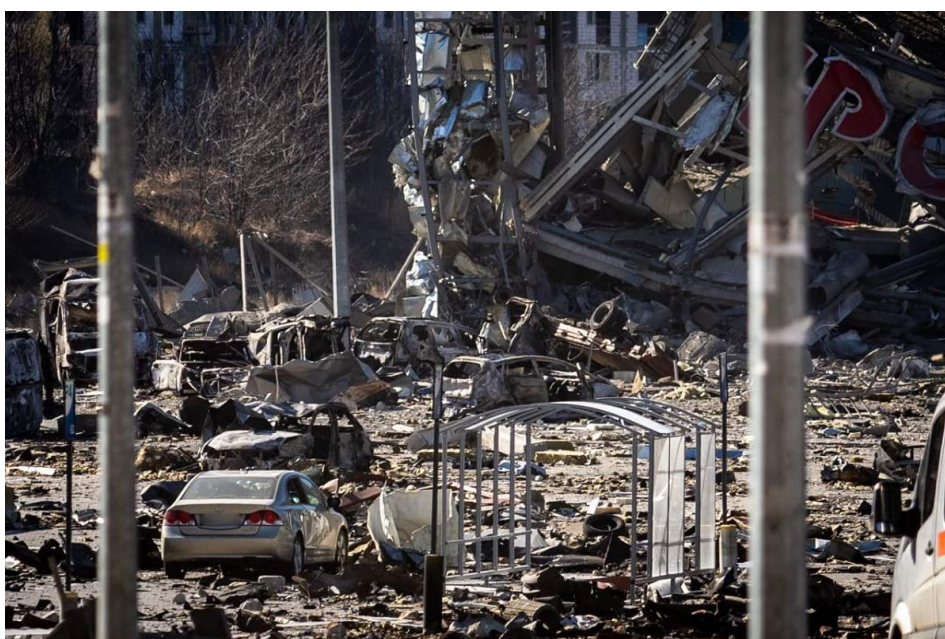
...but less than meets the eye

In light of subsequent events in Ukraine, the Xi–Putin February summit has acquired an almost totemic status. Yet much of the language in the joint statement rehearsed familiar tropes. The references to a friendship with “no limits” and “no forbidden areas of cooperation” were unremarkable. Xi and Putin could hardly have suggested otherwise, especially given speculation about a loss of momentum in the relationship during the Covid era of physical separation.⁹ The “no limits” formulation has been around since at least 2016, its advantage being that it allows “a vague, but flexible and large enough space for imagination in conceptualising the bilateral relationship”.¹⁰ Likewise, it has been true for some time that there are no forbidden areas of cooperation between China and Russia. In 2021, bilateral trade reached an all-time high of US\$147 billion.¹¹ Military-to-military ties have expanded significantly since 2014, while technological

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cooperation has also grown, highlighted by the entry of Huawei into the Russian 5G market.

It is no great shock that Beijing should have allowed critical references to NATO to appear in the statement. Although NATO enlargement is a peripheral concern of Chinese foreign policy, the US alliance system in Asia, the Quad, and AUKUS are very much at the forefront of Beijing's concerns. It would have been odd to have left NATO off the blacklist, and incompatible with the image of Sino-Russian solidarity that Xi and Putin were aiming to project.¹² The same is true of arms control, where Beijing and Moscow have their own particular priorities, but share a common concern about US missile defence plans. What was more noteworthy was the tepid language on Russian proposals for European security — “the Chinese side is *sympathetic to and supports...*”. This hinted at a lack of enthusiasm in Beijing for Moscow's approach to Ukraine even before the invasion.¹³ (If China had wanted to signal unequivocal backing for the Russian position, it could just have stated that “the Chinese side fully supports ...”.)



A shopping centre destroyed by Russian shelling in Kyiv's Podilskyi district, 20 March 2022 (Kyiv City State Administration/Wikimedia commons)

Far from foreshadowing a full-blown Sino-Russian alliance, the joint statement appeared to rule this out. In asserting that the relationship was superior to Cold War alliances, it indicated satisfaction with the existing format — a comprehensive strategic partnership without mutual defence commitments. This capacious framework encourages bilateral cooperation, but does not inhibit Beijing and Moscow from developing ties with other partners. Both sides retain strategic flexibility and policy independence.¹⁴

Much of the Western misreading of the Xi–Putin summit has been conditioned by subsequent events in Ukraine. Thus, the phrase “no limits” has become equated with Beijing greenlighting the Russian invasion.¹⁵ Yet the evidence points to the Chinese leadership being taken by surprise — from its failure to make provision for the 6000 Chinese students stranded in Ukraine to its haphazard public diplomacy in the immediate aftermath of the invasion.¹⁶ Putin would almost certainly have told Xi of Russia’s impending “special military operation”, since not to have done so would have been a clear betrayal of their personal relationship. However, Putin

would hardly have sought Xi’s permission, just as the Chinese president would not expect to consult the Kremlin on how to manage Taiwan. Xi may or may not have shared Putin’s confidence that the invasion would conclude in a quick and decisive Russian victory. But either way, he would have been in no position to demur.

Contrary to conventional wisdom in the West, Sino–Russian partnership is not driven primarily by ideological hostility towards the United States and the West.

Strengths and limitations

So what does this tell us about the Sino–Russian partnership on the eve of invasion? The most uncontroversial conclusion is that in February 2022 the relationship had reached its zenith. Despite distinct differences in their approaches to global order (see below), Beijing and Moscow regarded each other as their closest international partner, and were committed to maximising bilateral cooperation. No less important, they were keen to damp down any disagreements or dissonance between them.

Contrary to conventional wisdom in the West,¹⁷ Sino–Russian partnership is *not* driven primarily by ideological hostility towards the United States and the West. This is a classic great power relationship driven by common interests rather than shared values. There are multiple reasons why Beijing and Moscow value their partnership: a sense of political comfort, security confidence-building (they share a 4300-kilometre border), economic complementarity, and similar views on a range of international issues. The latter include a shared opposition to US global dominance, but it would be wrong to see this commonality as the glue that binds an otherwise tenuous relationship. The Sino–Russian partnership is multi-faceted, versatile, and resilient. Even when viewed through a narrow geopolitical lens, close association with China has enhanced Russia’s global status, while Beijing enjoys a well-disposed neighbour that acquiesces in (although rarely abets) its pursuit of Chinese strategic interests — in the Indo-Pacific, across Eurasia, in the Arctic, and globally.¹⁸

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Beijing and Moscow do not, however, share a common worldview. True, both oppose a “rules-based international order” centred on US global leadership and Western liberal values. Yet talk of an authoritarian “axis” or, more fancifully still, an “arc of autocracy”,¹⁹ is overblown.

China is invested in global order, albeit one where it exerts considerably greater influence than at present and where, correspondingly, US (and Western) dominance is much reduced. Xi has talked about China assuming a global leadership role, but this is about being a global leader, not *the* global leader.²⁰ Moreover, he seeks to realise this aspiration by working within the international system. The steady growth of Chinese participation in United Nations bodies points to an inside player that games the system to maximum advantage. Beijing’s approach is essentially parasitic and incremental — it operates to expand its influence within the host body and thereby to “reform” it. China is undoubtedly a revisionist power, but not a revolutionary one in the sense of wishing to demolish the international order.



Vladimir Putin has readily resorted to military force in Georgia, Syria, Ukraine, Iraq, Libya, Mali, and the Central African Republic. Pictured: Russian troops on the highway linking eastern and western Georgia, 19 August 2008 (BBC World Service/Flickr)

Russia's overarching purpose is very different. It is above all a disruptive power — an “arsonist of the international system”.²¹ Its goal is not reform or evolution of the existing order; it is its complete overthrow. Moscow thrives on instability, whether caused by itself or others. The more fluid and uncertain the external environment, the greater the scope for Russia to make its mark. Unlike China, it neither has the capacity nor the patience to work away at the international system by methodically increasing its influence in multilateral institutions and with key

China and Russia are strategically autonomous actors, whose influence on each other's behaviour is limited and indirect at best.

constituencies. It prefers more direct methods. That is why Putin has resorted so readily to military force — in Georgia, Syria, Ukraine, and, more covertly, in Iraq, Libya, Mali, and the Central African Republic. He and those around him identify Russia's ability and *will* to wage war as a comparative advantage that few others, apart from the United States, possess (or even desire). In a stable international system — whether US-led, Sino-American (G2-plus), or multilateral rules-based — that “asset” would be largely nullified.

These very different approaches towards global order and disorder have been highlighted in the course of Putin's war in Ukraine. They have also demonstrated why it is problematic for China and Russia to coordinate their foreign policies. They cheerlead on behalf of each other, offering moral and political support to their partner when their interests align. But China and Russia are strategically autonomous actors, whose influence on each other's behaviour is limited and indirect at best. For both, foreign policy is a sovereign affair. This is the main reason why there has been little interest, especially in Beijing, in transforming the partnership into a more formal, but also more binding, political-military alliance. For then there would be an obligation to consult more closely; and they would lose the flexibility and autonomy of decision-making they prize so highly.

INVASION AND THE SINO–RUSSIAN PARTNERSHIP

The course of the latest Russian invasion of Ukraine²² has confounded expectations in Moscow and Beijing. Instead of achieving a quick victory, Russia's armed forces have suffered huge losses and failed to achieve their original objectives: the occupation of Kyiv and other major cities; the elimination or surrender of President Volodymyr Zelensky and his administration; and the end of Ukraine as a sovereign democratic state. Instead, the Ukrainian resistance has been remarkably effective, and President Zelensky has emerged as an heroic figure both domestically and internationally.



Volodymyr Zelensky delivers a speech in the Riigikogu, Estonian Parliament, 13 April 2022 (President of Ukraine/Flickr)

Putin's actions have helped forge a powerful sense of Ukrainian national identity — the very phenomenon he had sought to crush. Western and transatlantic unity has held up surprisingly well. NATO is set to expand further with the likely accession of Finland and Sweden. And sanctions have caused immense damage to the Russian economy.²³ With so much going awry from the Kremlin's perspective, the invasion has turned into a critical test of the quality and resilience of Sino–Russian partnership.

Beijing's discomfiture

It is commonplace to assert that China has been the big winner from the war.²⁴ The conflict has diverted the attention of the West, and the United States in particular, from China. Beijing can pursue its strategic goals — reunification of Taiwan with the mainland; expanding Chinese influence across the Indo-Pacific; challenging US global leadership — safe in the knowledge that the United States and its European allies will be preoccupied by an unrelentingly hostile Russia for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, Moscow will be in thrall to Beijing — politically, economically, and geopolitically. An already asymmetrical partnership will become a patron-client relationship in all but name.²⁵

Putin's struggles over Ukraine have undermined authoritarianism's reputation for efficiency. He has been shown to be not only vicious, but also acutely fallible.

This reasoning, while plausible, is flawed on several counts. Most obviously, the juxtaposition of the Xi-Putin summit of 4 February and the subsequent Russian invasion of Ukraine has cast an unforgiving spotlight on China. Beijing stands accused of directly aiding the invasion or, at best, turning a blind eye to Moscow's trashing of international norms. This guilt by association has been compounded by its adherence to the Kremlin line that the conflict in Ukraine is not a "war", but a "special military operation" provoked by the United States and NATO. Beijing's refusal to condemn the brutalities inflicted on the Ukrainian civilian population has aggravated the reputational damage to China. Its platitudes about national sovereignty and territorial integrity have never looked so insincere.

The Russian invasion has also served to unify the West. Until relatively recently, Beijing was able to play on transatlantic divisions over China policy by reaching out to Europe. It also benefited from the erosion and discrediting of the liberal international order, especially during the presidency of Donald Trump.²⁶ Biden's mishandling of the military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the row over AUKUS, and the rise of illiberalism in Europe confirmed the impression of a divided, fractious and at times demoralised West. However, the Russian invasion has thrown the West a lifeline. Transatlantic unity is stronger than in years. The United States has recovered its leadership mojo. The concept of a unitary West again has meaning. The Europeans are increasingly inclined to view China in adversarial terms.²⁷ And liberalism and the notion of a US-led "rules-based international order" have received a major stimulus.

Conversely, Putin's struggles over Ukraine have undermined authoritarianism's reputation for efficiency. He has been shown to be not only vicious, but also acutely fallible. The authoritarian "brand" has been severely tarnished. Of course,

Chinese Communist Party rule is very different from Putin's personalised authoritarianism. Nevertheless, Xi cannot be happy that Putin has been so badly exposed, and that the Kremlin's conduct of the war has highlighted the vices of an excessive concentration of power. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has become an *anti*-model of how an authoritarian state should pursue its interests.

It is naïve to imagine, too, that Beijing will obtain much relief from Washington, whatever happens in Ukraine. Democrats and Republicans alike agree on the need to confront China. Meanwhile, Russian actions have had the effect of limiting Beijing's room for manoeuvre, especially over Taiwan whose forcible reunification with the mainland looks less likely than in a long time.²⁸ If the Biden administration was prepared to engage actively on Ukraine — until recently a peripheral concern — then it would certainly respond decisively to foreign aggression in America's primary theatre of strategic interest, the Indo-Pacific. The logistics of an amphibious military operation against Taiwan would also be hugely challenging, while China's lack of combat experience would radically increase the risk of failure.²⁹

Threading the eye of the needle

The uncertain course of the war presents China with a major dilemma. How does it balance preservation of the partnership with Russia without incurring the retribution of a united West? It is beset, simultaneously, by Russian requests for military and economic assistance and by Western demands that it dissociate itself publicly from Moscow's actions. The Sino–Russian partnership is very important to Beijing, but China's growth and long-term prospects are predicated on integration with the global economic and financial system and ready access to vital technologies (such as semi-conductors).³⁰ Its fortunes will continue to depend primarily on the US-led international order.³¹

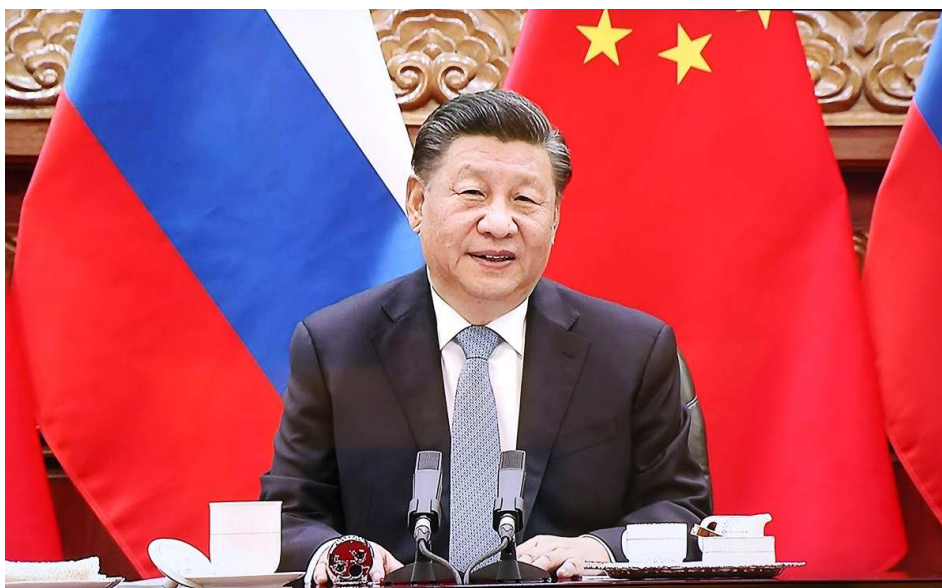
Beijing has attempted to reconcile these tensions by pursuing a multi-track policy. Rhetorically, it is full-throated in its support for the Kremlin's position. There has not been a breath of criticism over Putin's conduct of the war and his flouting of international norms. Chinese official pronouncements blame the West, and the United States specifically, for the current crisis. This official line is amplified by the Chinese media, which has enthusiastically disseminated Russian disinformation.³² Occasional freelance attempts to present a more truthful picture have been quickly shut down,³³ and in any case are outweighed by

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conspiracy theories, such as the bogus story on US biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine.

Substantive Chinese support for Russia, however, has been virtually nil. Despite US and European Union fears that Beijing might provide arms, such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and advanced missiles, to make up for Moscow's losses, this has not happened. Beijing has also refrained from providing sanctions-busting assistance; in some areas it has done just the opposite. Early in the conflict, Chinese state banks refused to provide US dollar-denominated letters of credit to finance imports from Russia. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB) suspended transactions related to Russia and Belarus. And several leading Chinese companies, such as Huawei, Geely, and Lenovo, curtailed or suspended their Russia operations, while Beijing refused to supply spare parts to Russia's commercial airline fleet.³⁴ Since then, there has been little sign of a return to the status quo ante. Although trade in some natural resources has grown, the exodus of Chinese tech companies from Russia has continued apace, while smaller trading companies have been put off by the volatility of the ruble.³⁵



Xi Jinping (in virtual conference with Vladimir Putin) during talks on 15 December 2021 (Kremlin.ru)

Internationally, the Chinese government has called for a diplomatic solution to the conflict, but played no meaningful role. Beijing's diffidence may reflect an appreciation of its limited influence on Moscow, as well as fears that the Kremlin could interpret such mediation as a weakening of Chinese support. There is an added difficulty: China is self-evidently not a neutral party unlike Turkey, which has hosted Russia-Ukraine peace talks.³⁶

Beijing appears to be hoping that it can thread the eye of the needle. Ideally, the Kremlin would be content with the present level of Chinese political and (dis)information support. The United States and European Union would not impose sanctions on Chinese companies. And international pressure on Beijing to act would be limited to the West. China might not emerge from the crisis in credit, but at least the damage to its interests would be contained.

The difficulty Beijing faces, however, is that the pressures on it are likely to mount. It is one thing to portray the Russian invasion as a justifiable response to US and NATO provocations — a view widely shared in the non-Western world.³⁷ It is quite another to keep ignoring the large-scale, wanton destruction of Ukraine and slaughter of its civilians. There is also the very real possibility that the conflict could escalate. How does Beijing respond if a frustrated Putin exhausts his conventional weapons playbook and moves to chemical and biological warfare or even a tactical nuclear strike? Of if the war extends beyond Ukraine to NATO frontline states? Beijing could also face demands from Moscow to deliver more than words, especially if the war continues to go badly for Russia. If this support takes the form of military or sanctions-busting assistance, then China risks significant punitive measures from the West.³⁸

If Xi decides that Russia represents an increasingly bad risk, he may discover there is nowhere else to go.

For Beijing, then, an early end to the war is clearly desirable. But there are no signs of this happening. Quite the contrary: the conflict may drag out for months, possibly years. This will subject Beijing's temporising approach to increasing strain. If Xi continues to favour partnership with Russia, China could suffer major consequences: in its interaction with the US-dominated global economy; in relations with the European Union, its largest trading partner; in an increasingly hostile Indo-Pacific environment; and in the form of greater obstacles to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).³⁹ More broadly, a protracted war in Ukraine would cause lasting global economic instability, resulting in massive losses to Chinese companies, soaring energy and food prices, and the disruption of essential supply chains.

But if Beijing distances itself from Moscow, many of the gains from the Sino-Russian partnership could be jeopardised: security along their lengthy common border; Russian acquiescence to Chinese economic penetration in Central Eurasia and the Arctic; and Moscow's geopolitical support vis-à-vis the United States. Some of the difficulties the West has encountered with Russia could be replicated in Sino-Russian relations. Russia might be in decline, but it remains a formidable disruptive power with the ability to undermine Chinese interests should it choose.

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Moreover, if Xi decides that Russia represents an increasingly bad risk, he may discover there is nowhere else to go. The reaction in Washington and European capitals to a sea-change in Chinese policy might be grudging at best, along the lines of “about time, too”.⁴⁰ China could end up alienating *a//sides* and find itself strategically isolated: its relationship with Russia degraded; facing a buoyant United States and revived transatlantic consensus; and surrounded by neighbours — India, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam — that view it principally as a threat.

SINO–RUSSIAN PARTNERSHIP POST-UKRAINE: FOUR SCENARIOS

In the short to medium term (two to five years), the Sino–Russian partnership will be shaped by the outcomes of the war in Ukraine. Since these are so uncertain, it makes sense to consider several scenarios: first, where Moscow loses; second, where there is some sort of accommodation or, alternatively, stalemate with Kyiv; third, where Putin secures a decisive victory; and, finally, where there is an uncontrolled escalation of the conflict.

Putin loses

There are various sub-scenarios where Putin might be judged to have lost — from the complete rolling back of invading Russian forces to a mutually unsatisfactory compromise that leaves Crimea in the Russian Federation, but returns previously occupied areas of the Donbass to Kyiv. The defining characteristic of defeat, however, would be the same: a general perception — including in Moscow and Beijing — that the invasion had failed to achieve its major objectives, and that Russia’s position in the world had become seriously weakened as a consequence.

As the post-Cold War record has shown, a Russia that feels humiliated is a resentful Russia, bent on “righting” history.

In this scenario, the Sino–Russian partnership could evolve in several ways. Beijing might take advantage of a damaged Putin to press for economic concessions, such as increased imports of oil, gas, and other commodities at knockdown prices. It might demand more concrete support for Chinese goals in the Indo-Pacific, such as an overtly pro-Beijing stance on South China Sea territoriality and the expansion of transfers of high-end military technology. Less plausibly, it could seek to regain vast territories in the Russian Far East lost in the nineteenth century as a result of the “unequal treaties”.⁴¹ (The risks of damage to the relationship, though, would outweigh any benefits to China.)

Much would depend on how Russia — with or without Putin — adapts to defeat. One immediate consequence would be a far greater dependence on Chinese trade, investment, and economic assistance. But there are also psychological factors to consider. As the post-Cold War record has shown, a Russia that feels humiliated is a resentful Russia, bent on “righting” history. The intensity of Putin’s revanchism marks him out from most of his compatriots. Yet he also reflects a wider consensus that Russia is a *natural* great power.⁴² Defeat in Ukraine is unlikely to erode such beliefs or lead to acceptance of a reduced status in the

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world. Just as Russia has kicked back against the West in recent decades, so it will resist being patronised by China.

Thus far, Beijing has been cognisant of Moscow's sensitivities about inequality — talking up Sino–Russian friendship, Russia as a great power, and Putin as an outstanding leader. For the time being, it would look to keep Moscow onside. The strategic partnership would be less central to Chinese foreign policy than before, but remain important. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of defeat, Xi might take extra care to massage the Kremlin's bruised feelings and defuse possible suggestions that China could have done more to help Russia in its time of need. A weakened Russia could either be a sullen contrarian that complicates the realisation of Chinese goals, or a useful (if diminished) partner in counterbalancing the United States.



Antonov Airport in Hostomel on 3 April 2022 after the Kyiv offensive of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Oleksandr Ratushniak/Wikimedia Commons)

It is worth emphasising that Beijing has little interest in a clientelist relationship. A Russia that is *too weak* would be more a burden than an asset — an outsized North Korea. Worst of all would be collapse of the Putin regime. This would embolden the United States, boost the credibility of liberal norms and institutions, delegitimise authoritarian rule everywhere, weaken China's geopolitical position, and destabilise its neighbourhood.

Accommodation or stalemate with Kyiv

An accommodation or stalemate in the conflict would be a “draw”. Russia might hold on to Crimea and expand its control over the Donbass, but make no other territorial gains. Ukraine would retain access to the Black Sea, consolidate its national sovereignty, and move further towards Europe. A variation of this scenario would see a return to the “frozen” conflict of 2015–21. There would be sporadic fighting and a nominal but ineffectual political process along the lines of the now defunct Minsk-2 agreement. Outstanding issues such as regional elections and autonomy in the Donbass would remain unresolved. And the potential for renewed major hostilities would be considerable, since Putin would almost certainly look to change “facts on the ground” at the first opportunity.

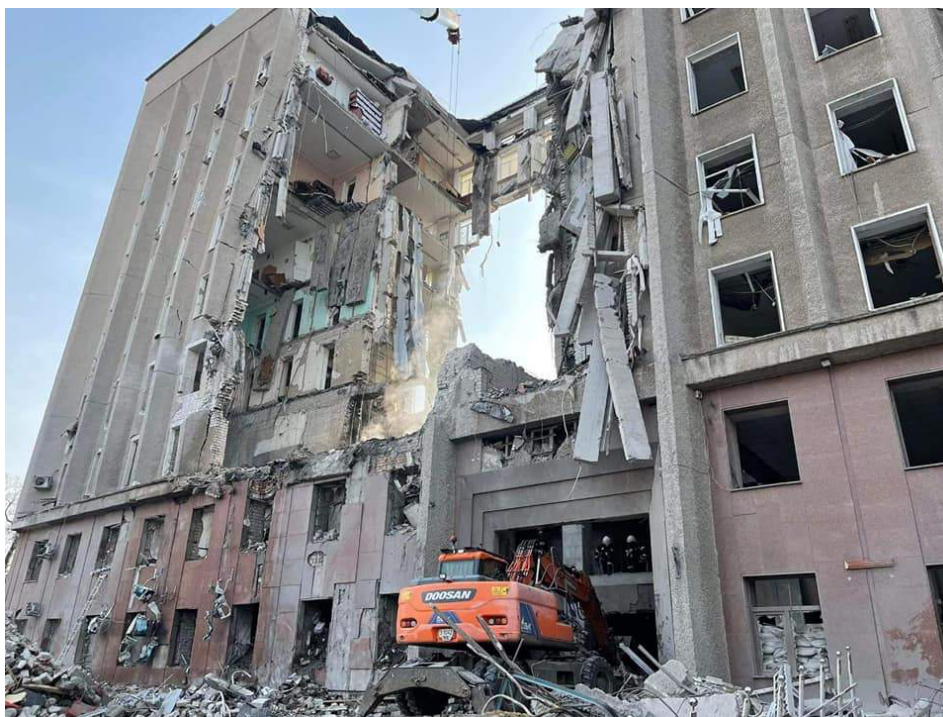
For Beijing, the draw scenario would be unsatisfactory, but tolerable. The worst of the fighting would be over, at least for a while, so the international system could revert to a relative stability. Putin would save some face and consolidate his hold on power, but be more reliant than ever on Beijing’s favour. China would be under less pressure to choose sides. And prolonged confrontation between Russia and the West would ensure that the Europeans would focus primarily on European affairs rather than supporting the United States in the Indo-Pacific. The downsides for Beijing would be that a draw might look a lot like a Putin defeat, given the combat losses Russia has sustained and the damage to its military and political reputation. The association of authoritarianism with strength will have been discredited. And the United States would again be free to pursue its primary aim of containing and confronting China.

For Beijing, the draw scenario would be unsatisfactory, but tolerable. The worst of the fighting would be over, at least for a while, so the international system could revert to a relative stability.

Assuming a relative peace holds for a while, the Sino–Russian partnership would continue along its present path. There would be closer military cooperation. Economic ties would expand, principally in the energy sector where slumping European demand for Russian oil and gas would force Moscow to depend on Asian markets, China above all. Putin could try to persuade Xi that the two countries should conclude a formal alliance, although it is hard to see Beijing agreeing. Putin’s gross mishandling of the Ukrainian question has highlighted the risks of China being sucked into a conflict not of its own making and beyond its control. The format of a flexible strategic partnership without mutual defence obligations has more than justified itself in the light of events.

Putin wins

The biggest game-changer for the Sino–Russian partnership could be if Putin’s invasion succeeds in achieving all or most of its current objectives: annexation of the whole of the Donbass; capture of the port city of Odessa; and closing off Ukraine’s access to the Black Sea. If Putin were able to parlay these successes into forcing Kyiv to sue for a humiliating peace — his original purpose — the Kremlin’s victory would be near-complete. Ukraine would remain formally independent, but no longer sovereign in the proper sense. It might have “neutral” status, but this would be a miserable version of the Finlandisation model advocated by some.⁴³ Ukrainian foreign and security policy would be dictated out of Moscow, and the economy would be emasculated.



A Russian rocket strike on a building in Mykolaiv, Ukraine, 29 March 2022, in which dozens were killed or injured (State Emergency Service of Ukraine/Wikimedia Commons)

Beijing would be delighted with these outcomes. The bad memories of early Russian setbacks would fade, to be replaced by more congenial realities: revitalisation of the authoritarian brand; humbling of the West; the discrediting of US leadership and Western alliances; and the demise of the liberal order. Defeat for Ukraine would be a landmark in the shift in global power from the United States to China.

Nothing would do more to boost Sino–Russian convergence than a Putin victory. Beijing would recognise Russia’s enhanced value as a geopolitical asset in Eurasia

and the Indo-Pacific. Moscow's historical Western-centrism would give way to a growing Sinocentrism. In principle, the Kremlin would look to dilute Russia's reliance on China by expanding ties with other key non-Western players, such as India, while rebuilding relations with selected European countries. But in practice, it would be difficult to mitigate Russia's China-dependence, especially with no end in sight to Western sanctions, and relations with Europe beyond repair. Whereas other players may be (or become) useful partners, China remains indispensable to Russia under virtually any scenario.

Beijing and Moscow might still eschew a formal alliance. After all, the present arrangement will have worked a treat, so why change? But in the end, this question may be moot. More important than titles is whether China and Russia build a new "special relationship", involving active coordination of their foreign policies, close strategic consultation, real military interoperability, and tight economic complementarities. The partnership would favour China, but Russia would retain geopolitical heft.

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Today, a Putin "win" seems improbable, but there are variables that could make it less so. One such is the victory of Donald Trump or a Trumpian candidate in the 2024 US presidential election. If this were to happen, there would be serious doubts about the resolve of Washington — and by extension the West — to resist Russian aggression. There is also a big question mark over whether transatlantic and European solidarity will stay the course in the face of growing economic pressures — such as rising fuel and food prices — and general "Ukraine fatigue".

Uncontrolled escalation

The previous scenarios have three common denominators: the Sino-Russian partnership would continue in some form; the balance within the relationship would tilt heavily towards Beijing; and China would determine the level and tempo of bilateral engagement. This raises the question whether there is any scenario in which the partnership might unravel. What if Putin resorts to chemical and biological weapons or a tactical nuclear strike against Ukrainian targets? Or if the conflict extends beyond Ukraine's borders to become a more generalised war between Russia and NATO? Is there a tipping point for the Sino-Russian relationship, or is it effectively bomb-proof (at least while Xi and Putin rule)?

There are, of course, various levels and types of escalation. If Putin were to employ chemical or biological weapons against Ukrainian targets, the effect on Sino-Russian partnership would likely be minimal. Given the Chinese government's indifference to Russian war crimes against the Ukrainian population, there is little reason to suppose that it would be especially outraged by Moscow's use of chemical or biological weapons.⁴⁴ More probably, it would continue to blame the United States for stoking the conflict, while calling for dialogue and a diplomatic resolution.

A nuclear strike would represent a drastic escalation. But even in this case, it is questionable whether Beijing would intervene, much less forsake Moscow. One reason is inertia. Over the past three decades, China and Russia have got so used to the habit of partnership that they find it almost impossible to contemplate separation, even under the most egregious of circumstances. Such a prospect is all the more unpalatable when their respective relations with the West are in crisis. In the current climate, the default response is to rationalise each other's behaviour, blame the West, and carry on as before.

A wider conflict between Russia and NATO would be harder to sidestep. Yet surprising as it may seem, Beijing might try to do this. Active military support for Russia is improbable, while exploiting the distraction of a European war to invade Taiwan would be fraught with risk given the vigorous US response over Ukraine. The Chinese leadership might attempt to broker a peace process, buffing up its international credentials in the process. But it is hard to see such efforts gaining traction. Beijing's transparent favouritism towards Moscow means that it lacks legitimacy and credibility as a would-be peacemaker.

THE WEST’S RESPONSE

The war in Ukraine is about much more than the future of a sovereign democratic nation. At stake is the fate of the post-Cold War settlement in Europe, the viability of the West as a political and normative entity, and the very idea of international order. A Russian victory would see the return to a divided Europe, but without the safeguards of the Cold War era. Serial rules-breaking would become the new “normal” in international relations, as a Hobbesian dystopia of “perpetual war” replaces the relic of the “rules-based international order”. Inevitably, too, Beijing would draw conclusions from the example of Western weakness to expand China’s geopolitical footprint in the Indo-Pacific, and assert its global leadership credentials.



*Joe Biden participates in a virtual bilateral meeting with Xi Jinping,
15 November 2021 (Cameron Smith/White House/Flickr)*

That is why the West must do all it can to ensure that Ukraine wins, or at least does not lose, the war against Putin’s aggression. To achieve this outcome, it will have to fundamentally change its approach towards the Sino–Russian partnership, guided by three broad principles.

Putin's Russia, not Xi's China, is the principal menace to global order

Ever since Donald Trump became US president in 2017, Washington has identified China as the greatest threat to Western interests, democratic values, and global order. The initial promise of a more nuanced approach under the Biden administration⁴⁵ soon gave way to a policy that was no less hawkish. Biden's attitude towards Russia, by contrast, exuded complacency. Initially, he was dismissive, patronising Moscow to the point of faux pity.⁴⁶ He was then attracted to the idea that reaching out to Putin might loosen the bonds of Sino–Russian partnership.⁴⁷ When this, too, failed, he sought to neutralise Russia so as to concentrate on China. The United States and Russia established a Strategic Stability Dialogue to address arms control issues, and there were hopes this might translate into a “stable and predictable relationship”.⁴⁸ As late as December 2021, Biden was still talking about a “potential accommodation” with Russia in Eastern Europe.⁴⁹



Joe Biden (centre, left) and Vladimir Putin (centre, right) during a US–Russia summit in Geneva, 16 June 2021 (Adam Schultz/White House/Flickr)

The attempt to manage or “park” Russia in order to focus on China has been the worst strategic blunder of the Biden presidency. From day one, Biden underestimated Putin’s resolve, the depth of his animus towards the West, and his yearning for empire. The White House’s response to the Sino–Russian partnership was both illogical and incoherent. On the one hand, it depicted a contest for global order in simplistic ideological terms, between two opposing camps:

authoritarian (China and Russia) and democratic.⁵⁰ On the other hand, Biden's actions for much of his first year in office were based on the delusion that Russia was more biddable than China.

The results are plain to see. Biden's attempts to defuse and, yes, indulge the Kremlin were totally counter-productive. They encouraged Putin in his conviction that the United States was irresolute and narrowly self-interested; that transatlantic unity was notional at best; and that the West would put up little resistance when faced with a determined Russia. Putin undoubtedly miscalculated and was guilty of great hubris. But Washington's mixed messages unwittingly nourished his misconceptions.

Today, the priority is to rectify these policy errors as a matter of urgency. We need to recognise that Putin's Russia poses a direct and existential threat, not just to Ukraine and Europe, but to the wider international system. Under the pressure of events, the Biden administration has belatedly absorbed this truth, but some Europeans — most obviously German Chancellor Olaf Scholz — remain reluctant to accept its full policy implications and act accordingly.⁵¹

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Contrary to the voices of accommodationists, there is *no deal* to be reached with the Kremlin except from a position of strength. That means arming Ukraine to the teeth so that it can defend itself properly. It means inflicting further crushing sanctions on the Russian economy, including an early (and long overdue) end to oil, gas, and coal imports. And it entails a major strengthening of NATO military positions in frontline member-states, moving from tripwire defence to actual deterrence.⁵² Inevitably, some in the West (and western Europe in particular) will call these measures provocative and escalatory. But the reality is that failure to stop Putin in Ukraine will generate far worse and more widespread consequences, while weakening our collective capacity. We have no choice but to confront Russian aggression; the only question is whether we do it now or later, and under what conditions.

None of this is to suggest that the West should go easy on Beijing, many of whose policies directly threaten Western interests and are inimical to its neighbours. The point, however, is that China continues to operate largely within the existing international order; as noted earlier, it seeks to game the system, not destroy it. Consequently, there is still some (if shrinking) scope to cooperate with it in selected areas, such as combating climate change. Instead of pursuing a one-tone policy that condemns China for almost everything bad in the world, Western

governments should practise what they already advocate, namely, a balanced approach that contains elements of cooperation, competition and, when necessary, confrontation.⁵³ With Russia, unfortunately, functional interaction is off the table while Putin rules — and vague calls for “engagement” and “dialogue” will not bring it back.⁵⁴

Forget about “wedges”, recognise reality

Distinguishing between China and Russia is a necessary first step to addressing the challenges posed by their strategic partnership. At the same time, any illusions about “wedging” Moscow from Beijing or vice versa should be ditched. The reality is that neither party will voluntarily sacrifice a partnership that has benefited them greatly. Even in the worst-case scenario for Moscow and Beijing — a comprehensive military and political defeat for Putin — the partnership will continue to function in some form. It cannot be magicked away, least of all by a West distrusted and disliked in both capitals.



Leaders such as Emmanuel Macron believed that they might succeed in drawing Vladimir Putin away from Xi Jinping (European Parliament/Flickr)

Biden and European leaders, such as French President Emmanuel Macron, were sorely mistaken in believing that they might draw Putin away from Xi.⁵⁵ But it would be a no less grievous error to imagine that playing nice with China might persuade it to “see reason” and distance itself from a tainted Russia. There is nothing the West can offer the Chinese leadership that would compensate it for taking such a drastic step. Beijing knows that once the conflict with Ukraine ends, Washington will turn its attention back to countering China.⁵⁶

Wedge policies are not merely pointless, they give away leverage to the very parties one is hoping to influence. Putin, in particular, has been masterful in his manipulation of Western leaders over the years, playing on their anxieties about confrontation with Russia and the rise of China to maximise his room for manoeuvre. Equally, pleading with Beijing to exert pressure/use its good offices on Moscow would be to invite Chinese demands for quid pro quo — on Taiwan, freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs), missile defence, the US alliance system, the Quad, AUKUS, human rights, a sovereign internet, and so on. If the West went down this route, it would be giving away the store, not to mention its self-respect, in return for (at best) nebulous, insincere promises to rein in Russia.

Revitalise liberal values, norms, and institutions

The biggest challenge the West faces today *is itself*. For all Moscow's destructive behaviour and Beijing's exploitative practices, it is the combination of Western moral failings and inept decision-making that has most undermined the credibility of the liberal international order. The Sino-Russian partnership has gained added impetus because the principles underpinning liberal democracy have become hollowed out over the past two decades. This failure has given Moscow and Beijing both motive and opportunity to pursue their respective agendas.⁵⁷

Liberal democracies must seize the historical "moment" to begin implementing a vision that resonates beyond a coterie of the converted.

The course of the war in Ukraine offers an opportunity to stop the rot. The extraordinary resistance of the Ukrainian people in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds has reminded us of what is at stake, and how precious and fragile it is. The defence of Ukraine has also *bought the West time* — time in which to revitalise liberal values, norms, and institutions. But the window of opportunity is small. Once it closes, we may not find another.

Liberal democracies must seize the historical "moment" to begin implementing a vision that resonates beyond a coterie of the converted. That means improving standards of governance, accountability, and transparency at home. It means confronting economic and social injustice head-on. It means demonstrating that international order is not just a Western construct, applied selectively and arbitrarily. Most of all, it means passing the test of relevance. The twenty-first century world faces unprecedented threats and challenges: accelerating climate change, worsening global poverty, mass migration, technological transformation, the information revolution. Liberalism must show that it is up to addressing these tasks.

TURNING POINT? PUTIN, XI, AND THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

The type of relationship embodied by the Sino–Russian partnership is anachronistic in many respects. Its prescriptions for problem-solving represent a regression to the historical mean. But it is not enough for Western governments to point the finger while luxuriating in the glow of being “on the right side of history”. They must make their case through deeds, not self-congratulatory homilies. Otherwise, the experience of Ukraine will have been in vain.

EPILOGUE

Five years ago, I suggested that the Sino–Russian “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination” had exceeded expectations, but warned that it faced a problematic future in the longer term. I highlighted the increasingly asymmetrical nature of the relationship, which raised “questions about how the two sides will sustain a lasting accommodation, and on what and whose terms”. It was unclear whether Beijing and Moscow could move “beyond pragmatic self-interest to a more deep-rooted and long-lasting convergence”.⁵⁸

In 2022, this question is more pertinent than ever. Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine has brought the Sino–Russian partnership into sharp relief. But the signals are mixed. On the one hand, the relationship has proved highly resilient to the shock of events. Despite the damage done to Chinese interests, Xi Jinping has not thrown Vladimir Putin under a bus. Viewed from the Kremlin, Beijing’s messages have been right on point. Both sides remain strongly committed to the strategic partnership.

On the other hand, it is questionable whether they have managed to move to a more fundamental convergence. Beijing’s response to the war has been driven almost entirely by “pragmatic self-interest”. Despite some pseudo-ideological trimmings, Chinese policy is grounded in *strategic calculus*: preserving its strongest relationship while minimising the risks of being drawn into the conflict on Russia’s side; counterbalancing the United States; and ensuring that China remains integrated into the international system and global economy.

What is perhaps most surprising is how *little* has changed in the Sino–Russian relationship over the past five years. True, cooperation has continued to grow on several fronts. The personal dynamic between Xi and Putin is exceptionally positive. And the two governments have managed to finesse potentially tricky issues, such as China’s growing influence in Eurasia and penetration into the Arctic. Nevertheless, the essential character of the partnership is unaltered. Events in Ukraine have confirmed trends that were already evident in 2017 (and indeed long before): Beijing’s utilitarian approach towards Moscow; Russia’s growing dependence on China; and the diverging development trajectories of the two countries.

Looking farther ahead, it is this last feature that poses the greatest long-term challenge to the partnership. On one side, a politically atrophied, economically

China and Russia could soon be playing in very different leagues, ensuring that the commonalities between them will be fewer and more uneven.

stagnant, and geopolitically dependent Russia. On the other, a globalist China with the drive and self-belief to realise its considerable ambitions. The main problem with Sino–Russian imbalance is not that Beijing might wish to subjugate a backward Russia, but the widening gulf in their interests and horizons. China and Russia could soon be playing in very different leagues, ensuring that the commonalities between them will be fewer and more uneven. The utilitarianism — “pragmatic self-interest” — that already colours the relationship would become much more pronounced, while the like-mindedness Beijing and Moscow claim would be increasingly tenuous.

In 2017, I speculated that the future of the relationship might depend less on international events than on developments *inside* China and Russia.⁵⁹ Today, I would double down on that judgement. Unless Russia can reverse its prolonged political and economic decay, the prospects of a “deep-rooted and long-lasting convergence” with China are remote. This is not to suggest that their partnership will fall apart. Beijing and Moscow will identify common interests and share certain aspirations, for example, in resisting liberal internationalism and US global leadership. But a global China and a marginalised Russia would have much less to talk about. Their relationship might begin to resemble, in some respects, that of Beijing and Pyongyang today. It would be a partnership of strategic convenience, but one defined principally by its limits rather than possibilities.

NOTES

Cover image: Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Council of Heads of State in Bishkek on 14 June 2019 (Vyacheslav Oseledko/AFP via Getty Images)

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² “China’s Xi Praises ‘Best Friend’ Putin during Russia Visit”, BBC News, 6 June 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-48537663>.

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⁴ See Yu Bin, “China’s Neutrality in a Grave New World”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 11 April 2022, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/chinas-neutrality/>.

⁵ Richard McGregor described the summit as “the culmination of a relationship two decades in the rebuilding”, in “China is Squirming under Pressure to Condemn Russia. It Can’t Hold out Forever”, *The Guardian*, 12 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/12/china-is-squirming-under-pressure-to-condemn-russia-it-cant-hold-out-forever>.

⁶ Andrew Roth and Vincent Ni, “Xi and Putin Urge NATO to Rule out Expansion as Tensions Rise”, *The Guardian*, 4 February 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/04/xi-jinping-meets-vladimir-putin-china-russia-tensions-grow-west>.

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⁸ “Agreement on Measures to Ensure the Security of the Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization”, 17 December 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en&clear_cache=Y; and “Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees”, 17 December 2021, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790818/?lang=en.

⁹ See, for example, Pavel Baev, “Russia and China: A Mutually Exaggerated Strategic Partnership?”, *China Brief*, Vol.21, No.20, 22 October 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-and-china-a-mutually-exaggerated-strategic-partnership/>; and Vladimir Milov, “Ambitions Dashed: Why Sino–Russian Economic Cooperation is Not Working”, Wilfred Martens Centre for European Studies, 26 November 2021,

<https://www.martenscentre.eu/publication/ambitions-dashed-why-sino-russian-economic-cooperation-is-not-working/>.

- ¹⁰ Zhang Xin, “Endogenous Drives’ with ‘No-limits’: Contrasting Chinese Policy Narratives on Sino–Russian Relations since 2014”, *Russian Analytical Digest*, No.265, 19 March 2021, pp.6–7. See also Igor Denisov, “‘No Limits’? Understanding China’s Engagement with Russia on Ukraine”, *The Diplomat*, 24 March 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/no-limits-understanding-chinas-engagement-with-russia-on-ukraine/>.
- ¹¹ It should be noted that this increase owed much to the spike in global oil and gas prices in the second half of 2021.
- ¹² Any lingering Chinese reluctance to criticise NATO would have been eased by the fact that at the 2021 Brussels summit, NATO declared that “China’s stated ambitions and assertive behaviour present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and to areas relevant to Alliance security.” See Brussels Summit Communiqué, NATO, 14 June 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm.
- ¹³ See interview with Evan Medeiros, “Parsing the Meaning of the Xi–Putin Meeting on the Sidelines of the Beijing Olympics”, National Public Radio, 8 February 2022, in which he said, “The most important outcome [of the Xi–Putin summit] was, no.1, that Ukraine was not mentioned in the joint statement. So I think the Chinese, while expressing a lot of sympathy...for Russian concerns, didn’t outwardly, publicly back Russia’s position on Ukraine...in large part, because the Chinese are concerned about a war.”, <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/08/1079112810/parsing-the-meaning-of-the-xi-putin-meeting-on-the-sidelines-of-the-beijing-olymp>.
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- ¹⁶ Yun Sun, “Ukraine: Did China Have a Clue?”, Stimson Center, 28 February 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/ukraine-did-china-have-a-clue/>.
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- ¹⁸ Lo, “The Sino–Russian Partnership and Global Order”.
- ¹⁹ Address by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison to the Lowy Institute, 7 March 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/address-prime-minister-scott-morrison>.

- ²⁰ My view of Chinese global ambitions falls between the Western mainstream and Chinese orthodoxy. The former argues that China wishes to overturn the existing international system, supplant the United States, and impose a new global order. This new “Washington consensus” is articulated by Rush Doshi, now Director for China at the US National Security Council, in *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford University Press, 2021). The other, diametrically opposed viewpoint insists that China has only very limited global aspirations. Beijing “intends to play an important role in shaping global economic norms...but...has no ambition to play a leading role in global security affairs...”. See Yan Xuetong, “China’s Ukraine Conundrum”, *Foreign Affairs*, 2 May 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-05-02/chinas-ukraine-conundrum>.
- ²¹ Ryan Hass, “Ukraine Presents Opportunity to Test China’s Strategic Outlook”, Brookings Institution, 1 March 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/03/01/ukraine-presents-opportunity-to-test-chinas-strategic-outlook/>. See also Lo, “The Sino–Russian Partnership and Global Order”.
- ²² The 2022 invasion is the third undertaken by Russia against Ukraine in the last eight years. The first was the seizure of Crimea in February 2014, and the second was the invasion of the Donbass in August that year.
- ²³ Estimates of the impact of the war and sanctions on Russian economic growth vary considerably, with most predicting negative growth in 2022 of between 8 and 15 per cent. I was among many who underestimated the vulnerability of the Russian economy to sanctions, although I was correct in judging they would have minimal impact on Putin’s decision-making. See Bobo Lo, “Bring It On’: Six Reasons Why Sanctions Won’t Bring Putin to Heel”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 February 2022, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/europe/bring-it-on-six-reasons-why-sanctions-won-t-bring-putin-to-heel-20220224-p59zj7.html>.
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- ²⁶ Bobo Lo, *Global Order in the Shadow of the Coronavirus: China, Russia, and the West*, Lowy Institute, Analysis, (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 29 July 2020), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/global-order-shadow-coronavirus-china-russia-and-west>.

- ²⁷ Noah Barkin. “Watching China in Europe — April 2022”, German Marshall Fund (GMF), 6 April 2022, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/watching-china-europe-april-2022>.
- ²⁸ See interview with Tong Zhao, “How China has Handled Its Strategic Dilemma over Russia’s Invasion”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 12 April 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/04/12/how-china-has-handled-its-strategic-dilemma-over-russia-s-invasion-pub-86875>.
- ²⁹ Paul Dibb, “China Will be Watching and Learning from Russia’s Poor Performance in Ukraine”, *The Strategist*, ASPI, 3 May 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/china-will-be-watching-and-learning-from-russias-poor-performance-in-ukraine/>.
- ³⁰ Xi has striven to make China more self-reliant by boosting domestic consumption as a driver of growth — part of his “dual circulation” strategy. But this will involve an immensely complicated and protracted process of transformation, with uncertain prospects of success. See Alicia Garcia Herrero, “What is behind China’s Dual Circulation Strategy?”, *China Leadership Monitor*, 1 September 2021, <https://www.prcleader.org/herrero>.
- ³¹ In 2020, Ruchir Sharma estimated that more than 90 per cent of bank transactions used the dollar. See “The Comeback Nation”, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2020-03-31/comeback-nation>. By comparison, the Chinese renminbi (RMB) accounts for only 3.2 per cent of international transactions. See Nathan Handwerker, “Can China’s SWIFT Alternative Give Russia a Lifeline?”, *The Diplomat*, 10 March 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/can-chinas-swift-alternative-give-russia-a-lifeline/>.
- ³² David Bandurski, “China and Russia are Joining Forces to Spread Disinformation”, Brookings Institution, 11 March 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/china-and-russia-are-joining-forces-to-spread-disinformation/>.
- ³³ The most well-known of these dissenting commentaries was by Hu Wei, a senior academic in the State Council. He was highly critical of the Russian invasion, writing that “China cannot be tied to Putin and needs to be cut off as soon as possible.” The commentary received more than a million views before being both shut down by the authorities and shouted down on social media. See Hu Wei, “Possible Outcomes of the Russo–Ukrainian War and China’s Choice”, *US–China Perception Monitor*, 12 March 2022, <https://uscnpm.org/2022/03/12/hu-wei-russia-ukraine-war-china-choice/>.
- ³⁴ Tianlei Huang and Nicholas Lardy, “China is Too Tied to the Global Economy to Risk Helping Russia”, Peterson Institute for International Economics, 15 March 2022, <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economic-issues-watch/china-too-tied-global-economy-risk-helping-russia>.
- ³⁵ See Mary Hui, “Russia’s Lost Alumina Supply from Ukraine is Now Coming from China”, *Quartz*, 5 May 2022, <https://qz.com/2162256/chinas-alumina-exports-to-russia-surge-after-ukraine-invasion/>; Lexi Lonas, “Chinese Tech Firms Pull out of Russia: Report”, *The Hill*, 6 May 2022, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/3479807-chinese-tech-firms-pull-out-of-russia-report/>; and Sophie Yu and Brenda Goh, “Chinese Trade with

Russia Feels the Sting of Ukraine War”, Reuters, 1 April 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/chinese-trade-with-russia-feels-sting-ukraine-war-2022-04-01/>.

- ³⁶ Although Turkey is a NATO member-state, it has close political and economic ties with Russia.
- ³⁷ See Amrit Dhillon, “Indians Reluctant to Denounce Russian ‘Brothers’ over Ukraine”, *The Guardian*, 27 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/27/indians-reluctant-to-denounce-russian-brothers-over-ukraine>; and Jason Burke, “Cold War Echoes as African Leaders Resist Criticising Putin’s War”, *The Guardian*, 28 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/28/cold-war-echoes-african-leaders-resist-criticising-putins-war-ukraine>.
- ³⁸ It may be, of course, that Xi hopes that the economic dependence of leading European countries on China, and the indifference of the non-West to events in Ukraine, will allow him to maintain his current course more or less indefinitely.
- ³⁹ There are already indications of disruption to the BRI. Goods are being diverted from the Russian–Belarusian corridor to other routes — the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor (CAAWEC) and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The bulk of trade (some 80 per cent) goes by sea. See Mohammadbagher Forough, “What Will Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine Mean for China’s Belt and Road?”, *The Diplomat*, 18 March 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/what-will-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-mean-for-chinas-belt-and-road/>; and Nathan Hutson, “War in Ukraine is Hamstringing China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’”, *Responsible Statecraft*, 22 March 2022, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/03/22/beltandroadchinarussia/>.
- ⁴⁰ Yasheng Huang observes that Washington has yet to acknowledge, much less thank, China for not providing material aid to Russia. See “What Lessons Does China Take from Putin’s War?”, *Foreign Policy*, 7 April 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/07/china-russia-putin-ukraine-war-lessons-taiwan/>.
- ⁴¹ As a result of the “unequal treaties” of Aigun (1858), Peking (1860), and Tarbagatai (1864), the Qing Empire ceded some 1.5 million square kilometres of territory — essentially the southern part of the present-day Russian Far East. The border remained a highly contentious issue in Sino–Russian relations, leading even to bloody clashes in 1969. Arguably, the single greatest achievement of the Sino–Russian partnership was the settlement of the border in 2004.
- ⁴² It is revealing that even the most liberal politicians of the Boris Yeltsin era (1991–99), such as former Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, believed in Russia’s great power identity even while they sought to “modernise” this concept.
- ⁴³ Mike Eckel, “‘Finlandisation’ for Ukraine? Macron’s Reported Comment Hits a Nerve in Kyiv, Stirs up Bad Memories in Helsinki”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio*

Liberty (RFERL), 10 February 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-finlandization-macron-zelenskiy-helsinki/31697728.html>.

- ⁴⁴ The Chinese response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria was consistently lame. It obstructed investigations and vetoed UN Security Council resolutions.
- ⁴⁵ In a 2019 article, Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan emphasised the importance of balancing competition and cooperation in US relations with China. See “Competition without Catastrophe”, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/competition-with-china-without-catastrophe>. Subsequently, Sullivan, now US National Security Advisor, spoke about the need to “manage a relationship with China, and work with China on certain issues” in his 2021 Lowy Lecture, 11 November 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/2021-lowy-lecture-jake-sullivan>.
- ⁴⁶ “Russia is in a very, very difficult spot right now. They are being squeezed by China. They want desperately to remain a major power...They desperately want to...be relevant” — Remarks by President Biden before Air Force One departure, Geneva, Switzerland, 16 June 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/16/remarks-by-president-biden-before-air-force-one-departure-4/>.
- ⁴⁷ Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky, “Kissinger Revisited: Can the United States Drive a Wedge between Russia and China?”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2 March 2021, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/83970>.
- ⁴⁸ The phrase “stable and predictable” was used as early as April 2021, but came to define the Biden administration’s efforts to achieve a more or less functional interaction with the Kremlin. Unfortunately, it was reduced to a standing (bad) joke as US–Russia relations deteriorated in the course of the year. For further details, see Bobo Lo, “Rewinding the Clock? US–Russia Relations in the Biden Era”, *Russie.NEI.Reports*, No.36, French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), February 2022, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/etudes-de-lifri/russieneireports/rewinding-clock-us-russia-relations-biden-era>.
- ⁴⁹ Katrina Manson, Max Seddon, and Henry Foy, “Joe Biden Makes Diplomatic Concession to Russia with NATO Talks Plan”, *Financial Times*, 8 December 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/8b151011-2054-4aa7-8b4c-fee8835529e5>. French President Emmanuel Macron was arguably even more wrong-headed than Biden in thinking that Putin could be reasoned with. However, the words and actions of Biden, as the leader of the only true superpower, had vastly greater resonance in the Kremlin.
- ⁵⁰ “We’re at an inflection point between those who argue...that autocracy is the best way forward...and those who understand that democracy is essential...” — Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference, 19 February 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/19/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-2021-virtual-munich-security-conference/>.

- ⁵¹ Much has been made of Olaf Scholz's *zeitenwende* ("turn of the times") speech in the Bundestag on 27 February 2022, in which he signalled major changes in German foreign policy. These included a €100 billion commitment to defence spending in 2022, and arms deliveries to Ukraine. Since then, however, Berlin's approach has been characterised by indecision, inaction, and backsliding. See Oxana Schmies, "Germany's Zeitenwende: Not a War-End", Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), 22 April 2022, <https://cepa.org/germanys-zeitenwende-not-a-war-ender/>; also Andreas Umland, "It's Time Germany Abandons Its Foreign Policy La-La Land", *Politico*, 5 May 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/olaf-scholz-germany-foreign-policy-turning-point-zeitenwende/>.
- ⁵² Actual deterrence aims to be powerful and convincing enough to prevent Russian military attack, whereas tripwire defence is intended to trigger a subsequent NATO military response in the event of attack. In the latter case, it is understood that frontline positions would be overrun by the hostile force.
- ⁵³ See Jake Sullivan's 2021 Lowy Lecture, 11 November 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/2021-lowy-lecture-jake-sullivan>. The former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd calls for "managed strategic competition" in "How to Stop China and the US Going to War", *The Guardian*, 7 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/07/how-to-stop-china-and-the-us-going-to-war>.
- ⁵⁴ As Yasheng Huang puts it, Putin is the "clear, present, and mortal enemy of the West" in "What Lessons Does China Take from Putin's War?", *Foreign Policy*, 7 April 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/07/china-russia-putin-ukraine-war-lessons-taiwan/>. The pro-Kremlin commentator Sergey Karaganov speaks of an "existential war" between Russia and the West in "Russia Cannot Afford to Lose, So We Need a Kind of Victory": Sergey Karaganov on What Putin Wants", Interview with Bruno Maçães, *The New Statesman*, 2 April 2022, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/ukraine/2022/04/russia-cannot-afford-to-lose-so-we-need-a-kind-of-a-victory-sergey-karaganov-on-what-putin-wants>.
- ⁵⁵ In a now infamous address to French ambassadors on 27 August 2019, Macron lamented that "pushing Russia away from Europe [was] a major strategic error" since it would either drive it to isolation or into the arms of China. See Ambassadors' Conference — Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, 27 August 2019, <https://lv.ambafrance.org/Ambassadors-conference-Speech-by-M-Emmanuel-Macron-President-of-the-Republic>.
- ⁵⁶ As Yun Sun puts it, "abandoning Russia and mitigating its threat to the West could very well leave China to face the full attention and force of a hostile United States later — alone". See "What Lessons Does China Take from Putin's War", *Foreign Policy*, 7 April 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/07/china-russia-putin-ukraine-war-lessons-taiwan/>.
- ⁵⁷ Lo, *Global Order in the Shadow of the Coronavirus*, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/global-order-shadow-coronavirus-china-russia-and-west>.

⁵⁸ Bobo Lo, *A Wary Embrace: What the China–Russia Relationship Means for the World*, Lowy Institute Paper, (Penguin Random House Australia, 2017), pp.138–39.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.139.

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