

# China's Relations with Russia Amid the War in Ukraine

Temur Umarov

**“Does Russia have any friends left?” – the official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova was asked this question in an interview on the Russia-1 TV channel. “Of course,” she said. “Look at the reaction of the world's giants. Those who do not pretend to be giants, but real giants. Well, in particular, China.”**

But if on the advice of Zakharova we look at the reaction of China, we can see that it is far from unambiguous. Since December 2021, when tensions escalated along the Russian-Ukrainian border, Beijing's public statements concerning this issue have been vague and even contradictory.

On different occasions, China supported Russia's concerns in Europe, but at the same time called on the parties to “resolve differences through negotiations,” or highlighted the importance of respecting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine and blamed everything on the United States. What do these statements say about China's relations with Russia?

## HOW CHINA IS TRYING TO RECONCILE THE INCOMPATIBLE

Russia's war in Ukraine has put China in an uncomfortable position. Beijing now has to juggle<sup>1</sup> two incompatible goals in its foreign policy: strategic rapprochement with Russia, on the one hand, and adherence to the principles of territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, on the other.

If China unconditionally takes the side of Russia, this will automatically undermine China's commitment to the principle of territorial integrity—Beijing's main proof-point on the Taiwan issue. Taiwan, a de facto independent island state with its own elected institutions of power, in

the eyes of Beijing is an integral part of the PRC. Without recognizing Taiwan as part of the PRC, it is impossible to establish diplomatic relations with Beijing.

In addition, support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine would imply that China grants consent to other countries to interfere in its own domestic politics. This is dangerous for the Chinese Communist Party, especially against the backdrop of its policy in the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region. The international community accuses China of violating the rights of religious and national minorities in Xinjiang. According to human rights organizations, more than a million people out of almost 26 million residents are forcibly undergoing training in so-called “re-education camps.” Beijing denies all accusations and claims that in Xinjiang it is fighting terrorism, separatism, and extremism, and everything that happens there the PRC authorities exclusively call a matter of domestic policy in which other countries have no right to interfere.

At the same time, if China opposes Russia's fighting in Ukraine, it will call into question its comprehensive strategic partnership with Moscow that the two parties have been building for decades.

China would not want to lose Russia as its key supporter at a time when Beijing is on the verge of a confrontation with the West. Therefore, the PRC is now trying to com-



On different occasions, China supported Russia's concerns in Europe, but at the same time called on the parties to "resolve differences through negotiations," or highlighted the importance of respecting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine and blamed everything on the United States. Pictured is China's current minister of foreign affairs, Wang Yi (photo: Wikimedia Commons / G20Argentina / CC BY 2.0)

bine the incompatible. That is, at the same time calls to respect the sovereignty of Ukraine and the security interests of Russia.

#### WHY CHINA NEEDS RUSSIA

Russia and China have been strengthening ties over the past ten years. And in many areas, relations between the two countries are experiencing the best period since the collapse of the USSR. At this point, the possible cooling of the relations between the two countries is less and less expected. Moreover, some factors will further strengthen<sup>2</sup> this partnership in Eurasia.

*Russia's even greater dependence on China is inevitable*

**First**, there are objective aspects encouraging Sino-Russian further, closer partnership. Not only do the two countries share more than 4,000 kilometers of border, but also both are armed with nuclear warheads and are among the countries with the biggest and strongest armies. It is better for these countries to be friends than enemies.

**Second**, the structures of the economies of Russia and China have developed as if they are destined to cooperate: it is not so often that the largest exporter of resources is placed right next to the largest importer on the map.

For more than a decade, China has been ranked first among Russia's trading partners if the EU is not considered to be a single entity. In 2021, trade between the countries grew by 35.8% and reached a historic high of \$146.9 billion. In the first months of 2022, it continued to grow and reached \$51.09 billion<sup>3</sup>, which is 25.9%

more than in the same period of 2021. More importantly, five years ago, China replaced Germany as Russia's main source of technology and equipment for industry.

**Third**, in the political dimension, everything also looks good. The establishment of a rapport between the leaders plays a vital role in the relationship between personalist autocracies. Vladimir Putin calls Xi Jinping a "good and reliable friend," while Xi calls Putin his "best friend." They often meet, since 2013 they have seen each other more than 40 times, and not all of these meetings were formal: they would celebrate Putin's birthday together, make pancakes, or go for a walk around St. Petersburg—the Russian president's hometown.

When the pandemic started, Putin and Xi took their friendship online for more than two years. The first in-person meeting since then happened on the day of the Olympic Games opening ceremony in Beijing. Experts called this meeting, as well as the joint statement<sup>4</sup> in which the parties opposed the further expansion of NATO, historic.

And this is not surprising. The final factor that makes Russia and China come closer together is their mutual confrontation with the U.S. The importance of this factor grows in parallel with the collapse of the relations between Russia and the West. Russia and China now act as global opposition to the U.S.-led international order.

It might seem that all these factors speak in favor of the fact that Russia and China are capable of creating almost a military bloc. However, neither Moscow nor Beijing formally calls their relationship an alliance. The only time Vladimir Putin has said something along those lines was in September 2019 at a meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club when he defined relations between the two countries as "allied." Then, in several joint statements, Russia and China switched to a different very long formulation: "While not being a military and political alliance, such as those formed during the Cold War, the Russian-Chinese relations exceed this form of interstate interaction... [T]hey are self-sufficient and not directed against third countries, they display international rela-



Support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine would imply that China grants consent to other countries to interfere in its own domestic politics. This is dangerous for the Chinese Communist Party, given that the international community accuses China of violating the rights of religious and national minorities in Xinjiang. Pictured is an Uyghur protest in Washington D.C. (photo: Wikimedia Commons / Malcolm Brown)

tions of a new type.” This is a pretentious definition, but it is not binding. There are certain issues that the parties are not ready to support each other on. Russia tries not to interfere in the conflict in the South China Sea or Sino-Indian border disputes, and China does not side with Russia in its conflicts with Georgia or Ukraine. Because of that, IR experts reduce Sino-Russian relations to the formula “never against each other, but not always with each other.”

However, Russia's current actions in Ukraine are on a completely different scale and China is unlikely to be able to ignore them.

### WHY RUSSIA NEEDS CHINA MORE

It is worth dwelling a little more on how China reacted to previous Russian acts of aggression: in 2008 in Georgia and 2014 in Ukraine.

After Russia invaded Georgia and the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian then-President Dmitry Medvedev tried to gain the support of China in Dushanbe at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit (SCO). But instead, he received condemnation. In the declaration, the SCO countries expressed “deep concern over the tension that has arisen in the South Ossetian issue.”

In 2014, China reacted more carefully and tried to ignore the question of Crimea's status altogether. Beijing limited itself to a call to resolve the conflict through negotiations and simply abstained<sup>5</sup> from voting in the Security Council or the UN General Assembly.

During the current war, China is also trying to be as neutral as possible in its actions. Although it should be noted that the statements of Beijing have changed in the last several years with the growing potential for Sino-American confrontation. For example, in late February, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying, in response to a journalist's question, scolded him for using the term “invasion” concerning Russia's actions in Ukraine. “When the US took illegal unilateral military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan without the mandate of the UN and caused massive civilian casualties, did you use the word ‘invasion’ or some other word?” she asked.<sup>6</sup>

Most media reports inside China refer to the war as either the “Russia-Ukraine conflict” or a “special military operation.” In addition, China has also supported Russia through unofficial instruments. For example, it launched mass advertising with pro-Russian propaganda on Facebook. The Chinese Communist Party's mouthpiece, the

People's Daily, hammered hard on claims about US biological weapons programs in Ukraine. However, this all comes together with other stories<sup>7</sup> in Chinese media space reporting on Chinese citizens caught by the war and children “born in midst of war.”

So, China did not support Russia in 2008 in the situation with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It did not support Russia in 2014 with Crimea. And it is not openly supporting Moscow now. Each of these crises alienated Russia from the West and forced Moscow to diversify its ties with the world, a process that furthered its “pivot to the East” policy. And each time Moscow's dependence on the PRC grew in many areas. In the exchange of products, for example, Russia's share in China's trade with the world is 2.4% whilst China's share in Russia's 17.8%.

The crisis, meanwhile, is growing. And, given the unprecedented number of anti-Russian sanctions, Russia's even greater dependence on China is inevitable. Moreover, in negotiations with Beijing, Moscow is losing power and, most likely, on several projects, it will no longer be able to negotiate for itself the conditions that the Chinese were ready to offer before the start of the war.

For example, this applies to “Power of Siberia-2,” the gas pipeline that Russian Gazprom was to build connecting Siberia and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Its construction is scheduled to begin in 2024. The parties do not disclose the formula for calculating the price of gas to be supplied via this new pipeline. But before the war, Russia had a strong negotiating position, because, in the fall of 2021, China went through a serious energy crisis<sup>8</sup>—and was ready to make concessions to cover the deficit.

Now, when the main market for Russia—the European one—can refuse Russian gas, China is turning into practically a monopoly consumer. And now it is Russia who needs to be ready to make concessions.

### WILL CHINA JOIN ANTI-RUSSIAN SANCTIONS?

But the main question about the future of Sino-Russian relations is, of course, whether Beijing is going to join the wave of sanctions put on the Kremlin.

In 2014, all big Chinese banks connected with the West were abiding by the sanction regime put on the Russian economy. Although it was not declared publicly, however, under different circumstances, they refused to cooperate with entities and people from the U.S. SDN list and even ordinary Russian citizens.

It is important to understand that Chinese banks are re-



Vladimir Putin calls Xi Jinping a “good and reliable friend”, while Xi calls Putin his “best friend.” They often meet, since 2013 they have seen each other more than 40 times, and not all of these meetings were formal. Pictured are the two leaders in February 2022 (photo: Wikimedia Commons / kremlin.ru / CC BY 3.0)

quired to follow U.S. sanctions to comply with the instructions of their regulator. The significance of these banks for the Russian economy until recently has been negligible, but what matters is the fact that China has made no exceptions for its clients from the friendly Russian regime.

This time, too, one should not expect that Chinese companies, still heavily tied to Western markets will start

*China's main gain is time*

blindly supporting Russia. Especially now when it is not at all clear how far the West is ready to go with its sanctions. Most likely, during this period of uncertainty, Chinese companies will temporarily refuse to cooperate with Russia, just in case. And the first signs are already there. The other day China refused to supply spare parts for aircraft to Russian airlines. China’s oil and gas giant, Sinopec, has suspended investments in both a major petrochemical plant and a marketing venture in Russia. And

according to the South China Morning Post, at least five Chinese companies are stopping their work on Russia’s Arctic LNG-2 project in northern Siberia.

However, there are companies in China that can use the sanctions to their advantage. First of all, there are those under U.S. sanctions themselves. Like telecommunications giant Huawei and electronics manufacturer ZTE. They have great chances to expand in the Russian smartphone market, where Chinese companies already hold about a 50% share. In addition, the largest Chinese Shipbuilding Industry Corporation (CSIC) has become an even more attractive partner for Russia in the development of the Arctic.

Relations with China, of course, were not the main factor that allowed the Kremlin to decide on the start of the war. However, Moscow has always considered that it might get a helping hand from China in some areas. For example, Russia does not have an international payment system, while China has UnionPay. Russia is experiencing difficulties with microelectronics and here comes the largest Chinese microelectronics manufacturer Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation (SMIC), also under US sanctions, that can become practically the only supplier of chips to Russia.

But the main benefit that China will receive from the Russian military operation in Ukraine is not the fact that Russia is now much more dependent on China, and not even the completely uncompetitive market that suddenly opened up on China's northern borders. The main gain is time.

### CONCLUSION

IR experts are sure<sup>9</sup> that the main geopolitical confrontation of the 21st century is not between Russia and the United States but between Beijing and Washington. Modern Russia was never considered by the U.S. as a key rival.

Russia despite its military potential is not capable of shaking the foundations of the existing international order. Over the past 30 years, Moscow has neither been able to integrate into the American-led world order, nor to offer the world a working alternative that would be attractive to other countries. On the contrary, the Chinese state-building system looks like a working alternative to Western-style liberal democracy for some authoritarian or hybrid regimes around the globe, and the Russian political regime is one of them. In recent history, no other major power has come so close to redefining democracy as the only working political system.

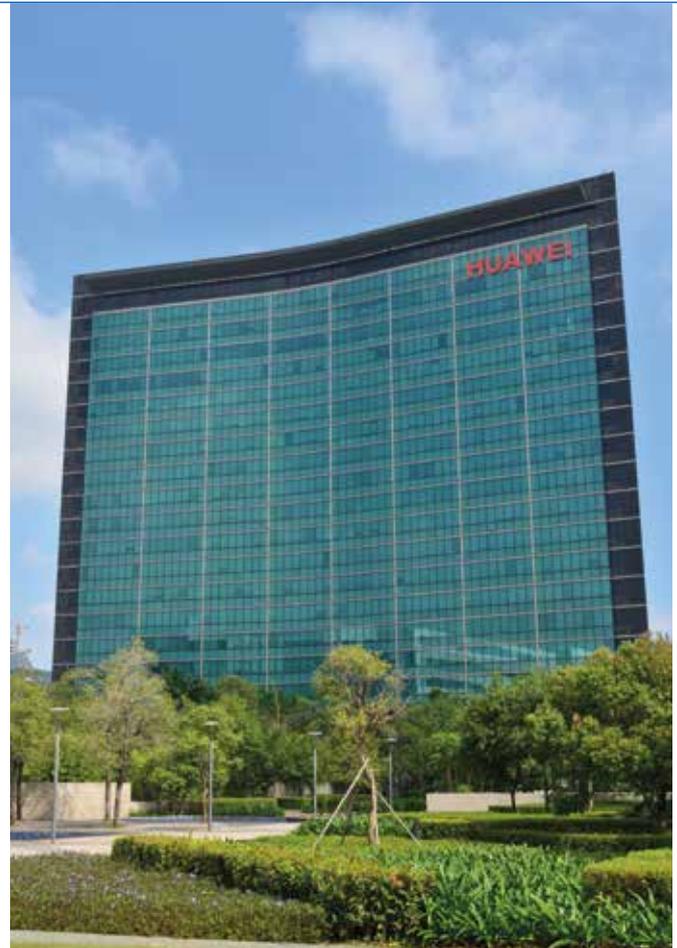
Russia (to put it more clearly, Russian political elites who share an average age of 65+ years) understands that the world will inevitably change and that global trends are irreversible. They feel caught in a trap and do their best to keep everything as it was during their lifetime, conserve those values, and not let "Western influence" conquer the minds of Russian citizens and consequently make Russia a part of the Pax-Americana.

Having unleashed a war in Ukraine, Moscow temporarily drew the attention of the West to itself. Thus, giving China time to better prepare for the inevitable clash with the United States. And time for the PRC is very valuable. China can not only make the most of the growing dependence of the Russian economy on it but also study the tools that the West uses against Russia. And learn to resist them.

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**There are companies in China that can use the sanctions to their advantage. First of all, it could be those under U.S. sanctions themselves. Like telecommunications giant Huawei (the headquarters of which in Shenzhen are depicted above) and electronics manufacturer ZTE (photo: Wikimedia Commons / Raysonho)**

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