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Centre for International  
Governance Innovation

CIGI Papers No. 288 – December 2023

# Sino-Russian Relations: The Implications of Putin's Strategic Folly

Kurtis H. Simpson





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## About the Author

**Kurtis H. Simpson** currently serves as a special advisor, Indo-Pacific affairs, with the Strategic Joint Staff at the Department of National Defence. As a senior defence scientist, he draws on several decades of experience in the Public Service, filling diverse science and technology roles across various government departments, including the Privy Council Office, Foreign Affairs, as well as defence and intelligence organizations. A China specialist by training, he also has extensive expertise in Asian security issues, global affairs, transnational threats and terrorism. He holds an M.A. and a Ph.D. in international relations from York University and is a graduate of the National Security Program.

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## Acronyms and Abbreviations

<b>AI</b>	artificial intelligence
<b>AIIB</b>	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
<b>ASEAN</b>	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
<b>ASPI</b>	Australian Strategic Policy Institute
<b>AUKUS</b>	Australia, United Kingdom, United States
<b>BRI</b>	Belt and Road Initiative
<b>BRICS</b>	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
<b>CIA</b>	Central Intelligence Agency
<b>MTC</b>	military-technical cooperation
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>PLA</b>	People's Liberation Army
<b>PRC</b>	People's Republic of China
<b>S&amp;T</b>	science and technology
<b>SCO</b>	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
<b>SWIFT</b>	Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication

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## Executive Summary

This paper considers Sino-Russian relations in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and its ongoing occupation. It provides a long-term historical perspective, with a particular focus on the period of 2014–2023. For Canadians, the effective implementation of our national Indo-Pacific strategy not only requires a comprehensive understanding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), but also that of its closest strategic partner: Russia.

Historically, China's complex relationship with Russia has experienced intense periods of ideological convergence, mutual aid and support, but equally deep divisions and open conflict.

While both countries were rivals during much of the Cold War, following the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, the relationship evolved into what was understood by each nation as more of an equitable partnership, aimed at balancing the influence of the United States and promoting a multipolar international system. However, this parity of interests is now undergoing a fundamental transformation. The negative consequences of Russian President Vladimir Putin's attack and illegal occupation of Ukraine have so severely isolated Russia economically and diplomatically, and so reduced its military power, that China now considers Russia "a junior partner."

While many factors still draw the two countries together, such as economic reciprocity, similar perceptions of US hegemony, a common fear of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion in Europe and America's Indo-Pacific agenda, as well as Chinese President Xi Jinping and Putin's high level of personal amity and shared subversive approaches to exercising international influence, the military backbone of the relationship is morphing. Military-technical cooperation (MTC) between China and Russia has evolved away from arms sales to focus on personnel exchanges, technology transfers, joint development and dual-use applications. This new dynamic increasingly favours and empowers the PRC over Russia. The single area where China and Russia mutually benefit is from joint military operations. These are rapidly increasing in scope, scale, frequency, complexity and geographic reach.

Despite a qualitative change in bilateral relations, Beijing will continue to align itself with Moscow publicly, all the while capitalizing on this growing dependency to its "net" advantage. Ultimately, any enabling of Russia will only happen after China first judiciously considers its broader global agenda and carefully evaluates perceived risks. Calibration will be a benchmark of this "new era" in Sino-Russian relations.

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## Background

Historically, Sino-Russian relations have been mercurial in nature. The two countries have had a difficult history, marked by early periods of intense ideological fervour, Soviet economic aid and technical assistance, followed by equally sharp divisions, distrust and ultimately border clashes in 1969, complete with the threat of open warfare and a potential Russian nuclear strike.

In the face of massive force buildups, border fortifications and an uneasy coexistence, Sino-US rapprochement in 1972 nurtured a new balance of power in East Asia. Despite ongoing flashpoints (most notably the PRC's invasion of Vietnam in 1979 to counter Soviet expansionism) and persistent Chinese fears over Russian encirclement,<sup>1</sup> a short list of major obstacles to diplomatic relations was being addressed behind the scenes. Russian concessions, particularly from 1986 onward, facilitated incremental improvements in bilateral relations. This culminated in the Sino-Soviet Summit of 1989, considered the beginning of normalized state-to-state ties and party-to-party relations.

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<sup>1</sup> By the mid-1980s, Soviet military personnel in Mongolia totalled some 82,000 (more than 100,000 individuals counting family members). This was a formidable force, consisting of elite troops, five army divisions, as well as air force assets, anti-aircraft installations, communications, intelligence and support units.

## Contemporary Sino-Russian Relations

Bilateral interactions slowly began to flourish with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. A significant benchmark was witnessed in April 1996, when the two countries formalized the Sino-Russian Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, spelling out the basic parameters of their political-military cooperation goals. This and other confidence-building measures (such as the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization [SCO] in June 2001, and the commencement of annual bilateral security consultations in alternating capitals) began uniting Russia and China in common purpose. Consistent small-scale partnering in the following years established the framework for a fundamental acceleration of linkages. Bilateral ties have deepened in the wake of Xi's ascension as China's paramount leader in 2012 and Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in early 2014, which led to the imposition of EU and US economic sanctions.

From 2014 to 2019, China and Russia benefited from a positive trajectory of non-stop increases in both the depth and breadth of their relations. This is true for investment, trade, international politics and, most importantly, all aspects of military interactions, including MTC initiatives, personnel exchanges, and regular joint military patrols and exercises.<sup>2</sup> The political commitment to a unique partnership “driven from the top down” was manifest in June 2019, when Putin and Xi observed the seventieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries and upgraded their relationship to “a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era.”<sup>3</sup> In China's official hierarchy of foreign relations, this is the apex. Only Russia holds such exalted status, described

2 Examples of this new “dualism” are considerable and varied. Often-cited highlights include: following a May 2014 summit between Putin and Xi, the two agreed to also hold biannual Northeast Asia security dialogues at the deputy foreign minister level. In 2016, China and Russia issued their first joint statement on strategic stability in the UN General Assembly (which was renewed in 2019). China and Russia have also shared coordinated positions on arms control, including the prevention of weapons in space (while recognizing some areas of difference, for example, first use doctrine and attacks on civilian infrastructure remain). Moreover, the two countries have institutionalized the cyclical implementation of five-year road maps detailing bilateral military cooperation outlooks and goals.

3 For a copy of the Joint Statement text, see <https://china.usc.edu/russia-china-joint-statement-international-relations-february-4-2022>.

by one senior Chinese Mandarin as the “highest level of mutual trust, coordination and strategic value among major-country relations, which contributes significantly to development and rejuvenation of the two countries and to world peace, stability and progress” (Hui 2020).<sup>4</sup>

## Alliance or Partnership?

Despite almost two decades of strengthening ties and the current announcements supporting a “new era” of cooperation, along with numerous public, high-level, face-to-face summits (such as Xi's highly symbolic visit to Moscow in March 2023, his first diplomatic encounter after being re-elected president for an unprecedented third term, and immediately following the International Criminal Court's announced arrest warrant for Putin's alleged war crimes), Sino-Russian relations still do not meet the standards of a formal alliance, with commitments of mutual assistance and defence.<sup>5</sup> That said, the level of bilateral collaboration, shared interest and mutual cooperation is extremely high.

## What Motivates Xi and Putin to Align More Closely?

Recognizing that the historic signed declaration between the two leaders in early 2022 proclaiming “no limits Sino-Soviet cooperation and no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation” was more hyperbole than fact, China's relationship with Russia is witnessing a “historic high” (Osborn and Trevelyan 2022). This declaration by the two sides was built upon a mutual acceptance of each other's positions on national sovereignty, security, territorial integrity and economic development.

4 A second road map was signed on November 23, 2021, just three months before Russia invaded Ukraine. This document, covering the period 2021–2025, will enhance strategic coordination and promote joint military activities such as joint air and sea patrols/exercises. There was also a formal commitment to deepen bilateral military cooperation, which has been affirmed publicly numerous times since.

5 Xi's visit was followed by the first-ever overseas visit in mid-April of the newly appointed defence minister, Li Shangfu (now dismissed due to corruption allegations), who vowed to further augment communications between their two militaries, strengthen multilateral coordination and further improve military cooperation. Li again visited Russia in mid-August 2023 to attend the Eleventh Moscow Conference on International Security. In general, bilateral interactions between high-level Russian and Chinese military officials occur 20 to 30 times a year. Minister-to-minister exchanges are further reinforced in multilateral fora, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus and SCO events.



Moreover, Russia openly sided with China's Indo-Pacific ambitions of reunification with Taiwan.<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, the PRC has voiced its opposition to NATO enlargement and supported Russian proposals to create long-term, legally binding security guarantees in Europe. With respect to the conflict in Ukraine, China has consistently failed to criticize Russia's aggression and even provided clandestine aid to the war effort vis-à-vis drones, scanners, jammers and ruggedized computers.<sup>7</sup> It has purposefully abstained from international condemnations by the United Nations, has continued to serve as Russia's economic lifeline and has increased its role as a military partner of growing significance. Several factors encourage this trendline (Kendall-Taylor and Lokker 2023).

Below are several factors uniting China and Russia.

- **Similar perceptions of US hegemony:** Both the PRC and Russia view America as their most significant security challenge. Each has a stake in promoting US decline, a shift to a more multipolar world and new (or revised) international institutions more favourable to their own national interests. In short, both champion a "reimagined" global order.
- **A common fear of NATO expansion in Europe and America's Indo-Pacific agenda:** With NATO's framing of China as a "systemic challenge" and mounting concerns over US activities in the Indo-Pacific (for example, new multilateral security measures aimed at countering China, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue; the Asia-Pacific 4; the Australia, United Kingdom and United States alliance [AUKUS]; the emerging Japan-Philippine-US trilateral alliance; and the US engagement of India), both Russia and the

PRC are increasingly apprehensive of Western military planning, alliance building (Japan, South Korea) and operations' potential. The United States' declaration of Taiwan as a strategic asset critical to the defence of vital American interests is particularly salient.

- **A high level of personal amity between Xi and Putin:** Since Xi's ascension to power, he and Putin have nurtured an unusually close personal relationship between two heads of state. They have met more than 40 times since 2012. Only months apart in age, and sharing similar family situations, they regularly exchange birthday presents amid declarations of close friendship, hold similar philosophies on global politics and national governance, and promote national development and revitalization through a joint strategic partnership. Xi's personal influence over Putin appears to be increasing in the current context.<sup>8</sup>
- **Strong popular Russian and Chinese approval for increased interactions:** Russian citizens view a growing bilateral relationship with China in very positive terms, with few downsides. Most envisage ties as expanding over the next 10 years. For Russians, association with China strengthens their position in the world and offers technological, trade and other advantages. Likewise, Chinese citizens see Russia as being unfairly targeted by NATO and the West. Nearly 80 percent of the Chinese population considers Russia a friend (Hutt 2022). Almost as many believe the invasion of Ukraine is in the PRC's national interest. Russia is commonly understood as China's most important bilateral partner.
- **Alternative approaches to exercising international influence, encouraging subversion and jointly managing shared interests:** China and Russia both practise mutually supportive coordination tactics as veto-wielding permanent members of the United Nations to achieve their desired foreign policy outcomes. Likewise, each is prone to encouraging alternative international

6 Russia has declared its unqualified support for the "One China" principle as defined by Beijing, confirming Taiwan is an inalienable part of China and rejecting any form of Taiwanese independence.

7 The White House clarified on January 24, 2023, that it is closely monitoring China's material support to Russia's war effort in Ukraine. To date, public sources generally agree that there has not been any overt banned material aid from China to Russia. However, this potential continues to exist. In February, US officials, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Bill Burns, acknowledged that the PRC was seriously considering sending lethal aid. This included companies selling parts for Russia's Su-27 aircraft, as well as artillery ammunition (122 mm and 152 mm rounds). Russian forces have reportedly already received large quantities of gunpowder, navigation equipment, Chinese 60 mm mortar rounds, body armour, helmets, optical sights and drones, according to Ukrainian and US sources and various press reports.

8 According to *Financial Times* reporting (while not independently verified), Xi during his visit to Moscow in March 2023 apparently played a central role in de-escalating Putin and his threats at the time of possible nuclear weapons use. Equally likely, China has played a central role in warning Putin off any potential attack on Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. See Webster (2023).

institutions (such as the SCO); the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB); and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) to foster alliances of interest and a new model of global governance. Both countries use “grey zone” tactics such as influence operations, cyberattacks and political interference to undermine democratic norms and the national security of competing states. Moreover, each enables the other. For example, Russia provides a security guarantee in Central Asia, with China promoting concurrent economic development, each to their mutual advantage (Umarov and Gabuev 2023). Or, in the High North, China claims the invented, dubious standing of a “near-Arctic state” and profits from Russian backing to insert itself into Arctic diplomacy discussions, organizations, free trade agreements, research venues and infrastructure projects.<sup>9</sup>

→ **The personalization of power, paranoia and risk-prone behaviour:** Characteristic of essentially one-party states, both Xi and Putin have dramatically centralized power; only promoted perceived loyalists; and in enacting press suppression, limited civil society and state-approved narratives, and encouraged their respective cults of personality to flourish. This type of “great leader” mantra has resulted in leadership isolation, distorted perceptions and encouraged high-risk undertakings. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and China’s ongoing unprofessional and unsafe intercepts of Western military aircraft and ships in the Indo-Pacific, are evidence of this.

→ **Disparaging labels and “identity politics”:** US President Joe Biden’s recent description of his Chinese counterpart as a dictator during a private fundraising event, effectively equating Xi with Putin (and other despots, particularly in Belarus, Iran and North Korea), promotes common identities, collusion and agendas among hardline leaders now dubbed the “axis of

autocrats.” A common shared trait between them is an obsession with regime security and the avoidance of “colour revolutions”<sup>10</sup> at all costs.

When examining the forces bringing the PRC and Russia closer together, none are as significant as economic considerations and MTC. Each warrants separate examination from those already noted. Both reinforce the PRC’s asymmetric advantage over Russia.<sup>11</sup>

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## Economics Ties and Currency Interests

China’s rising leverage over Russia starts with the simple recognition that the PRC’s economy is a colossus. Its GDP has risen by more than 700 percent during the past three decades of uninterrupted growth, making it second only to the United States. If judged by purchasing power parity, China now ranks first. In sharp contrast, Russia’s economy is eleventh in the world and has seen but a marginal increase of 112 percent over the same period. Furthermore, Russia remains plagued by structural problems of low diversity, rampant corruption, a weak entrepreneurial class and an unstable business environment dominated by the mounting costs of the ongoing conflict with Ukraine.

According to Chinese customs data, cross-border trade has increased precipitously.<sup>12</sup> Total trade swelled from US\$114 billion in 2021 to US\$190 billion in 2022. From January to May 2023, trade totalled more than US\$93.8 billion, a 40.7 percent increase compared to the same period last year. In short, while China has served as Russia’s most important trading partner for the past 13 years, the reverse is not true. Russia ranks as China’s fourteenth-largest trading partner, accounting for only three percent of its global trade turnover in 2022, up from 2.1 percent in 2021.

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9 Russia’s willingness to enable China’s Arctic aspirations is well established. As far back as 2015, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declared China “one of the priority partners” for cooperation in the region (TASS 2015). This perception has accelerated in recent years. A 2022 experts’ panel at the Hudson Institute, for example, noted that extensive partnering between the two countries in the Arctic involved multi-use ports and airfields for energy extraction, joint scientific endeavours, as well as sharing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance data. Joint investments since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have increased significantly, with a focus on the development of the Northern Sea Route. See Eiterjord (2022).

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10 This was, for example, a key goal Xi listed for SCO member states in his opening statement during the most recent SCO summit hosted by India in early July 2023.

11 An important overview of the nature of Sino-Russian relations in this regard is Bogusz, Jakóbowski and Rodkiewicz (2021).

12 For a recent comprehensive high-level overview of the nature of the relationship, see Gilchrist (2023).

Severe and escalating economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the West (including export controls, the freezing of overseas assets and denying Russia continued access to the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication [SWIFT, the international messaging system that enables bank transactions]) are anticipated to continue for the foreseeable future. As a result, some analysts have described Russia's economic dependency on China as akin to it becoming "a vassal state."

An equally important insight into the nature of this inequality is the type of goods (versus services) traded by each country.<sup>13</sup> Russia's exports are predominantly petroleum, natural gas and coal. These commodities accounted for 74 percent of total Russian exports to China in 2022. Following the imposition of sanctions on Russia, food exports to China have also risen from a nominal value of US\$3.6 billion in 2021 to US\$6.0 billion in 2022 (Dezan Shira & Associates 2023a). Fertilizers and metals (for example, gold, nickel, titanium and platinum) account for the remainder. In stark contrast, Russia has recently expended billions of dollars on the purchase of automobiles, machinery, semiconductors, electronics, ships and aircraft from China. Increasingly, given Russia's growing isolation, household goods (appliances, mattresses), textiles and other consumer products have all witnessed high upward spikes.

Viewed in strategic terms, Russia is increasingly dependent on China for essential products it cannot now procure from elsewhere. These are secured according to terms set by the PRC. Moreover, as evidenced by recent natural gas, oil and coal purchase agreements (US\$81.3 billion in 2022, up from US\$52.1 billion in 2021), China is now not only diversifying its sources away from the Middle East, and broadening delivery modes from a reliance on sea lanes to include land routes, but also purchasing Russian fossil fuels at significantly discounted prices.<sup>14</sup>

Directly related to trade, both China and Russia have a stake in increasing the use of "local"

currencies in their economic interactions. Efforts to "de-dollarize" the global economy started in 2014 for Russia (as a response to initial US sanctions over Crimea) and were officially agreed to by the PRC several years later. Trade in either yuan or rubles allows both countries to conserve US dollars, insulate trade from sanctions, decrease their exposure to the effects of US economic and monetary policy, and expand the use of each country's respective currency. Transactions via this means have grown from around 25 percent of the bilateral total prior to the invasion of Ukraine, to recent claims by Putin as now nearing 65 percent. In late 2022, yuan-ruble currency trades on the Moscow Exchange mushroomed to US\$1.25 billion per day; previously, such transactions rarely exceeded US\$150 million per week (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2023).

Russia and China are both striving to internationalize their currencies, but Russia lacks the capability to do so. China's economic scale, continual prodigious growth rate and global financial leadership make the yuan an increasingly attractive alternative to the US dollar. And again, this empowers the PRC over Russia. For example, Russian banks are now conducting considerably more transactions in yuan. More than US\$7 billion in yuan-dominated bonds were issued by Russian companies in 2022. Additionally, Russia's financial ministry has sharply upped the potential share of yuan reserves held by the country's sovereign wealth fund to 60 percent.

Fearing indirect sanctions for supporting Russia, Beijing has pushed Russian business transactions to provincial second- and third-rate banks and companies that are less visible and internationally exposed. Chinese financial institutions have also purposefully not become direct creditors to the Russian government.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, although China and Russia both have alternative financial transfer systems to SWIFT, China does not subscribe to Russia's messaging system, the System for Transfer of Financial Messages. Finally, the PRC is a world leader in the development of its own digital currency, the "e-yuan." This provides China with increased regulatory oversight over its own financial system, augments its influence as an international creditor and trading partner,

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13 In 2021, China did not export any services to Russia. In comparison, Russian services to China totalled US\$2.6 billion and were confined primarily to transportation and construction with select business services provided.

14 Some analysts calculate the savings at approximately US\$5 billion over the past year on the back of EU sanctions and depressed prices (which have fallen approximately 14 percent from 2022 to 2023). Also see Nugent (2023).

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15 This situation is, however, nuanced. According to recent analysis by the *Financial Times*, China's four biggest banks have quadrupled their exposure to Russia's banking sector from US\$2.2 billion at the start of 2022 to almost US\$10 billion by March 2023. See Carville (2023).

and further normalizes global e-currency evolution according to a “Made in China” model. This disadvantages other (particularly weaker) international partners, most notably Russia.

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## Military Cooperation

In June 2017, China and Russia signed their first joint military road map. This was heralded as a three-year officially approved plan for increased military cooperation. The catalyst was jointly perceived threats and security challenges posed by the West. In 2021, this was further elevated with a new five-year agreement. An increasingly long-term planning commitment speaks to China and Russia’s common interests and views on strategic stability and regional security, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>16</sup> They also reinforce shared fears over possible US and Western intervention and conflict. Finally, they denote a heightened level of bilateral trust. Essential aspects of China and Russia’s MTC consist of arms sales, military exchanges, technology transfers and co-development, the sharing of dual-use technologies and joint military exercises.

## Arms Sales

Military cooperation between Russia and China was founded on arms sales in the early years of bilateralism (1950–1960), which largely ceased during the Sino-Soviet split until the normalization of relations in 1989. Initially, Russia directly aided China in its involvement in the Korean War, starting in October 1950 with massive amounts of equipment and assistance.<sup>17</sup> Russia was also key in enabling China’s civilian and nuclear programs. Soviet assistance consisted of training Chinese scientists, supporting the PRC’s weapons-grade uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing, and offering guidance with warhead design, production and missile technologies. China subsequently detonated its first nuclear weapon in 1964. Following this, however, arms sales were suspended until the early 1990s.

From 1991 to 2005, China profited from a new spirit of collaboration and acquired large volumes of Russian weapons, including combat aircraft, ships, submarines, air defence systems, anti-ship missiles and numerous other platforms. Sales initially averaged around US\$2–3 billion per year, accounting for 83 percent of China’s arms purchases.<sup>18</sup> This soon plateaued as China quickly encouraged licensed production agreements, where Chinese defence firms acquired the rights to locally produce Russian weapons in-country using supplied assembly kits. Additionally, the PRC quickly mastered reverse engineering, practised industrial espionage on a global scale and developed native production capabilities.<sup>19</sup>

For a 10-year period following 2005, with a few notable exceptions, such as transport helicopters and turbofan aircraft engines, sales significantly declined. However, with the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” and Russia suffering the consequences of its unilateral military occupations of adjacent territories, both countries saw value in reinstating renewed sales and cooperation. Most significantly, Russia began making concessions to China, selling more of its most advanced technologies. In 2015, for example, a US\$7 billion sale of Su-35 combat aircraft, S-400 air defence systems, as well as sophisticated combat aircraft engines was unusual. More typically, annual sales approached US\$1.5 billion on average. Nevertheless, with PRC defence spending at roughly a three-to-one ratio in comparison to Russia, the ongoing maturation and sophistication of its own national military industrial complex, and China’s commitment to rapidly becoming a world leader in science and technology (S&T), today Russian arms sales to China (further reduced by the war in Ukraine) represent a much less important component of its military-to-military links with Beijing.

## Personnel Exchanges

The importance of military exchanges is often overlooked. This is a critical means of promoting trust, sharing military culture, fostering strategic communications and

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16 The most comprehensive recent analysis of Sino-Russian military cooperation (on which this work draws heavily) is Gorenburg et al. (2023).

17 For a good high-level overview of Russia-China military cooperation, see Hart et al. (n.d.).

18 The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute offers the best data set on this topic. See [www.sipri.org](http://www.sipri.org).

19 Russian defence conglomerate Rostec has identified endless examples of Chinese reverse engineering, including aircraft engines, Sukhoi planes, deck jets, air defence systems, portable air defence missiles and surface-to-air systems.

encouraging confidence-building measures.<sup>20</sup> The rotation of Russian and Chinese military personnel and technical specialists has been in effect since the early 1990s. The practice was institutionalized in formal agreements starting in 1996. According to Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, approximately 3,600 Chinese military personnel have been trained in Russian military universities since 1991. Xi and Putin publicly affirmed the value of military cross-pollination during their high-level talks in 2023.

As the main destination for Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers receiving military education and training overseas, high-ranking members typically attend the General Staff Academy of the Russian Armed Forces. There, they are exposed to broad-based educational programs on military strategy and tactics. Equally important, more junior ranks are schooled in the operation and maintenance of advanced Russian weapons' systems. The value of Russian training (informed by Moscow's direct conflict experience in modern military operations, which most PLA personnel lack) can be measured by the promotion rates of former participants, who graduate better able to inform China and Russia's rapidly increasing joint patrols and exercises. Overall, these types of military-to-military interactions are a higher-level indicator of the strength of relations, given that commitments of this nature promote compatibility in terms of military thinking and approaches to warfare. Some have argued that the PLA force structure, doctrine and organizational reforms under Xi, all draw on Russia's "new generation warfare" concepts (Singh 2020).

## Technology Transfers and Joint Development

With the trendline of arms sales falling, joint technology projects (involving technology transfers and co-development) are rapidly escalating. This is now recognized as a critical component of Sino-Russian MTC. China has long looked to Russia to aid in the development of numerous Chinese weapons. Most are derived from Russian systems and

technologies ranging from the WZ-10 helicopter and L-15 combat trainer, to PL-12 air-to-air missiles. In other words, technology projects have ushered in cooperation at new levels. Such undertakings are often characterized by long-term investments, shared research exchanges and deeper integration of the countries' respective defence industries. That said, the Chinese remain experts at effectively selling the idea of co-development, but then quickly manipulating joint development into opportunities for acquiring Russian technology, components and expertise outright. Nevertheless, Russia retains niche expertise in areas such as heavy-lift helicopters, ballistic missile defence, military space operations, early warning systems and long-range precision strike capabilities.<sup>21</sup> Russian submarine development, including advanced quieting technology, acoustic systems and nuclear propulsion, is particularly coveted by Beijing as it seeks to strengthen its maritime force projection capabilities in the Indo-Pacific out past the second island chain.

The promotion of defence industry integration and cooperation is further being ushered in by the PRC's advances and even global leadership in numerous emerging and disruptive technologies. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) has examined 23 technologies critical to the second pillar of the AUKUS alliance, such as hypersonic weapons, quantum technology, artificial intelligence (AI) and cybersecurity. It notes that China has a significant lead over AUKUS members in 19 of these cutting-edge domains.<sup>22</sup>

What can we extrapolate from all this? First, Chinese-Russian sustained cooperation on the most sophisticated aspects of military S&T is broadening and deepening. Second, each is incentivized to work with the other in its own national interest. Third, while Russia will still benefit from the sharing of sensitive technologies, joint development and the co-production of sophisticated new weapons systems, China's leverage (amplified by the West's ongoing sanctions), Moscow's significant diminution in national power capabilities and its dire economic circumstances,

20 Russia's comfort in internally redeploying approximately two-thirds of its eastern border forces, as well as substantive equipment stockpiles including S-400 and Pantsir-S air-defence systems and Su-35 fighters to exercises near Belarus for prolonged periods in 2022–2023, speaks to a new level of trust toward the PRC. People-to-people contacts, however, remain limited and are often marked by racial and historical stereotyping as well as cultural bias.

21 Capabilities enabling the diminution of US space-based surveillance capabilities, or enablers for the PRC's intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance efforts, would be particularly threatening.

22 ASPI's critical technology tracker is the definitive open-source resource on such trends. See <https://techtracker.aspi.org.au>.

will collectively enable China to steer future high-tech collaborations to its overall benefit.

## The Sharing of Dual-Use Technologies

China's ambitions to become a world-class military by 2049 depend on novel, "leap-frogging" approaches to S&T development.<sup>23</sup> As chronicled by the US State Department, Xi has systematically reorganized China's S&T ecosystem to ensure new innovations to simultaneously advance economic and military development. Barriers between China's civilian research and commercial sectors, and its military and defence industries, are being eliminated. The two domains are increasingly merged, under what is referred to as "military-civil fusion." As a by-product of this, advanced dual-use technologies (arising from China's strong national research base, acquired international innovations, espionage and commercial theft) are not only making China "an innovation superpower" but also a potential supplier of world-class disruptive technologies to other countries, including Russia.

Definitional boundaries of dual use remain extremely problematic (Campbell 2023).<sup>24</sup> For example, the internet and GPS both represent now pervasive technologies that originated with the US military. Nonetheless, a sample of current dual-use technologies with equally important civilian and military applications could include a diverse range of items such as quantum sciences, chemicals, software, semiconductors, biotechnology, lasers, thermal-imaging devices, computer chips and drones.

Overall, joint R&D agreements between Russian and Chinese defence firms have been on the increase since 2014. Chinese commercial and dual-use technologies in telecommunications, space, satellite systems, remote sensing, robotics and AI are noteworthy examples of collaboration areas that have been advantageous to both sides. Nevertheless, Russia's isolation is again tipping the scales in China's favour, as Moscow desperately searches for secure replacements of critical components (such as Chinese-made

navigation and fire-control systems) and advanced manufacturing equipment — all no longer available through Western suppliers.

The sharing of dual-use technologies is anticipated to accelerate over time. American apprehensions were recently noted by Secretary of State Blinken, who highlighted that Beijing had "almost certainly" been supplying Russia with "some non-lethal, dual-use type support" (Marlow 2023). No further details were provided, but 24 PRC-based companies have been barred from trading with US entities, given their links to Russia's military or defence-industrial base. Additionally, a Chinese satellite firm was sanctioned for offering imagery of Ukrainian territory (complete with troop positions) to a Kremlin-aligned militia.

## Joint Military Exercises

Since 2003, China and Russia have undertaken joint bilateral, trilateral and multilateral military exercises. An initial counterterrorism event was followed up several years later by a much larger undertaking of some 8,000 Chinese and 2,000 Russian troops. This exercise involved both land and amphibious manoeuvres, commencing in Vladivostok and concluding in China's Shandong Peninsula. Early bilateral exercises comprised largely ground or multi-domain operations, but they have continually evolved in complexity, frequency, scope, geographic location and purpose. The diversity of missions now consists of peace operations, joint sea trials, strategic command and staff exercises, trilaterals (with South Africa and Iran), as well as multinational engagements. To date, the two countries have conducted approximately 48 joint undertakings of various postures.

New patterns of behaviour are increasingly evident. First, public pronouncements by senior Chinese and Russian leaders affirming both the value and necessity of joint training are now commonplace.<sup>25</sup> Second, air and naval patrols are becoming

23 For a good early overview on this subject, see Nouwens and Legarda (2018).

24 Richard Moore, chief of the United Kingdom's Secret Intelligence Service (or MI6), said at a rare public appearance that China and its communist ruler Xi are "absolutely complicit" in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. See Anderlini and Vinocur (2023).

25 In the wake of the aborted Wagner uprising, then defence minister Li noted to his Russian equivalent during a meeting on July 3, 2023, that "with the joint efforts of both sides, the relations between the two militaries will continue to deepen and solidify, constantly make new progress and reach a new level." See Lindberg and Zibang (2023).

regularized on a routine and consistent basis.<sup>26</sup> Third, China and Russia are predisposed to holding exercises in each other's potential flashpoints, including the East China Sea, the Baltic Sea, the South China Sea, the Sea of Japan, the Arctic, and the waters in and around Taiwan. Fourth, exercises (with additional partners) are now taking place in a more globalized context, such as in South Africa, the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. Similarly, joint aerial patrols now cover broad swaths of the western Pacific Ocean and periodically encroach on South Korean, Japanese and US locations (Guam and Alaska).<sup>27</sup> Sixth, the inclusion of more sophisticated armaments by each side continues to build trust.<sup>28</sup> This solidarity of spirit is reinforced by increasing Chinese port visits following naval exercises with Russia.<sup>29</sup> And, finally, as manifested in the Northern/Interaction-2023 exercise, China is now leading in the planning and hosting of Russian troops and equipment,<sup>30</sup> as well as in the coordination and command of multiple military services from each nation. Rehearsals currently involve live-fire scenarios and more sophisticated warfighting such as air defence training, as well as anti-missile, anti-submarine and anti-ship manoeuvres. The overall declared purpose of Northern/Interaction-2023 is "safeguarding the security of strategic waterways" (Yang 2023), but numerous outcomes are concurrently being realized.

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26 For the sixth time since 2019, on June 6, 2023, the PLA Air Force and Russian Air Force conducted a joint patrol over the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan. Several iterations of annual joint naval patrols have also taken place adjacent to Japan. Most notable, an 11-vessel Russian-Chinese flotilla sailed near Alaska in early August 2023 and practised communications training, helicopter landings, as well as a joint anti-submarine exercise in the southwestern part of the Bering Sea. This patrol covered more than 6,400 nautical miles.

27 Occasionally, air defence identification zones are violated and Western fighter jets scramble in response. Japan responded in this manner almost 800 times between April 1, 2022, and March 31, 2023.

28 For instance, according to Chinese government sources, the Zapad/Interaction 2021 exercise was massive in scale, involving some 10,000 personnel, 200 armoured vehicles and 100 artillery pieces. Reportedly, more than 80 percent of the equipment employed was new, produced since the PLA began modernizing in the early 2000s. The backbone of such efforts is built on a new networking system referred to as "one network and four chains" that connects aircraft, artillery and armoured vehicles on the battlefield.

29 For example, following the China-Russia Northern/Interaction-2023 exercise in July 2023, Chinese naval vessels proceeded to Vladivostok and engaged in open-day activities, deck receptions, cultural and sports exchanges, as well as reciprocal ship visits.

30 Mutual access to each other's military facilities offers both countries strategic advantages, especially China. The ability to routinely access Russian air bases would enable the PLA Air Force to pose a greater threat to Japan, while also likely reducing US attack options from Alaska.

The value to both Beijing and Moscow of joint military exercises is manifold: they are a symbolic show of unity, strategic ambiguity and military potential against terrorist threats, regional powers and neighbouring countries. While avoiding naming "third-country targets," this applies most particularly to the United States. In short, such events serve to message on many levels. They have, for instance, occurred after US President Biden's recent summit in Tokyo, and in the wake of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's 2022 stopover in Taipei. Moreover, current efforts include US, Japanese and South Korean military drills aimed at countering North Korea's notable increase in missile launches.

Pragmatically, joint exercises promote increased interoperability, offer training, enable joint command and encourage habits of interaction. They also fulfill a direct deterrence function and demarcate the risks of possible NATO expansion into the Indo-Pacific. Most importantly, joint exercises benefit China, which uses them as a means of learning tactical and strategic planning lessons from its battle-tested counterpart. Current operations present, for instance, an opportunity to gain insights into Moscow's experience of countering land-based attacks against naval assets. For the Chinese, the war in Ukraine holds important parallels that could arise during a cross-strait crisis (Su 2023).

## The Sharp Edge of Diplomacy

Prior to concluding, a final aspect of Sino-Russian relations that offers insights into the current state of relations is the political nature of ongoing interactions. On June 24, 2023, Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of the Wagner Group, directly used his mercenaries to challenge the Russian military establishment, and indirectly Putin's continued hold on power. While Beijing's ties to Moscow were quickly restored after the status

quo outcome became clear,<sup>31</sup> China's response was unequivocally slow and purposefully muted. In short, the most serious challenge to Putin's reign of more than two decades elicited little more than belated and bland statements by China, simply supporting "Russia in maintaining national stability and achieving development and prosperity," during what was framed an "internal affair" (Taylor 2023). When practically tested, China and Russia's "no limits" partnership proved itself extremely qualified, measured and determined by Xi's dictates and self-interests.<sup>32</sup> Russia truly now fills the role of China's junior partner.<sup>33</sup>

## Implications for Bilateral and Regional Relations

The implications of Russia's failed invasion of Ukraine for its relationship with China are not yet fully discernible and have more than narrow bilateral consequences. The PRC was clearly surprised by Putin's "high-stakes" gamble and has been equally shocked by the West's level of cohesion and enduring commitment to sanctioning Russia. While momentarily diverting the United States and allied countries from the Indo-Pacific theatre, this has ultimately amplified fears of a cross-strait crisis, increased Western military support to Taiwan and pushed India further into America's sphere of influence. More directly, it has dramatically heightened Japan's military spending, reinvigorated the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, and provoked Australia's historic purchase of some 220 US-made Tomahawk long-range cruise missiles capable of striking the Chinese mainland.<sup>34</sup>

China has been penalized in other ways as well. Russia's predilection for overturning the international order (versus China's more reformist mindset) has caused self-inflicted wounds that negatively impact Beijing's strategic calculations.<sup>35</sup> For instance, Putin's military force projection potential has been largely downgraded. Russia's personnel losses in Ukraine are estimated at more than 350,000. By some measures, military equipment that was either destroyed, captured, damaged or abandoned, reached close to 10,000 pieces. Ammunition and artillery rounds are so low, Russia is resorting to stockpiles produced decades ago. In short, not only has China's resolve to support Russia militarily been directly tested (and a failing grade likely accorded by Putin), in the event of a Taiwan crisis, Russia would now have far fewer assets to commit to aid China (provided the political will even remained to do so).

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31 High-level cooperation has continued unabated between China and Russia since the insurrection. A Chinese delegation has visited Moscow to discuss joint anti-missile defence. Until his recent dismissal, Li participated in talks with Russia's commander-in-chief of the navy to strengthen bilateral cooperation. Russia's deputy prime minister, Denis Manturov, was hosted by Beijing to consider mitigation efforts in response to Western sanctions. And Foreign Minister Lavrov has worked with his Chinese counterpart at ASEAN to jointly promote comprehensive development, the principles of justice, as well as equality and mutual benefit in global affairs. China hosted Putin on October 17–18 when he attended the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. According to Russian News Agency reports, identified topics for collaboration included combatting corruption and the illegal circulation of cryptocurrency, the laundering of criminal proceeds, the financing of terrorism and the returning of stolen assets from abroad. Major strategic goals included opposing hegemony, resisting unilateralism and promoting the democratization of international relations. The public readout of the Xi-Putin meeting was limited but affirmed a joint commitment to further strengthening bilateral relations. See Lin et al. (2023).

32 Geopolitically, China is the only "winner" in the Ukrainian conflict. Russia is weaker and more dependent on the PRC than ever before. The economic growth of NATO members (who have contributed billions of dollars in military and humanitarian aid to simply ameliorate this crisis) has diminished. China is analyzing the response of the West to Russia's actions and developing "lessons learned" to inform any future cross-strait scenarios. Europe has displaced the Indo-Pacific as the West's most immediate security concern. And finally, while aiding and abetting Russia's unlawful and deadly invasion, China has avoided blame, bolstered its reputation among developing nations, and even escaped Western criticism by not crossing "redlines," all while presenting itself as a potential leader in peacemaking efforts.

33 The CIA's number two official, Deputy Director David Cohen, has observed that Xi regards Russia as China's "junior partner." Beijing is increasingly wary of being too closely tied to Moscow. This has been echoed by US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby in public statements.

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34 Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida views Japanese security now at a "turning point in history." The national defence budget will double to two percent of GDP. An initial US\$5.6 billion is allocated for the next five years, with a focus on regional relationships (including Taiwan), interceptor missiles, attack and reconnaissance drones, satellite communication equipment, F-35 stealth fighters, helicopters, submarines, warships and heavy-lift transport jets.

35 Trust and cultural differences remain a deeply entrenched "fault line" between China and Russia that can arise during a crisis. See, for example, Maizland (2022).



Likewise, Russia's international reputation has been severely damaged, its economic tools of statecraft attenuated, and its global leadership potential and influence significantly diminished. This new reality demands more of China and makes the PRC increasingly a focal point for criticism. Ironically, Russia's failed invasion has elevated international fears over the uncertainty and threat posed by China.

Against this backdrop, rifts or future tensions between the two countries may multiply behind the scenes. A consensus exists that the PRC will capitalize on its mounting asymmetry with Russia (Schuman 2023). For instance, China's terms of an acceptable settlement in Ukraine will diverge further and further from Moscow's as the war continues. Its motivations differ.<sup>36</sup> Beijing is furthermore likely to increasingly profit from Russia's attenuated national power resources. It will strive to displace Russia in Central Asia (Palmer 2023). Also, it continues to use the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to increase its influence, access and political leverage in South and Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East at Russia's expense. New politically motivated partnerships forego the need to establish formal military alliances and full-fledged bases, but at the same time enable security, assure PRC growth, help guarantee access to natural resources and operationalize an expanded global posture. Bluntly speaking, China is ascending, independent of Russia. Senior Chinese Communist Party leaders are not pleased by the complications Putin's actions have imposed on their lofty aspirations of promoting "the Chinese Dream." Niceties aside, Xi no doubt remains committed to a fundamentally instrumentalist approach to Russia, which China now considers a weakened, sometimes erratic and potentially domestically unstable strategic partner.

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36 China's "peace plan" for Ukraine is not really about peace. It revolves around China's need to present itself to the Global South as a peace broker, to reset China's relations with Europe, and to position itself in the reconstruction of Ukraine after the war. See Bekkevold (2023).

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## Conclusion

Putin's meeting with Xi on February 4, 2022, was a discussion between perceived equals, immediately prior to the start of Beijing's hosting of the Winter Olympics. It could have involved some basic insights into Putin's planned "special military operation" in Ukraine and resulted in a published 16-page joint statement on their intended bilateral partnership entering "a new era." The assumptions of both parties at that time have, however, proven egregiously wrong. This miscalculation has fundamentally redefined Sino-Russian relations.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing conflict over the past 21 months leave it politically isolated, economically handicapped, internally divided and militarily weakened.<sup>37</sup> While unlikely to have been forecast at the outset, China has profited from Russia's error-prone strategy at every opportunity. In short, Russia's actions have significantly accelerated its already ongoing redefinition of status from a major global power to a junior partner of China. This transformation portends implications for the evolving world order.

To begin with, the identified seven "gravitational forces" pulling China and Russia together into the same orbit have only increased since the onset of the Ukrainian invasion. Shared fears over US hegemony continue to deepen as America successfully leads other nations in countering autocratic behaviour by China, North Korea and Russia. NATO's Vilnius Summit Communiqué and searing criticism of the PRC's ongoing military buildup, its enhanced nuclear capability and its increasing threats to the rules-based international order, all demonstrate the new geopolitical linkages being made between Europe and the Indo-Pacific. While the strong personal amity between Xi and Putin has likely been attenuated by the Wagner rebellion, the two have fostered a strong, broad-based friendship over a long period.<sup>38</sup> Each, for example, was quick to affirm that ongoing high-level government-to-government dialogue continued. Commitments

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37 By any of the most common measures of domestic power resources (overall productivity, leadership in frontier technologies, an ability to generate discretionary resources for spending, quality of national institutions and military capabilities), Russia has suffered incredible setbacks since launching its invasion of Ukraine.

38 Reports of Chinese displeasure with Russian intransigence over Ukraine are appearing. See Porter (2023).

to renewed and enhanced military cooperation are furthermore expected to increase this year. Building, in part, on the international successes of Xi and Putin empowering alternative international organizations, such as the SCO, AIIB and BRICS, public support for ever-closer ties between the two countries continues to grow. Finally, a shared identity between Xi and Putin as historic figures ushering in renewed national ambitions in a period of mounting global disorder unites them in common purpose, irrespective of their grossly different potentials to achieve such outcomes.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to the coalescing forces just discussed, there are two all-determining fundamental factors shaping the scope, nature and potential of Sino-Russian ties. These are Russia's deepening economic/financial dependency and military cooperation. As has been demonstrated, the PRC is overwhelmingly the author of the terms of each.

Bilateral trade continues to build between China and Russia with projections for 2023 reaching US\$237 billion (Dezan Shira & Associates 2023b). This will surpass an original goal set by Xi and Putin in 2019, months ahead of schedule. That said, it is not balanced trade. China is by far Russia's largest trading partner, but Russia remains relatively inconsequential to the PRC. Trade is almost solely in goods, not services. China receives oil, natural gas and coal (at heavily discounted rates), which it uses to strategically diversify its overreliance on Middle East suppliers. It is now also offsetting a dependence on maritime delivery routes with land-based pipelines through Russia and Central Asia. In return, the PRC supplies Russia with critical finished products such as automobiles, machinery, semiconductors, electronics, ships and aircraft. It also increasingly fills the role of satisfying consumer need for essentials such as appliances, mattresses and textiles. With few options under mounting international sanctions, Russia is developing a dependency on China. It retains little leverage over what is traded, the price or the concessions granted.

In even starker terms than trade, Russia's reliance on China's yuan (now recognized by the

International Monetary Fund as a core international currency) is profound. While each country has striven to promote the use of the yuan and/or ruble to de-dollarize their economies and insulate themselves from US influence and sanctions, China is the only credible option of the two. The leadership role China plays in global finances, its influence over stakeholder countries that supplicate themselves to PRC-led development opportunities (such as the BRI), and its success in establishing new global banks and institutions to address financial crises, as well as the granting of international aid and loans, all translate into Russian acceptance of Chinese preferences. For instance, the PRC does not recognize Russia's alternative to SWIFT and directly competes with it. China is not a creditor to the Russian government. Moreover, China limits business transactions with Russia to select provincial second- and third-rate banks and companies to reduce the risk of provoking Western sanctions. Again, China plays the determining role.

In military technological cooperation, Sino-Russian relations are less one-sided, but the trajectory overall still favours China. Arms sales are no longer a defining advantage for Russia. Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, Beijing only purchased one to two billion dollars' worth of weapons annually. Through theft, reverse engineering, international espionage and often unfairly advantageous joint co-development, the PRC has developed into the world's fourth-largest arms exporter. Its interests today are only in the most sophisticated of Russian weapons and technologies. On this front, China enjoys continued success in skillfully using its many and varied levers to extract concessions. As a base for co-development and shared funding, China's position has never been stronger, particularly as Russian military stockpiles (including some of its most advanced kit, such as the T-90M main battle tank and AMN armoured vehicles) have been decimated.

Facing the requirement to completely rebuild its arsenals, Russia will be very motivated to offset production costs and enhance its weapons capabilities by collaborating with the PRC. A major accelerator to this advantage is Beijing's multi-year, fully funded national priority on promoting "military-civil fusion." As China further entrenches its status as an "innovation superpower," it can be expected to engage Russia in the areas it deems value-added. According to precedent,

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39 Reportedly, at the conclusion of Xi's visit to Moscow in March 2023, during an intimate moment, the Chinese president turned to his Russian counterpart and stated, "Right now, there are changes – the likes of which we haven't seen for 100 years – and we are the ones driving these changes together." Putin, smiling, responded, "I agree." See Leonard (2023).

this will continue until China surpasses Russia in the few remaining areas of technological expertise it does not already dominate.

A final area of MTC for consideration is joint exercises. Lacking direct combat experience, since 2003 China has prioritized conducting joint bilateral, trilateral and multilateral military training with Russia. As outlined in this research, that has paid important dividends. The PRC is now a credible international military partner. It ably participates in complex, geographically dispersed and operationally challenging counterterrorism, peace operations and major power conflict scenarios. China and Russia are demonstrating novel patterns of interaction marked by routinization, a willingness to interoperate in their respective “flashpoints,” the hosting of each other’s troops (complete with in-country facility access), and the inclusion of sophisticated armaments that involve multiple military services from each nation. As a result, China now has the confidence to lead in planning, joint command and sophisticated live-fire drills. Trust between the two is trending upward in this respect, but only as China increasingly displaces Russia in leadership and mentoring roles.

## Outlook

Looking forward, the degree of China’s increasing influence over Russia will likely be manifest by a short list of possible indicators. For example, to what extent will the PRC incur genuine risk (and possible retribution from the West) in providing Russia with the lethal military aid it requires in Ukraine? Likewise, will China implement measures that enable Moscow to either evade export controls or process banned financial transactions? Additionally, how effective will the PRC be in utilizing its rapidly increasing national power resources to secure disproportionately advantageous outcomes in overlapping domains of interest with Russia, most notably Central Asia, the Arctic and Africa? To what extent will China be able to obtain the most sophisticated and latest generation of Russian military technologies (submarine related), prioritized joint development projects (such as missile defence systems) and the co-production of sophisticated new weapons (to enable military space operations and precision strike capabilities)? Concurrently, will Russia and China develop denser and mutually dependent intelligence-sharing relationships than what currently exist? Moreover, how successful will

China be in determining the nature, location and leadership roles in joint military exercises that offer it advantages in promoting interoperability in East Asia, command experience and lessons learned to inform possible Taiwan conflict scenarios? Finally, when crises arise (such as the Wagner mutiny), how far will China go in bolstering Putin’s regime versus suddenly proving non-committal and opportunistic?

In conclusion, the PRC as a strategic competitor is unrivalled. A number of forces pull China and Russia together, but their partnership (especially since the invasion of Ukraine) is not one of equals. The PRC can be expected to capitalize on this growing dependency to its own advantage, and while motivated to aid and support Russia (even during its unlawful breeches of international norms), Xi will always prioritize China’s broader self-interests viewed from an international framework before enabling, assisting or empowering Putin. This is indeed “a New Era” of bilateral relations between the two, but one infused clearly with Chinese characteristics not immediately evident at the outset.

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