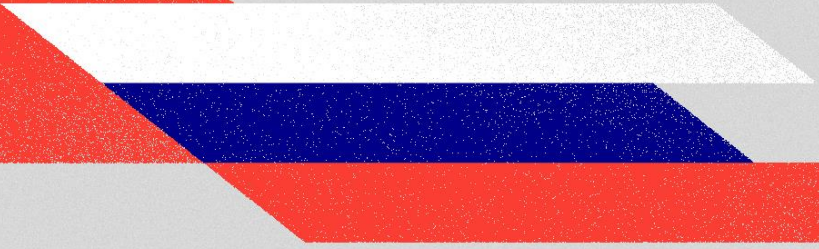
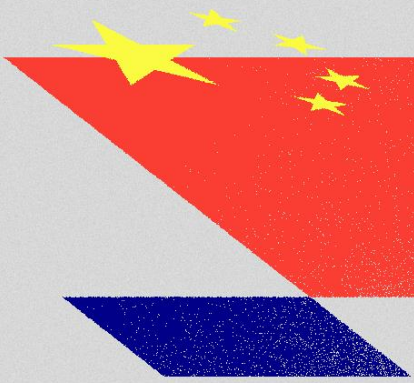


DANUBE PAPERS

ASPIRING TO HEDGE-CHINA, INDIA AND THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

CSABA BARNABÁS HORVÁTH



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and the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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China, India and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

The Russian narratives regarding the war often depict it as a conflict between a unipolar and a multipolar world order. If we judge Chinese and Indian policies regarding the war by their deeds, and not by their words, then it indeed outlines a kind of new multipolar world, but not quite the one Russia would have wanted. Rather one in which two emerging superpower aspirants are playing the role of the laughing third, (as well as laughing fourth) in the systemic conflict of the other two that were the superpowers of the 20th century. What some in the West and Russia see as a pro-Russian stance on behalf of China and India, can rather be described as neutrality on behalf of both. The neutrality of a proactive kind, in which both China and India appears to aim to extend their power and maximize gains while the conflict in Ukraine binds the attention and resources of both Russia and the West, however, the net outcome of their game appears to erode Russia's power much more during the process.

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The 2+2 game

Regarding the intentions of a certain actor, deeds and words do not always match, and when they do not, deeds are usually better guidance than words. While China has been more or less supportive of Russia since the start of the war, its deeds do not completely reflect that. There were things that China if it truly wished for a Russian victory, should have and could have done, but did not do, and there were things, that China if it truly wished for a Russian victory, shouldn't have done, but still did. First of all, China does not supply military equipment to Russia. How badly Russia needs such, is shown by the news that it is buying from Iran and North Korea. China, if it wanted to, could provide much more than Iran and North Korea can, however, it does not do so. Then there is the issue of high tech. While Russia's military industry badly needs high-tech parts such as chips, China's export of those to Russia was restrained at best for most of the year, with a failure rate among chips exported by China being as high as 40%, and with failure rate in semiconductors exported by China to Russia rising by 1900% compared to the previous year.¹ Then in December China simply ban all exports of Chips to Russia altogether.² Moreover instead of supplying a financial lifeline, China's financial institutions partially even joined sanctions, with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank freezing all lending to Russia and Belarus,³ and Union Pay, a Chinese payment system also refused services for Russian banks.⁴ We can see a similar pattern regarding India, with an 86% decrease in the delivery of telecom instruments compared to the previous year⁵, and also refusing to supply military equipment. The New Development Bank of the BRICS group suspended lending for Russia as well.⁶ Oil and gas purchases by China and India can also hardly be seen as signs of helpful intention towards Russia, as they pay under global market prices, thus rather seeming to be ways for China and India to get these goods under the market price. Then, during the latter half of the year, words from China and India started to harden as well. Not only both warned Russia of using nuclear weapons,^{7,8} but China also pledged its support for the independence and territorial integrity of Kazakhstan, when the latter came into dispute with Russia.

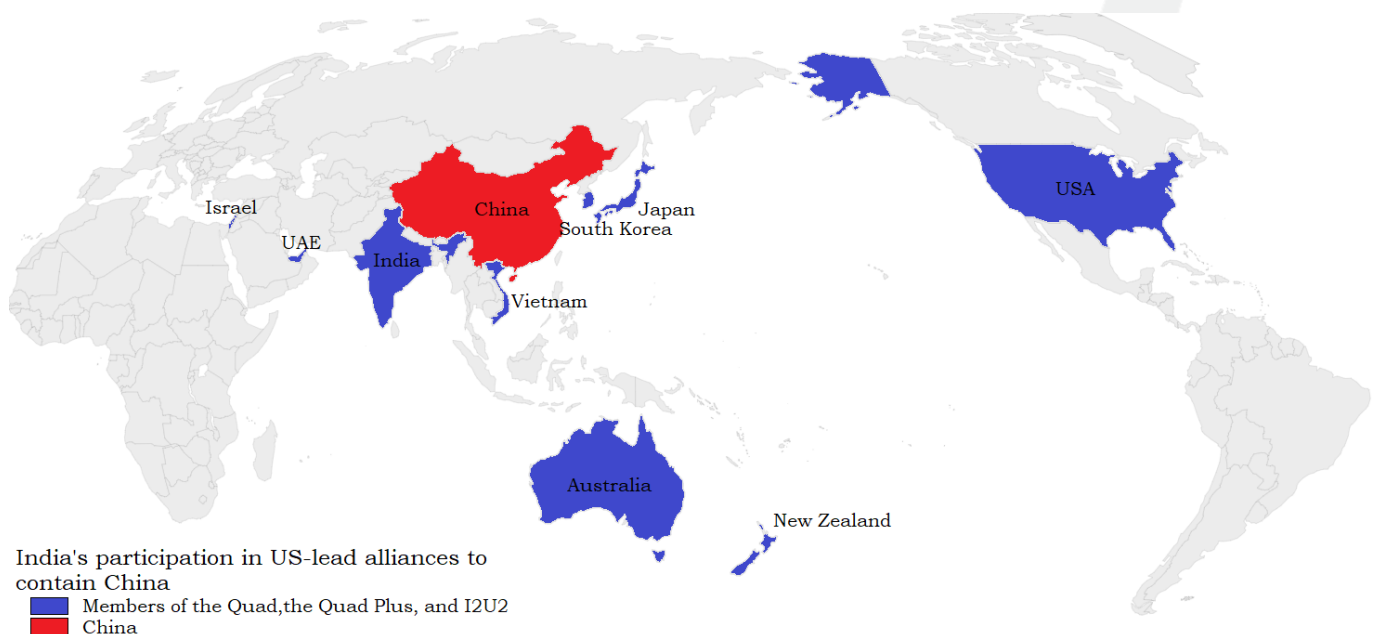
What may the incentive be behind these Chinese and Indian moves? During the last two or so decades, we could see a peculiar 2+2 game between two major and lesser great powers, the US and China as the two major ones, and Russia and India as the two lesser ones. Basically, alongside the great game of China vs. the US, India, and Russia had a special undeclared partnership on their own, in which India supported the US against China, but not against Russia, while Russia supported China against the US, but not against India. The main factor fuelling this odd combination was Russia's apparent concern about China's rise, despite their cooperation against the US, otherwise, the game of the four could simply be a 2 vs 2 game of the US and India vs China and Russia. In their undeclared partnership to contain China, the offer that India gets is cooperation against its foe, while the offer that Russia gets is cooperation against its supposed ally. Therefore, making or accepting such an offer would be perfectly obvious from India's side, it is Russia's willingness to participate, that could appear as the anomaly in this situation. Unsurprisingly we could also observe certain limits and signs of mutual mistrust in the

Sino-Russian cooperation during the same period, which included Russia denying support from China during the Sino-Indian border skirmishes and supplying with weapons the very same Indian army that China facing along the Himalayas and refusing China's offer for an SCO free trade zone, that would have included China, Russia, and much of post-Soviet Central Asia. On China's behalf, we could see denying support for Russia in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, and this mutual mistrust appears to have culminated in China's ambivalent policies during the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine as discussed above, being supportive of Russia in words but joined some of the Western sanctions, did not provide Russia either military supplies, or a financial lifeline, and in case of Kazakhstan, even seems to have used to gain ground against Russia in Central Asia. This also explains, why India on the other hand, despite being an ally of the US against China, did not give much support to the US against Russia. It is also worth noting, however, that India does not give the same support to Russia against the US, as Russia gives it against China, it merely does not support the US against it. This overall led to a situation where both China and India took a stance that could most correctly be described as neutral, albeit from the very opposite reasons.

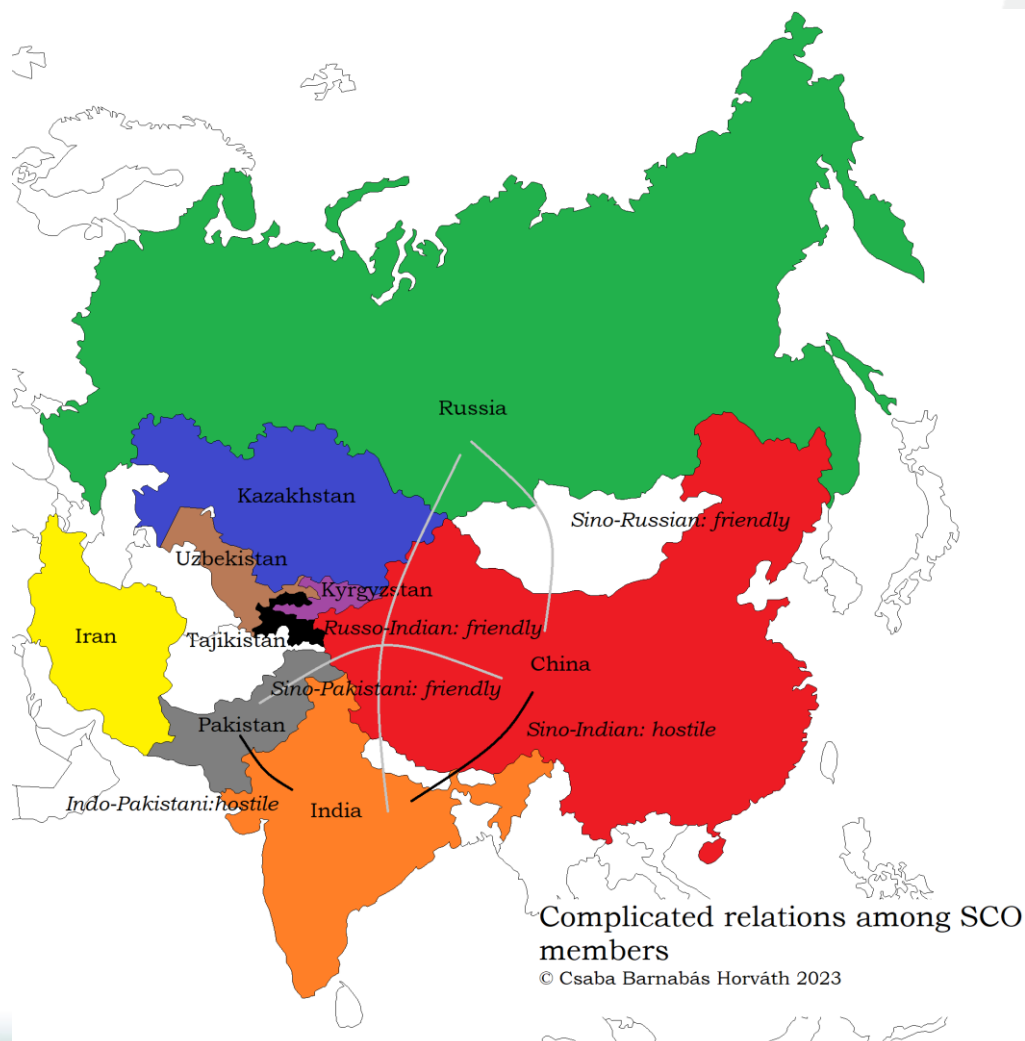
This special relationship between India and Russia despite the US-India alliance against China, and mistrust between China and Russia despite their cooperation against the US can be seen as a remnant of alignment in the latter half of the cold war, which started in 1962 but peaked during the 1980s. After the Sino-Soviet split occurred at the end of the 1950s, it was the Sino-Indian border war of 1962 became the first conflict in which the USSR supported India against its former ally, China. For the rest of the Cold War, India relied on the USSR as a counterbalance against China. This became even more apparent after the start of the US-China rapprochement in 1971 and the war in Afghanistan in 1979. The first, the undeclared Sino-US partnership against the Soviet Union that was orchestrated by Henry Kissinger and started with ping-pong diplomacy and Richard Nixon's visit in 1971-1972, and enhanced to the next level by the start of the Chinese reform era in 1978 with expanding economic relations between the two, cemented China's role as a rival of the Soviet Union for the rest of the Cold War and therefore, made the support for China's rival, India a cornerstone of Soviet geopolitics in Asia. Regarding the second, the South Asian archenemy of India, Pakistan, and China became allies as early as 1962,⁹ and in the war in Afghanistan, Pakistan became the main supporter of anti-Soviet forces. While Pakistan has already been a member of the pro-US Baghdad Pact early in the Cold War, the war in Afghanistan meant more confrontation between the USSR and Pakistan. This way, throughout the 1980s, an undeclared Indo-Soviet alliance faced a Sino-Pakistani one. After the end of the Cold War, China and the US started to see each other as arch rivals, and after a brief honeymoon in the early 1990s, US-Russia relations returned to rivalry from the late 1990s. This combination again gave way to a China-Russia and a US-India rapprochement. The Sino-Russian rapprochement manifested in the foundation of the Shanghai Five in 1996, while the US-India partnership against China become formalized with the foundation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in 2007. Russia however still did not support China against India, not even during

the most recent Sino-Indian border skirmishes of the 2010s and 2020s, and while communicating in a neutral tone, by supplying weapons to India, it was more on the side of India than on that of China.¹⁰¹¹¹²

The Quadrilateral security dialogue, the main platform of the US-India partnership consists of the USA, India, Japan, and Australia, thus it includes three of the four largest economies in the world in GDP-PPP terms, and it is also highly symbolic regarding their joint effort to contain China, that it consists of the USA, China's greatest global rival, India, China's greatest Asian rival, and Japan, China's East Asian archenemy.¹³¹⁴ The Quad was first established in 2007, de jure disestablished in 2008, but re-established in 2017, and joined by New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam as the Quad Plus in 2020.¹⁵ Between 2008 and 2017, while the Quad was de jure defunct, de facto the four participants increased their cooperation in the form of bilateral partnerships. India's participation in the group ever more intensified since the inauguration of the BJP government led by Narendra Modi in 2014, which showed a major paradigm shift in Indian foreign policy: Instead of non-alignment as the main principle followed by the Congress Party governments, Modi's foreign policy focused on close cooperation with the US-lead network of alliances, building close bilateral ties not only with Australia and Japan, the two other members of the Quad, but with Canada and Israel as well,¹⁶ and even formed the I2U2 group with the US, Israel, and the UAE for Middle Eastern affairs in 2021.¹⁷ The 2022 edition of the Malabar exercise, the annual joint naval exercise of the Quad held in November of that year showed that the Quad is alive and kicking.



A factor in India's foreign policy that perhaps belongs to its unaligned heritage the most is its participation in the US lead alliances of the Quad and the I2U2 group is its participation in the BRICS. The BRICS, formed of Brazil Russia, India, China, and South Africa, founded in 2009 aims to coordinate the economic interest of these emerging economies as opposed to the First World, and global institutions dominated by that, such as the IMF and the World bank. This however also sets the limits of cooperation between the participants. While the group has started initiatives such as a development bank, a contingent reserve agreement, and plans for a payment system, it does not form a trade block, nor has any security aspect. Therefore, its potential is merely to become an alternative for the G7, but no more than that. The BRICS cannot assist India in containing China and Pakistan, nor provide FDI the way the US and Japan can. The only BRICS member state that could be a significant source of FDI for India is China, the very same viewed by India as a strategic rival and threat. What gives puts further limits to the potential of the BRICS for anything beyond an alternate G7, is that the rivalry between China and India would force the other participants to choose between the two, which they are refusing to do. In India's foreign policy, the most apparent sign of the limits of cooperation between members of the BRICS is that India decided not to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative, China's main project of regional economic development.



While the Quad is the main platform of US-India cooperation to contain China, the most realistic initiative for a Sino-Russian alliance was the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It started as the Shanghai Five in 1996, ad cross-border cooperation of China, Russia, and three of the five former Soviet Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2002, and Uzbekistan joined the same year. However from 2008 on started a gradual erosion of the cohesion of the organization, that by now virtually ruled out the scenario of it ever becoming a unified security or trade block. First, Russia failed to coordinate with China before its war in Georgia in 2008, and in exchange, China denied support from it, joined by Kazakhstan.¹⁹ Then came China's offer for an SCO free trade area, which was rejected by Russia, presumably to preserve its privileges in post-Soviet Central Asia compared to China, and to avoid too much Chinese influence in its economy.²⁰²¹ Then came the enlargement of the SCO where Russia insisted on the accession of India alongside Pakistan. The SCO never had a collective security clause, but the simultaneous accession of India and Pakistan, two countries not having a peace treaty, just a ceasefire between them, and India also having a serious border dispute with China, made any such further ambitions meaningless. Russia's resistance against deepening the SCO, and the inclusion of India, virtually an enemy of China may originate from fears of China becoming dominant over Russia. This way however, the cohesion of the SCO got diluted to a degree, where it lost the perspective of becoming a Sino-Russian version of NATO, and it rather became an Asian version of the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe), a loose regional forum of countries not necessarily on amicable terms with each other, to deal with general issues in the region.

Russia's decline

Why Russia is cautious about China's growing power is pretty much obvious. However, considering all these factors also explains why China is not that eager to help Russia to achieve a victory in Ukraine: Russia sees itself as a great power, probably even as a superpower on its own. As we can see, this means that it never so far accepted the role of the junior partner of China, and it basically always pursued its great power agenda, and China's needs rarely were a reason for it to show restraint in this. This combined with Russia's cooperation with China's regional rival, India makes the scenario of these tendencies intensifying in case Russia is victorious. The original war goals of Moscow after all were to merge Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus in a confederation of more than 200 million inhabitants virtually re-establishing the Soviet Union, as shown among others by the prematurely published triumph-editorial of Ria Novosty,²². Had such a victory been achieved by Russia, the above tendencies could have intensified to a degree, where Russia would have likely started to pursue a superpower status again, equal to China and the US, possibly even leaving its alliance with China, starting hedging between it and the US. However, a kind of hedging from the position of strength, where it could dictate to both, gaining further ground against the US in Eastern Europe, and against China in Central Asia, signaled by claims of certain Russian political actors foreshadowing the possibility

that in case of a victory in Ukraine, Kazakhstan could be the next. Such a scenario could have even seriously jeopardized the energy security of China, to say the least.

On the other hand, the best scenario for China would be one where Russia accepts the role of a junior partner in a Sino-Russian alliance, and a Russian defeat in the war could very well open the door for such a scenario, as it would leave Russia both weakened and isolated from the west. Conditions where it would have no choice, but to join a closer-knit alliance with China than the SCO is in its present form and accepts a junior role in it, just to get the badly needed support from China against the US.

Russia's losses of heavy equipment in the war are already high to a level where they already mean a long-term impairment of the conventional military capabilities of the country: It is estimated to have already lost 60% of its tanks, 40% of its armed personal carriers, and 20% of its artillery.²³ Replacing such losses will take considerable time, for instance replacing such a quantity of tanks can take up to one decade given the pre-war annual manufacturing capacity of Russia of 200-250 tanks,²⁴ and this does not even take into consideration the sanctions that deprive Russia's military industry of high-tech parts.

Of course, one could ask the question that even after a fiasco in Ukraine, isn't Russia bound to sooner or later recover to its former strength? The answer is no: Russia's GDP is about the size of that of Spain in nominal terms. In accordance with the fact that it manufactures most of its weaponry domestically and even mines within its borders most raw materials and energy needed for its military industry, and thus needs to pay only domestic prices for all these, we can rather consider its GDP on Purchase Power Parity. However, this still makes it equal to Germany only. In our age where the military is more about high added value technological research and innovation than any time before, it is unrealistic for a country with financial resources equal to those of Germany, to maintain a military power equal to that of the US and China. On this scale, according to the October 2022 forecast of the International Monetary Fund, Russia's position will deteriorate even further in the long run: While in 2023, it represented 2,74% of the global GDP-PPP, in 2027 it will represent only 2,51%. That share will be an 8,44% shrink relative to the 2023 one (ie. $2,51/2,74$) which is the second most significant decline among all the G20 countries, only after Japan.²⁵

G20 share in the global GDP-PPP in the given year (source: IMF)	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	change
China	18,91%	19,16%	19,41%	19,65%	19,92%	5,30%
United States	15,23%	14,94%	14,71%	14,53%	14,34%	-5,80%
India	7,45%	7,72%	7,97%	8,22%	8,46%	13,52%
Japan	3,74%	3,67%	3,59%	3,49%	3,40%	-9,18%
Germany	3,19%	3,14%	3,11%	3,06%	3,01%	-5,83%
Indonesia	2,54%	2,60%	2,65%	2,70%	2,75%	8,02%
Russia	2,74%	2,69%	2,63%	2,57%	2,51%	-8,44%
Brazil	2,30%	2,27%	2,25%	2,22%	2,19%	-4,87%
United Kingdom	2,28%	2,22%	2,20%	2,18%	2,14%	-6,05%
France	2,24%	2,20%	2,17%	2,13%	2,10%	-6,17%
Turkey	2,06%	2,06%	2,05%	2,05%	2,04%	-0,92%
Mexico	1,78%	1,76%	1,74%	1,72%	1,70%	-4,61%
Italy	1,82%	1,79%	1,75%	1,71%	1,67%	-8,26%
South Korea	1,70%	1,69%	1,68%	1,67%	1,65%	-2,71%
Canada	1,37%	1,35%	1,34%	1,32%	1,30%	-5,26%
Saudi Arabia	1,26%	1,26%	1,25%	1,25%	1,25%	-1,19%
Australia	0,99%	0,98%	0,97%	0,96%	0,95%	-4,54%
Argentina	0,74%	0,73%	0,72%	0,72%	0,71%	-4,72%
South Africa	0,58%	0,57%	0,56%	0,55%	0,54%	-7,09%

Meanwhile, Japan due to Article 9 of its constitution possessed a military well below its economic potential after the Second World War, it is now in the process of rearming itself. Hence, the increase of its militarization may counterbalance its relative economic decline regarding its global and regional power. Russia, by contrast, is about to suffer this decline from a position of already unsustainable and unaffordable high levels of militarization, thus the decline of its global and regional power is likely to be significant. The 21st century is no longer the period where one could win a war by human wave tactics based on masses of unequipped foot-soldiers, and even if it was, Russia being only the 9th most populous country in the world with less than half of the population of the US, about one-third of that of the EU, and a mere one-tenth of that of India and China, simply does not have the demographic muscle for that any longer either. Before its dissolution in 1991, the Soviet Union was the 3rd most populous country on the planet, right behind China and India. With its dissolution, Russia inherited only about half of its previous population, which made it 6th in the world, as the US, Indonesia and Brazil immediately surpassed it.

Since then, Bangladesh, Nigeria, and Pakistan surpassed Russia as well, making it 9th. This will only further worsen for Russia in the future, as according to the July 2022 forecast of the United Nations, in terms of population, Ethiopia will surpass Russia five years from now in 2028, the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2034, the Philippines and Mexico in 2036, and Egypt in 2038, as soon as 15 years from now, by which point, Russia will be a mere 14th in population on the global list.²⁶

Population in millions in the given year (Source: UN Population Division)	2022	2023	2028	2034	2036	2038
India	1 417	1 429	1 492	1 558	1 577	1 595
China	1 426	1 426	1 420	1 403	1 396	1 387
USA	338	340	349	359	361	364
Pakistan	236	240	264	294	303	313
Nigeria	219	224	251	286	297	309
Indonesia	276	278	288	299	302	305
Brazil	215	216	222	227	228	229
Bangladesh	171	173	181	190	192	195
Ethiopia	123	127	143	162	169	176
DR Congo	99	102	120	144	152	161
Philippines	116	117	126	136	139	142
Egypt	111	113	122	132	136	140
Mexico	128	128	133	138	139	140
Russia	145	144	142	140	139	138

Thus, the realistic position for Russia is that of a regional middle power, equal to India at best, and, given the latter's dynamic economic growth and massive population, even that may not be sustainable for too long. Indeed, Russia's position as a military power equal to the US and China has already been fading for a long time, and the moment when its conventional military drifts out from the US-China league had to transpire. In fact, as the performance of the Russian military in Ukraine shows, in reality, this moment most likely occurred sometime ago, but Russia managed to keep it unnoticed by the world. Up until the war, many still believed that in case of a conflict with NATO, the Russian army had the strength to push to central Germany, and even there it could only be stopped by the deployment of half the US army. It turned out however that it barely has the strength to push beyond central Ukraine. What lingered on was the mere guise of Russia being in a league with the US and China, and what we are seeing now is the evaporation of that guise. Had Russia succeeded in its original plans by taking Kyiv in days, and the rest of Ukraine in weeks, virtually resurrecting the Soviet Union by establishing a confederation

of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus with more than 200 million inhabitants, possibly coercing Kazakhstan as well into joining that soon after, and achieving all this with minimal losses, this decline could have been postponed and covered for a few more decades, but there seems to be no way back now. Therefore, even though Russia can replace its losses to a certain degree in the long run, this replacement will most likely not be able to get any further than the level of regional middle power.

Russia of course, would most likely sooner or later resist a Chinese alliance that would make it the junior partner. In that case, the most plausible alternative to that would be hedging between China and NATO, securing their sovereignty against both. However, among such circumstances, Russia could only hedge between China and NATO from a position of weakness, while before the war, it rather did from a position of strength. Such a change can likely lead to a new kind of fault line in Russian politics: While throughout the last three decades, the main fault line in Russian politics was between Westerners and Nationalists, a new one between pro-Western and pro-Chinese forces could likely arise. How this could bring a new quality into Russian politics, is that in this case, both sides could represent a nationalist narrative, however, one with one voicing concerns against Chinese influence, and the other one voicing such against Western influence.

The elephant in the room: Russia's vulnerable eastern frontier and China's rise

The elephant in the room, what behind the scenes may be the main reason for Sino-Russian mutual mistrust, and the double game that China is playing regarding the war is the long history of Sino-Russian territorial disputes and the vastness of resource-rich territories that were subject to it. This issue is threefold: First, the present international borders not only between China and Russia themselves, but even those of Central Asia between the two, were set in historical periods when Russia had the opportunity to negotiate from a position of strength, and China had to negotiate from a position of weakness. In other words, these borders were drawn by Russia. Therefore, a moment when Russia got the upper hand, got frozen in time in the form of the current borders, and is supposed to remain so in a period when China is increasingly getting the upper hand, and this new geopolitical landscape seems to be a long-lasting one. Second, the territories in question are home to enormous reserves of crude oil, natural gas, and industrial raw materials, all of which China badly needs. Third, historically speaking, Russia's Asian territories are modern acquisitions, and its hold on them has been pretty loose before the 20th century, and even today, they are all extremely thinly populated, especially compared to the neighboring provinces of China, and even this thin population, a considerable part consists of indigenous Asian ethnic groups, subjugated by Russia in the 17th-18th centuries, and has a long history of rebellions against it, even with outright independence movements at certain times. It would be unusual for a great power, not to attempt to change this setting when it is in a position of strength, which China is increasingly in our days.

Russia's conquest of Siberia was part of the European colonization of much of the world, happened in the same historical period, and is thus a relatively recent event in terms of Asian history. When Ivan the Terrible renamed the Grand Duchy of Muscovy as the Tsardom of Russia in 1547, the eastern border of Russia barely reached the Ural mountains, and even the European Steppe belt Between Kazan and the Black see was not part of Russia, but inhabited and ruled by Tatars instead. Siberia was inhabited by different Asian ethnic groups. Its southern fringe along the steppe belt formed the periphery of major Asian polities south of it: The steppe of Southwest Siberia Between the Urals and the Altai Mountains was inhabited by Muslim Tatars with close cultural and political links to the Tatars of Eastern Europe, and Muslim Central Asia. The section of the Steppe belt between the Altai Mountains to the upper reaches of the river Amur formed the northern periphery of Mongolia under strong Tibetan Buddhist influences, while the Amur basin functioned as the northern periphery of Manchuria, often even falling under direct Chinese rule. North of these, the subarctic and arctic forest and tundra belts were inhabited by nomadic tribal societies of extremely low population density (with the sole exception of the Sakhas or Yakuts, where pockets of meadows suitable for cattle and horse husbandry means a somewhat higher population density). Russia opened the way to the east by conquering the Tatar Khanates of Kazan in 1552 and Sibir in 1584 the latter of which Siberia got its name, however, which ruled only the Steppe belt of southwest Siberia. The conquest of these Tatar Khanates opened the way eastwards as far as Mongolia and China, as the reindeer herders in between couldn't offer much resistance. Russian conquest swept across the rest of Siberia during the 17th century, using river routes. This expansion along the river routes in the subarctic taiga forest, bypassed the Tatar, Mongol, and Manchu steppe polities from the north, as these routes were mostly inaccessible to their steppe cavalries of these, and were ignored by them up until then. After initial clashes between advancing Russians and the Chinese Qing Empire, the Sino-Russian border was set at the treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689. The border ran significantly north of the present one, along the Stanovoy mountains, basically linking what is the northernmost point of China today, with the southwestern tip of the Sea of Okhotsk, northwest of the mouth of the Amur river. This meant that China had a long coastline of the Sea of Japan between the mouth of the Amur and Korea, while Russia had no access to the said sea. The northern half of Sakhalin was claimed by China, while the southern half of it as well as the Kuril islands were claimed by Japan. These borders remained in place till the middle of the 19th century, when Russia started expanding to the southeast, taking a territory of about one million square kilometres from China by the treaties of Aigun in 1858 and Beijing in 1860, establishing the current Sino-Russian border, while China's central Asian borders were redrawn by Russia in the treaty of Tarbagatai in 1964, and China recognized Mongolia's independence only in 1949.

As we could see in Ukraine, Russia also has a policy of trying to influence Russian minorities, mostly settled in the former Soviet republic during the Soviet era, to maintain or expand its influence. In Central Asia, even this perceived demographic basis of Russia's influence is fading away: In Kazakhstan, the largest and wealthiest country of Central Asia,

the proportion of ethnic Russians was a mere 11% in 1897, when the last Russian census before the Bolshevik takeover was conducted, and that of the ethnic Kazakhs was 83% at the time.²⁷ After the artificial famine of the 1930s that killed close to 40% of the entire ethnic Kazakh population,²⁸ akin to the Holodomor of Ukraine, and Soviet mass-resettlement policies, the share of ethnic Russians peaked at 43% at the 1959 Soviet census, while ethnic Kazakhs fell to as low as 30% by this point. Due to the higher birth rate among Kazakhs, their share of Kazakhs started to rebound and that of the Russians to decrease from this point on, so by the time of the 1989 Soviet census, conducted a mere two years before Kazakhstan regained its independence, ethnic Russians constituted 38%, while ethnic Kazakhs 37%.²⁹ After regaining independence, a trend of the share of ethnic Russians falling sharply, and that of ethnic Kazakhs rising sharply started, and continues up until today due to several factors: One is the high birth rate of ethnic Kazakhs, another one is the low birth rate of ethnic Russians, a third one is that it took more than a decade for Kazakhstan's oil wealth to build up, and enrich the local population, so up until that point, Russia offered much better standard of living, which caused a mass re-migration of ethnic Russians back to Russia, and a fourth one is Kazakhstan's policy of welcoming ethnic Kazakh citizens of neighbouring countries, such as Uzbekistan, or China's Xinjiang province.³⁰³¹ As a result, by the time the most recent Kazakh census before the war took place in 2021, the share of ethnic Russians fell to a mere 16%, while that of the ethnic Kazakhs rose to as high as 70%.³² Ethnic Russian minorities in the rest of former Soviet Central Asia all but evaporated due to similar factors, falling from 22% of the population in 1989³³ to a mere 5% in 2021³⁴ in Kyrgyzstan where their share was the second largest after Kazakhstan, and from 8% of the population in 1989³⁵ to a mere 2% in Uzbekistan, the most populous country of the region.³⁶ Thus while back in the 1990s, a Donbas-style war could have shaken the very foundations of Kazakh statehood if Russia managed to successfully subvert the ethnic Russian minority, such a strategy merely has the potential of scratching its surface now.

In a 2014 paper of mine, I got to the conclusion that the decreasing numbers of the Russian minority in Kazakhstan will sooner or later likely influence Kazakhstan's foreign policy to distance itself from Russia³⁷ and this war seems to be the time when such a scenario indeed plays out at last, bringing Russo-Kazakh relations to breaking point, with China taking advantage of the situation by backing Kazakhstan, and thus bringing it into its sphere of influence instead of that of Russia: Kazakhstan wowed to not to allow itself to be used to bypass sanctions against Russia.³⁸ Russia repeatedly blocked Kazakh oil exports through its territory.³⁹ As a reaction, Kazakhstan made plans of exporting its oil through Azerbaijan and Georgia instead of Russia.⁴⁰ Public figures in Russia repeatedly call on Russian-inhabited areas of Kazakhstan to be dealt with in the same manner as in the case of Ukraine,⁴¹ and the issue has been a subject of concern for Kazakhstan ever since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁴² China voiced its support for Kazakhstan in its oil transit dispute with Russia⁴³ and also pledged its support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Kazakhstan.⁴⁴

What can be viewed as the vulnerable eastern fringe of Russia is its Far Eastern Federal District, by area the largest, but also the most thinly populated of all its federal districts, with an area of 7 million square kilometers, but a population of merely 8 million people, right next to the neighbouring northern provinces of China, Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning, and Inner Mongolia, with a combined population of 123 million people. Besides its extremely low population, other factors that enhance the vulnerability of this part of Russia is that not large chunks of it were part of China and Japan before, thus could be subject to Chinese (or for that matter even Japanese) irredentism, but also on large chunks of it, ethnic Russians do not reach a majority of the population. According to historical, demographical, and geographical factors, we can divide the Far Eastern Federal District into four major regions⁴⁵:

- First, the territory ceded by China in 1858-1860 (including North Sakhalin but not South Sakhalin) that for the sake of simplicity, we can refer to according to its old Chinese name, "Inner Manchuria". This region covers about 975 thousand square kilometres, and as of the Soviet census of 2021, has a population of 4 115 000 people. While the population is predominantly ethnic Russian, it is dwarfed by the population of China's neighboring Heilongjiang province, which has a population of 32 million people. While before the annexation in 1858-1860, the region had virtually no ethnic Russian population, mass resettlement of ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians from the European parts of the Russian Empire started from then on, accelerated after the completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway, and went on during Soviet Times. The Chinese population in the region was thin due to the Qing dynasty's restrictions on Han resettlement to Manchuria, which were only lifted after the territory has already been annexed by Russia. Still, before Stalin's rule, the region had sizeable Korean and Chinese populations, that were wiped out from the region by the 1940s. The current population is 94% ethnic Russian, but unofficial estimates put the number of Chinese migrants to up to 550 thousand, which would make up 12% of the population of the region.⁴⁶
- Second, right east of this region lies South Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands, a region that was part of Japan until as recently as 1945. This region covers about 45 600 square kilometres and has a population of about 416 000 people. The original Japanese population has been expelled after the annexation in 1945, and as of 2021, 91% of the current population are ethnic Russians resettled here after 1945, although a population of ethnic Koreans remain in the region, making up 4% of the population, who were settled there by the Japanese before 1945, but were allowed by Soviet authorities to stay. The population of this region is also dwarfed by the neighbouring Japanese island of Hokkaido with its 5 million inhabitants.
- The part of the Russian Far Eastern Federal district, lying right north of these formerly Chinese and formerly Japanese territories, that for the sake of simplicity, we can refer to as the "Northeast". Consisting of the Sakha Republic, the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, Kamchatka Krai, Magadan Oblast, and three districts of Khabarovsk Krai (Ayano-Maysky, Okhotsky, and Tuguro-Chumikansky) cover five

million square kilometers (5 154 000 to be exact) and includes much of the natural resources of Russia, and is in close proximity of not only China, and Japan, but right next to Alaska, even the US. It was conquered by Russia in the 17th century, and while it was not part of China or Japan before, it is a region where ethnic Russians are a minority, as it went through a similar demographic trend as Central Asia did, being overwhelmingly indigenous at the time of the Bolshevik takeover, witnessing mass resettlement into the region of ethnic Russians and other ethnic groups from the European parts of the Soviet era, followed by a rebound and rise of indigenous populations and a sharp decline of ethnic Russian population due to mass re-migration to European Russia since the fall of communism, resulting ethnic Russians to becoming a minority in the region as a whole by 2021. In the Sakha (Yakut) Republic which covers no less than 3 million square kilometers, at the first Soviet census of 1926, the combined share of indigenous Asian ethnic groups, the Sakha, Evenks, Evens, Chukchi and Yukaghirs represented 87% of the population, while ethnic Russians a mere 10%. Due to Soviet reprisals against the indigenous population, and mass resettlement policies, the share of ethnic Russians was 50% in 1989, at which point the combined share of the named indigenous Asian ethnic groups was as low as 36%. Due to higher native birth rates, and Russian re-migration to the European regions of Russia, by the 2021 Russian census however, the combined share of the named indigenous Asian ethnic groups reached 61% of the population, while the share of ethnic Russians fell to 33%. In the neighbouring Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, which is located right across the Bering Strait facing Alaska, while ethnic Russians still form a majority, this majority has fallen from 66% in 1989 to 54% in 2021, and the combined share of the indigenous Asian ethnic groups of the Chukchis, the Chuvans, the Yupiks, and the Evens re-increased from 10% to 36%. The combined population of Magadan Oblast and Kamchatka Krai, two, predominantly ethnic Russians adjacent to Sakha and Chukotka covering another one million square kilometers along the Pacific, decreased from 1 009 000 to 428 000 between 1989 and 2021 due to Russian mass re-migration to the European regions of Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union. The combined population of the Northeast, including the Sakha republic, Chukotka, Kamchatka, Magadan, and the three aforementioned districts of Khabarovsk Krai based on the figures of the 2021 Russian census, is 1 480 000 people, out of which the combined share of indigenous Asian ethnic groups is at about 44% in 2021 (37% Sakha and 7% other indigenous) and on an increasing trend, while the share of ethnic Russians is at about 49% and on a decreasing trend, with the remainder of the population made up of other ethnic groups of the former Soviet Union, out of which ironically ethnic Ukrainians are the most numerous, making up close to 2%. Thus ironically to the Russian argument built on the right of self-determination of the ethnic Russian minority in the Donbas as well as historical legitimation, there is an area of no less than 5 million square kilometres in the northeast of Russia, where if the principle of ethnic self-determination was applied, the outcome may not be that favourable to Russia, all conquered by Russia only at the time of the

European colonization, and all of that located in the direct vicinity of the rival powers of China, Japan, and on behalf of Alaska, even the United States.

- South of this lies an area between lake Baikal and the former Chinese territories, which for the sake of simplicity we can refer as its historical Russian name, “the Transbaikal”, and consists of the republic of Buryatia, and the Zabaykalsky Krai. before the Russian conquest, this region was the northern periphery of Mongolia, has the combined territory of 782 800 square kilometres, and a combined population of 1 983 000 people, out of which the share of ethnic Russians is 76%, and the share of Buryats, the largest indigenous ethnic group is 20%. While this region has a Russian majority, its population is still dwarfed by the neighboring regions of China, and ethnic Buryats, while a minority, as a Mongol ethnic group traditionally following Tibetan Buddhism, are culturally closely related to Mongolia, and the six million ethnic Mongols of Inner Mongolia in China.

While not part of the Far Eastern Federal district, as a region that not only belong to China before the mid-19th century but also one where ethnic Russians are a minority, a region along the Mongolian border, consisting of Tuva and the Altai Republic can also be viewed as part of Russia’s vulnerable eastern fringe, covers a combined area of 263 400 square kilometers, have a combined population of 548 thousand people, out of which the combined share of ethnic Tuvans and Altais is 64%, while the share of ethnic Russians is 25%.

While despite of their history of rebellions in previous centuries, the indigenous Asian ethnic groups of the Far Eastern Federal District appeared to be considered loyal to Russia during the Putin era up until the war, the mobilization that started in September 2022, sparked mass protests, and allegations of discrimination by the Russian state (ie. claims that members of the indigenous groups have been drafted at a disproportionately high rate) among these groups.

Is China willing to take advantage of this vulnerability of Russia’s eastern fringes, and if, how? The easier part of the story for China is Central Asia, as here it is about sovereign countries that can shift alliances without an open conflict. Here we have already seen action on behalf of China during the present war, in giving support to Kazakhstan in the latter’s actions standing up to Russia as discussed above. Kazakhstan stood up to Russia, did it with China’s backing, and something that it would have likely not been able to do without that. This way to a certain degree Kazakhstan has already shifted from Russia’s sphere of interest into that of China, and presumably one reason why it could do so was the shrinking of the Russian minority, which deprived Russia of its tools of subversion to a great degree. The Far Eastern Federal District represents a more difficult story regarding supposed Chinese expansionism. As they are part of Russia proper, even in case of an ever more likely Russian fiasco in Ukraine, an outright Chinese invasion of the region would be unfeasible. While China’s conventional forces would most likely be able to sweep out the Russians, especially given all the equipment losses they suffered in Ukraine, there are two problems with such a scenario: One are nukes, and the other is ironically the USA.

NATO carefully avoided direct conflict with Russia in Ukraine to make sure Moscow doesn't use its 6000 nuclear warheads. In case of an all-out Chinese invasion of the Russian Far East, it most certainly would. The US on the other hand in that case, may as a story twist, intervene on the side of Russia, as the logic of power balance would dictate to help out its weaker adversary against its stronger adversary, especially if the outcome would otherwise enhance the power of the stronger adversary as much as the acquisition of the 7 million square kilometres would strengthen China, regardless if it would happen by outright annexation, or merely by establishing client states in the region.

Therefore, an outright invasion seems to be unfeasible, however, China could gain a foothold the way it did in other countries in recent decades: By soft power, and acquiring economic concessions in the region. If Russia is defeated, weakened, and isolated from the West, China can make certain economic concessions as a condition for its continuous support for Russia against the West. There is however still another option where China could still march in: Namely if a Russian defeat triggers a chaos of civil war in Russia. "Its competing societies might decide to settle their disputes by violence. Other countries might seek to expand their claims by force."-wrote Henry Kissinger regarding the option of a Russian civil war in his recent article in the Spectator.⁴⁷ Kissinger did not state which countries does he specifically mean as those that might seek to expand their claims by force, but the possibility of China doing so, and acquiring the 7 million square kilometers



of the Russian Far East may be one of the main reasons for Western concerns about a Russian civil war, as such a move would be a game-changer in the Asia-Pacific, and a game-changer that would expand China's power. This scenario also means a difference in the interests of the US and those of its most committed Eastern European and Scandinavian allies in the war. While for Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, China acquiring the Far Eastern Federal District would not mean much change, as Russia would still be a more than a sufficient barrier between them and Russia, so they may even welcome such a turn of events as it would, even more, weaken the threat that Russia poses to them, such a change would be a major headache for the US in the Pacific. In case of a civil war, China could create a pretext of marching into the Russian Far East, if not else than as a peacekeeper, by bribing local oligarchs or on agreement with indigenous separatists, or both. However, there could be a story twist on behalf of the US in this case as well:

The decline of the ethnic Russian population, and the re-rise of the indigenous population in the five million square kilometres area of the Far Eastern Federal District right north of the former Chinese territories, consisting of the Sakha Republic and the Pacific coastal territories east of it, is something that not only China, but even the US could use on its advantage in case of a Russian civil war: As the region is easily accessible from Alaska through the Pacific, theoretically it could also create an indigenous client state from the region, and the local indigenous population may even welcome such an outcome more than it would Chinese conquest. In that case, a Russian civil war could even lead to a Sino-US (or Sino-US-Japanese) partition of the Far Eastern Federal district, a feasible way for the US to counterbalance Chinese gains in the region in case of such a scenario, leaving only the former Chinese territories to China. Such a scenario still seems far-fetched, however, as is a Russian civil war as an outcome. What remains the more realistic version is that in case of a Russian defeat in Ukraine, Russia makes the sovereign countries of former-Soviet Central Asia its sphere of influence and it bargains extensive economic concessions in Siberia from Russia in exchange for support against the West.

Conclusion

What we can draw as a conclusion is that the stance of China and India regarding the war can mostly be categorized as neutral one. Albeit not a passive, but rather an active kind of neutrality where both emerging great powers are aiming to maximize benefits as laughing thirds. While in the past two decades, on the global level, we could see China-Russia and US-India cooperation, the main reason why diplomatic positions regarding the present war didn't simply end up as the US and India versus China and Russia game seems to be the mutual mistrust between China and Russia, that poses as a certain limit to their cooperation. The very same Sino-Russian mistrust also gives an incentive for India too, despite its de facto alliance with the US, to maintain a certain degree of cooperation with Russia as part of its great game of containing China. A certain degree of cooperation, but one that cannot balance the lack of support from China, making the net outcome rather negative for Russia, which can count only on some minor powers, such as Iran and North Korea as true allies while facing the vast resources of NATO. The main issue at the heart

of the Sino-Russian mistrust appears to be conflicting interests regarding the natural resources of Central Asia and the Asian holdings of Russia, where current international borders were drawn by Russia at the height of its power and the low point of China's "century of humiliation" while now China is the stronger one and is increasingly so. We have already seen a manifestation of this issue in how the resource-rich Central Asian nation of Kazakhstan stood up to Russia during the present war in Ukraine, and China gave its full backing to it, virtually drawing the country into its sphere of influence instead of that of Russia. Demographic and economic trends suggest that Russia will not recover to a level where it could again be in the same league with China and the US, but rather seems to be destined to be a mere regional power, meaning not only a long-term victory for the US in Europe but also giving further way to China and India as the new great powers of Asia.



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