

Russian-Chinese Relations: A Marriage of Expedience or a true partnership in world politics?

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This analysis delves into Sino-Russian relations, exploring their historical context, recent developments, economic cooperation, geopolitical dynamics, and reasons for their evolving partnership. The main aims are to elucidate the relationship's significance in the Eurasian region, understand its genesis and evolution, and examine factors contributing to its complexities. The document's sections include an overview of historical ties, recent intensification of relations, key cooperative projects, geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia, and reasons behind the nuanced partnership. Through these sections, the analysis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Sino-Russian relations within the broader context of Eurasian history and contemporary geopolitics.

Relations between Moscow and Beijing have never been as close as they stand today. This growing proximity is the result of three decades of consistent efforts by the political leadership of Russia and China to strengthen their mutual ties and enhance cooperation in various domains such as politics, military affairs, economy, and ideology. The relationship that has emerged can be described as an informal alliance, rooted in a deep conviction shared by the ruling elites of both countries regarding the fundamental alignment of their strategic interests and the ideological similarities between their authoritarian regimes. Consequently, this alliance goes beyond mere tactical expediency and is characterized by a genuine convergence of interests, even though internal tensions may still exist.

It has taken a relatively long time from the theory of Eurasianism to its practical realisation, as a result of changing forces in world politics and geopolitics. At the same time, the importance of Eurasia - not only for Russia - has increased significantly over the last 20 years, as one of the most populous and dynamically developing regions in the world and a potential counterweight to the US in the international system. We are therefore witnessing the emergence of a 'Eurasian era', with the economic, energy, and military centres of power increasingly shifting eastwards. As a result of this trend, by the 2000s the idea of Eurasia began to look more and more like a viable option for many countries in the region.

In Russian politics, the Eurasian idea began to emerge at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, as relations with the West deteriorated.¹ The reason is that, in the context of globalisation, the state is left with two paths: the first is semi-peripheral integration with China or the European Union. The second - which was the one finally chosen - was to create a Eurasian Empire or Union in the centre of Eurasia according to Alexander Dugin's approach. However, the question that still remains for the international community today is whether the Russian-Chinese relations that currently dominate the region extend only to the limits of expedience or whether they are now a global political tandem. In the current chapter, I seek to answer this question first and foremost through an examination of the international cooperation and economic issues that currently most define the relationship between the two sides.

Russian-Chinese relations from regime change to the present

The fact that Russia chose the latter option can be traced in a number of foreign policy concepts. In 2000, it explained its integration into the region in terms of the need for economic

development in Siberia and the Russian Far East². In 2008, it began to attach increasing importance to the region, including by presenting the Sino-Russian relationship as a strategic partnership and a cornerstone of regional and global functionality.³ The year of 2023 calls the Far East the fastest growing geopolitical region in the world.⁴ The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation⁵ did not specifically focus on China-Russia relations, but it highlighted the significance of deepening ties with strategic partners, including China. There are six key points related to China-Russia relations from the 2016 doctrine:

1. **Strategic Partnership:** The Concept emphasized the strategic nature of the Russia-China relationship and referred to it as a "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination." It stressed the importance of developing political dialogue, expanding trade and economic cooperation, and enhancing cultural and humanitarian exchanges.
2. **Multipolar World Order:** The doctrine emphasized the importance of creating a multipolar world order to ensure international stability and balance of power. It called for strengthening cooperation with countries like China to counterbalance what Russia perceived as the dominance of Western powers.
3. **Regional Cooperation:** The Concept highlighted the need to promote regional cooperation and integration, particularly in Eurasia. It acknowledged the importance of initiatives like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Silk Road Economic Belt (part of China's Belt and Road Initiative) in fostering economic development and connectivity in the region.
4. **Security and Defense:** The doctrine recognized the significance of maintaining regional and global security. It emphasized the importance of strategic stability, arms control, and international cooperation in countering common threats and challenges.
5. **Economic Cooperation:** The Concept emphasized the importance of expanding economic cooperation with China, including trade, investment, and joint projects. It acknowledged China's role as a major economic partner and stressed the need for deeper integration between the Russian and Chinese economies.
6. **International Organizations:** The doctrine underscored the importance of strengthening collaboration with China within international organizations and forums such as the United Nations, BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It

highlighted the shared positions and coordinated efforts between Russia and China on various global issues.

The relationship between the two states has been further strengthened by the Trump administration's open designation of Russia and China as strategic competitors from 2017 and then launched a trade war against them in 2018¹, which sent them a message that the US would do everything in its power to prevent their further rise. In June 2019, the Russian and Chinese heads of state announced that their relationship in the area of international strategic cooperation would be elevated to an even higher level. Their joint declaration set out clear goals and directions: joint coordination in foreign policy actions, strategic support for each other, and joint defence of their security, sovereignty, territorial integrity and independent development path. Their cooperation has thus reached to a level that is both a response to the increasingly competitive nature of the US behaviour of the US, but also openly articulated their desire to transform the world order.

The above mentioned points are further supported by the 2023 foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation attaches particular importance to the Eurasian region in achieving its strategic objectives.⁶ It aims at a comprehensive deepening of relations with friendly, sovereign global centres of power and development located on the continent, which in principle coincide with Russian approaches to the future world order and concepts for solving key problems of world politics. In the context of the People's Republic of China, Russia's goals are broad and general: to further strengthen comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation and focus on mutually beneficial cooperation and development in all fields, to enhance mutual assistance and cooperation in the international arena to ensure security, stability and sustainable development at the global and regional levels, both in Eurasia and in other parts of the world.²

In contradiction with not only these documents but also popular perception, the relationship between the parties has not always been so balanced. Chinese-Russian (before that Soviet) relations go back centuries. During the period of imperialism they were enemies. A little later communist ideology was able to put the two sides on a common platform, geopolitical and realpolitik imperatives eventually overrode this artificial political cooperation. The formation of this alliance started in the early 1990s, but its intensity has changed over time. It gained

momentum whenever Moscow came into confrontation with the United States and weakened when Washington seemed willing to accommodate its geopolitical ambitions³.

As far as the relationship between the parties is concerned, I would like to highlight two documents that have laid the foundations for the current state of Sino-Russian relations. The first is the 1997 joint declaration of the leaders of the two countries on "a multipolar world and the international world order"⁴. This not only rejected US hegemony, but also declared to the international community the presence of a new type of Russian-Chinese relations with the outside world. Furthermore, a treaty on good neighbourliness, friendship and cooperation was signed in 2001. From that date, we can speak of a strategic partnership between the two countries, which, as it happens, was renewed for a further 5 years.⁷ A significant turning point came in 2012, when the People's Republic of China (PRC) became an indispensable and irreplaceable partner for the Kremlin. This shift occurred after Moscow concluded that the primary goals of US policy towards Russia were to promote democratisation and regime change. The year 2012 also coincided with Xi Jinping's takeover of the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, which led to a more authoritarian domestic policy and a more assertive foreign policy stance⁸. Subsequently, Sino-Russian relations evolved into an informal alliance between 2012 and 2018, as both powers openly clashed with the United States and recognised the enduring and structural nature of this conflict.

Regarding Sino-Russian relations, the conceptual commonality of neo- Eurasian ideology was manifested in three major points: a shared approach to civilisation, attempts to reorient the dynamics of international politics in their own neighbourhood and calling for the development of a multipolar international system⁹ in which the US is not the hegemonic power and can count itself among the major decision-makers.

As an implementation of this kind of unity neither China nor Russia identify themselves as *nations* but as *civilisations*. The ruling elites of both states reject Western liberalism and the ideology of the global market. Instead, they see their countries as independent civilisations with their unique cultural values and political regimes. In the context of this common mindset

of the parties, it is important to note that for a long time China was primarily regarded as a civilisational state. Then, over time, Vladimir Putin adopted the same approach and stated that Russia's status as a civilisational state was and would continue to prevent the country from "dissolving in this diverse world".

The prevalence of this approach is not only impacting the distribution of global power, but also reshaping post-Cold War geopolitics, moving away from liberal universalism towards a focus on cultural exceptionalism. As a concrete example, Xi Jinping has emphasized on numerous occasions the need for China's elites to revitalize Chinese civilization by energizing its cultural elements that transcend boundaries of time, space, and nationality¹⁰ while maintaining both enduring and contemporary significance. He specifically refers to the timeless allure of Confucian harmony, which the Communist state promotes domestically and internationally. Furthermore, Beijing's endeavors to assert control over Taiwan and the South China Sea are rooted in a vision of establishing a civilizational sphere of influence. Samuel Huntington anticipated the potential for confrontations between states of one civilization and states of another¹¹, but he did not foresee the rise of civilization states (or "the one modern state - one civilization model") and its far-reaching consequences for the West and others.

China's reversion to its historic global primacy could lead to it becoming the ideal type of civilisational state. Beijing today is known for its "four supers" and "one blend": super-large population; super-large territory; super-long traditions; and super-rich cultures. Each of these characteristics is a mixture of the ancient and the modern. In Russia, the presence of imperial consciousness and thinking is deeply ingrained in current strategic planning, as expressed by Alexander Dugin's assertion that the country cannot exist without imperialism. However, while it is widely recognized as a defining aspect of their foreign policy, it is also considered highly risky, bordering on self-destructive. The Russo-Ukrainian war marked a turning point, with President Putin emphasizing Russia as an entire civilization with even greater intensity. The state is not just revered and worth sacrificing for, but is also viewed as a distinct and superior civilization, with a unique historical trajectory spanning a thousand years. Throughout this historical narrative, cultural traditions and values are transmitted across generations. The Russian civilization-state possesses its own revered figures, a pantheon of heroes that has

remained unchanged from the Soviet era to the present, including Alexander Nevsky, Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Joseph Stalin, Yuri Gagarin, and many others. Imperialism and colonialism are fundamental components of Putin's vision of civilization and are closely tied to warfare. This ideology is not novel; it directly draws inspiration from Stalinism, as well as earlier Eurasian and Slavophile narratives. War is depicted as a means to restore historical justice, as a form of defense and prevention, and as an act of liberation. Putin asserts that the territories of the empire "must be reclaimed and strengthened." In line with this perspective, over the past year, President Putin has repeatedly declared to the Russian people, through numerous speeches and statements, that the "special operation 2022" is a natural extension of the Great Patriotic War (known as World War II in Russia). Essentially, it is framed as an existential conflict between Russian civilization and the Western world.

Besides this, the basis and origin of China-Russia cooperation are political, as both parties are calling for the development of a multipolar international system in which the US is not the hegemonic power and can count itself among the major decision-makers. At the same time, the economic, military and energy aspects of the relationship are becoming increasingly important. The diplomatic relationship between the two countries is complex and worthy of attention from the West, as there are currently nearly 400 agreements between them covering all areas of cooperation.

In addition, a further hundred agreements have been concluded at regional level and direct meetings at the level of state leadership are organised at least once a year. In brief, the alliance between Russia and China is based on the similarity of their global strategic interests, in particular the fact that they both pursue an assertive foreign policy. By engaging in simultaneous activities, both countries aim to compel the United States of America to allocate its limited resources, thus enhancing Russia's position in Europe and China's influence in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, the foundation of this alliance is also grounded in a hierarchical and socially Darwinian perspective of international relations, which is embraced by the ruling elites of both the Kremlin and Zhongnanhai.

Another dimension of the parties' ideological community is the fact that both country's attempts to reorient the dynamics of international politics were particularly visible in their own neighbourhood, as it is intuitively logical concept that regional predominance should be an important element of the claim to great power status: China is putting forward territorial claims in the adjoining seas, carrying out a massive territorial settlement programme in the South China Sea, and strengthening its military presence in the East China Sea, as well as intensifying

political and military pressure on Japan over the disputed Senkaku (Diaoyu in Chinese) islands⁵. On the other hand, Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and opened a new stage of the conflict with Ukraine in 2022, by fomenting the war in eastern Ukraine. Besides these coercive measures, both states have put forward a complex set of initiatives that show how they believe international politics and cooperation should work in their respective regions: the New Silk Road Initiative and the above mentioned New Eurasian and Eurasian Economic Union (EurSEC).

This kind of ideological community can be seen in some concrete examples, such as the Russian presidential speeches, the Joint Russian-Chinese Statements and shared geopolitical perspectives. As mentioned Russian presidents -including Vladimir Putin- have emphasized the importance of regional cooperation and integration in their speeches, which aligns with some aspects of neo-Eurasianist thought. For instance, in his speeches, Putin has highlighted the significance of Russia's partnerships with neighboring countries and the Eurasian region as a whole. He has spoken about the need for economic integration, security cooperation, and the preservation of cultural ties in order to foster stability and development in the region.

Besides this, joint statements issued by Russia and China often focus on areas of cooperation and shared interest. While not explicitly attributed to neo-Eurasianism, these statements often highlight the importance of strategic partnerships, economic integration, and the development of the Eurasian region. For example, joint statements between the two countries have emphasized the alignment of their respective integration initiatives, such as the EAEU and China's Belt and Road Initiative, to enhance connectivity and cooperation in the Eurasian space.

Thirdly, as mentioned Russia and China share certain geopolitical perspectives that resonate with elements of neo-Eurasianism. Both countries advocate for a multipolar world order, emphasize the importance of national sovereignty, and seek to counterbalance what they perceive as Western dominance. While these perspectives are not solely attributed to neo-Eurasianism, they do align with the broader notion of enhancing regional cooperation and influence in the Eurasian space. It is nevertheless important to underline that it is not plausible -despite the common points in Russian and Chinese external policies- that the complete implementation of the concept is in sight.

The impact of the past year on Sino-Russian relations

The relationship between Russia, China and the other countries of the Eurasian region is undeniably rooted in a history of shared identity: a desire to build a new ideology that would provide a sense of identity for their communities. In this respect, Russia can build a new, binding ideology for the Eurasians to reclaim the geographical and cultural sphere of the post-Soviet space. This is also reflected in the fact that since the beginning of Vladimir Putin's presidency, the Euro-Asian ideology has received political and economic support from the government to create a large-scale integration project.⁶

The outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022 and the past year itself have led to a significant increase in intensity in the relationship between the two countries. This is illustrated, inter alia, by the Russian President's description of the relationship between the two countries at the meeting between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in February 2022¹²: "Russia considers China as it's most important strategic partner and like-minded friend. Moreover they see the Russian-Chinese relations as the -neo-euroasianist- model for international relations in the 21st century". The Chinese President stressed that the friendship between the two states is "without borders". It can also be seen as a similar relationship-building step that Xi welcomed Dmitry Medvedev, leader of the ruling United Russia party, to Beijing in December, 2022. During his current visit to Moscow, Wang Ji was previously also met by Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.¹³

Besides the above mentioned bilateral relationship-building meetings are continuing: on the 10th of July 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Valentina Matviyenko. President Xi noted that with the joint efforts of both sides, Sino-Russian relations have maintained a healthy and stable development momentum, and cooperation in various fields has shown steady progress. The Russian representative stated that the social basis and support for the generation-to-generation friendship between the two countries is growing stronger, and in order to further strengthen it, the Federation Council of the Russian Federation stands for deepening Russian-Chinese cooperation, and is ready to intensify exchanges with the National People's Congress in order to provide legal guarantees for the implementation of the agreements between the two leaders.

In addition to the political and military dimensions, cooperation has also intensified in the form of projects and joint efforts in a number of other areas during the past few years - for example desinformation and railways development. These include a steadily growing effort by China to spend billions of dollars to spread pro-Russian propaganda in 2022. Mainly with a focus on the Global South, as well as the countries' increasing information warfare campaigns, within the context of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine - according to James Rubin, coordinator of the Center for Global Engagement, a US State Department agency created to "expose and counter" foreign propaganda and disinformation.

Interestingly, and to illustrate the increasing intensity of the relationship, in the initial four months of 2022, there was a significant surge in retweets of Chinese diplomats by Russian sources compared to the same period in 2021. This increase was primarily driven by the amplification of Russian state media outlet RT, but it has also been observed at the diplomatic level. For instance, the Chinese embassy in Paris has retweeted the Russian embassy in Paris multiple times, even on sensitive topics such as denying war crimes in Bucha. Likewise, we can observe a similar pattern in reverse, with Russian officials retweeting Chinese government officials and state media. From January to April 2022, Russian diplomats retweeted Chinese officials over 140 times, which is almost a tenfold increase compared to the same period in 2021. Interestingly, the most retweeted accounts in this case are not state media, but rather Chinese officials, particularly those associated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including the official ministry of foreign affairs account. Besides the content, that has a significant anti-American tone, furthermore, there is also a noticeable convergence in messaging, particularly concerning the war in Ukraine.

A prominent narrative revolves around portraying NATO as the aggressor in the war, which is further reinforced by adopting the Kremlin's viewpoint that NATO expansion is directly responsible for the conflict. While this talking point had some presence in Chinese messaging prior to the war, there has been a notable surge in its adoption since the conflict began. When examining the term "war" in the statements of Chinese officials that we monitor, it can be observed that, apart from China itself, which predominantly focuses on diplomatic declarations, the most frequently mentioned country, in relation to war by Chinese officials in 2022, is the United States, rather than

Ukraine or Russia. Surprisingly, the number of mentions of the United States is nearly double that of Russia, specifically in tweets discussing the war¹⁴.

The steadily strengthening nature of Russian-Chinese relations over the past decades is reflected in a number of joint declarations and projects. An example is the recent announcement made by Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Tan Kefei -based on the speech of Xi Jinping- in March of 2023¹⁵, that the armed forces of the People's Republic of China are ready to establish a higher level of cooperation with the Russian Federation in the field of strategic communication and coordination. In addition, the two countries are ready to work together to implement global security initiatives.

Furthermore, military confidence building, in the form of joint both maritime and air patrols and exercises has also become a priority area. A recent high-profile instance of the latter is the Sino-Iranian-Russian joint naval exercise in the Gulf of Oman, where the three nations sent forces including 12 ships, special operations and diving units to the exercise between the 15th to the 19th of March 2023, strengthening the navy's capability to carry out various tasks and further deepening the friendship and practical cooperation between the three countries¹⁶.

Another interesting example is the current railway project between China and Russia, known as the China-Russia High-Speed Rail (CRHSR) project, aims to strengthen transportation infrastructure and connectivity between the two countries. The project involves the construction of a high-speed rail line spanning approximately 7,000 kilometers, connecting Beijing in China with Moscow in Russia. The primary goal of this project is to enhance bilateral trade and economic cooperation by facilitating faster and more efficient transportation of goods and people. By reducing travel time from several days to just a few hours, the CRHSR project seeks to boost economic ties, attract investment, and promote cultural exchanges between China and Russia. It demonstrates the balance of power between China and Russia, showcasing their ability to collaborate on major infrastructure projects and project their influence on a global scale. It further underscores the increasing importance of China as a key player in Eurasia and highlights Russia's willingness to cooperate and benefit from its neighbor's economic prowess.

From a geopolitical perspective, the China-Russia High-Speed Rail project carries significant implications for both parties. Firstly, it strengthens the strategic partnership between China and Russia by deepening their economic integration and interdependence. Enhanced transportation links between the two countries contribute to the development of a Eurasian trade corridor, which can serve as an alternative to traditional sea routes, reducing dependence on maritime transport. This project also enhances China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as it expands China's reach into the heart of Eurasia and reinforces its economic influence in the region.¹⁷

The continued strengthening of the relationship between the two sides is also reflected in the significant increase in the number of high-level bilateral meetings between the two countries. In February 2023 Russian President Vladimir Putin received in Moscow Chinese State Councilor Vang Ji, a member of the Chinese Communist Party and head of the bureau of the Central Committee's Foreign Affairs Committee. On this occasion, the Russian side stated that relations between Russia and China are developing steadily and reaching new frontiers. In addition, the Russian head of state praised the contribution of cooperation between the two sides both in terms of stabilising the international situation and providing humanitarian aid. Vang Ji pointed out that Sino-Russian relations are steadily improving despite international pressure. Relations between Moscow and Beijing are not directed *against* third countries and are not subject to pressure *from* third parties. The relationship is based on strong economic, political and cultural foundations, which also refers to the ideological community of neo-Eurasianism.⁷

The Sino-Russian relationship has continued to evolve significantly in 2023 and 2024, influenced by ongoing geopolitical tensions, economic sanctions against Russia, and the complex dynamics of Chinese-American relations. This analysis explores the key developments, economic cooperation, geopolitical shifts, and the broader impact of sanctions and Chinese-US relations on the Sino-Russian partnership. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has further solidified the strategic partnership between China and Russia. High-level meetings and diplomatic exchanges have increased, with leaders from both nations emphasizing mutual support and cooperation. In February 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin reaffirmed their commitment to deepening their relationship, highlighting a "no limits" partnership. Western sanctions against Russia have driven Moscow to strengthen

economic ties with Beijing. China has become a crucial economic partner for Russia, providing an alternative market for Russian energy exports and other goods. Trade between the two countries has surged, with a significant increase in Chinese imports of Russian oil and gas. China has also expanded its investments in Russian infrastructure projects, including energy and transportation.

The two countries have also intensified cooperation in technology and defense. Joint military exercises have become more frequent, showcasing their military coordination and shared strategic interests. China has provided technological support to Russia, helping mitigate the impact of Western technological sanctions. This includes cooperation in areas like telecommunications, cybersecurity, and advanced manufacturing.

China's Belt and Road Initiative continues to play a significant role in shaping Sino-Russian relations. Both countries have collaborated on infrastructure projects in Central Asia, enhancing connectivity and economic integration. However, there are underlying tensions as both nations vie for influence in the region. Russia's traditional political and security ties contrast with China's growing economic presence.

The deteriorating relationship between China and the United States has influenced Sino-Russian ties. As the US imposes tariffs and sanctions on China, Beijing has sought to counterbalance this pressure by strengthening its partnership with Russia. Joint efforts to counter Western influence have become more pronounced, with both countries supporting each other in international forums and advocating for a multipolar world order.

Despite the deepening partnership, both China and Russia prioritize their strategic autonomy. Each nation pursues its national interests, sometimes independently, which can lead to divergent policies and priorities. For instance, China's cautious approach to the Ukraine conflict, advocating for peace talks while not directly condemning Russia, reflects its desire to maintain a balanced foreign policy.

The economic imbalance between China and Russia presents challenges. While China is a rising economic superpower, Russia's economy has been significantly impacted by sanctions and its reliance on energy exports. This disparity could lead to dependency issues, with Russia becoming increasingly reliant on Chinese economic support.

The Sino-Russian relationship in 2023 and 2024 has been shaped by a combination of geopolitical shifts, economic interdependence, and mutual strategic interests. While the partnership has strengthened in response to external pressures, underlying complexities and

challenges persist. The evolving dynamics of Chinese-American relations and the impact of sanctions against Russia will continue to influence this important geopolitical alliance, shaping the broader context of international relations in the years to come.

Conclusion

In order to get a full picture of Russian-Chinese relations, it is essential to highlight a rather controversial situation. The "strategic partnership" and the "unprecedented level of relations" have been emphasised even when there were differences between the parties, but the parties are not entering into a real alliance.¹⁸ The primary reason for this is that sovereignty is such a priority for both countries that they are fully committed to the other. It is also important to stress, that the People's Republic of China is committed to its own national objectives and is ready to implement projects even without Russia, as demonstrated by the agreements and declarations made by nine other states, including Argentina, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, on the establishment of the International Lunar Exploration Station.

In addition to the sovereignty issue, the geographical proximity of the parties, their shared geostrategic interests, and thus their conflicts of interest in the Central Asia region, also play an important role. The power balance between Russia and China in the Middle-Asia region is characterized by a complex interplay of interests and competition. For instance, in Central Asia, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has led to increased economic influence through infrastructure projects, while Russia maintains political and security ties with these countries.

In terms of energy resources, Russia has traditionally relied on Central Asian gas supplies to maintain influence over European markets, while China has been investing in energy infrastructure to secure resources for its own domestic needs. This competition for resources adds to the power dynamics between the two countries. In terms of security, both Russia and China have engaged in the Middle-Asia region. Russia has actively participated through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), while China has provided assistance in border security and counterterrorism efforts. The diverging approaches and priorities of Russia and China in addressing security challenges further influence the power balance. Moreover, the region's proximity to Afghanistan and its security threats, including terrorism and drug trafficking, pose additional challenges that both countries seek to address. The evolving

dynamics in the Middle-Asia region will continue to shape the power balance between Russia and China, impacting regional stability and broader global geopolitics. In addition, border conflicts, both historical and ongoing, play a crucial role in shaping the power balance in the Middle-Asia region. The most significant change at the moment might be that, while the Russian-Ukrainian war is diverting Russia's resources, capacities and attention to the West, Chinese influence - in areas considered to be its immediate and traditional sphere of interest of Russia- is steadily increasing.

This was demonstrated by the diplomatic milestone for Chinese President Xi Jinping in May of 2023. He had invited the leaders of five Central Asian states to the city of Xian for their first-ever joint summit without the contribution of Russian politicians. Following the recent establishment of the China-Central Asia Summit, a surge in apprehension ensued. It can be said that Russia's influence in Central Asia has weakened due to the war in Ukraine, and China perceives an opportunity. This development, juxtaposed with the G7 meeting taking place simultaneously in Japan, is regarded as a contest for influence, referred to as "duelling summits." China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its growing economic partnerships with Central Asian nations have laid a solid foundation for cooperation in trade, infrastructure, and energy. The substantial financial support pledged at the China-Central Asia Summit, amounting to 26 billion yuan (approximately US\$3.8 billion), reflects a robust economic collaboration, further contributing to the prevailing unease.

The apprehension is compounded by Russia's evident decline in power and influence following its invasion of Ukraine. Despite indications of increased cooperation between China and the Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), there has been no abrupt change in China's policy towards the region. China's objective is not to dominate Central Asia or fill a power vacuum. Instead, by strengthening ties with its neighbors, China appears primarily focused on maintaining stability in its western periphery. This, in turn, would create a buffer zone to effectively manage the persistent security challenges it faces in the Asia-Pacific region to the east. China's diplomatic priorities provide valuable insight into its ambitions in Central Asia. These countries became China's immediate neighbors after the collapse of the Soviet Union. China's diplomatic blueprint underscores the importance it assigns to "major powers, its periphery, developing countries, and multilateral platforms," with Central Asia playing a critical role in this framework. From Beijing's perspective, Central Asia and Russia represent the gaps in what they perceive as a US

encirclement strategy. Initially, China's relations with Central Asian countries progressed slowly due to its focus on major powers and Southeast Asian neighbors.

The lack of dynamic diplomatic mechanisms also hindered closer ties with Central Asian countries, despite security cooperation at the borders. Thus, the inauguration of the China-Central Asia Summit in Xi'an, emphasized by President Xi Jinping as a significant milestone on the ancient Silk Road, marks a crucial turning point. While China acknowledges the importance of its relationship with Central Asia, its larger focus lies in the dynamics of its relationship with the United States. Washington has identified Beijing as a "strategic competitor" and is engaged in regional conflicts centered around the East and South China Seas, including Taiwan. Additionally, China views US initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the Quad alliance involving Australia, Japan, and India, and the AUKUS partnership with Australia and the United Kingdom as efforts to encircle China, limiting its influence on the first island chain and obstructing access to the Indian and Pacific Oceans¹⁹. From China's perspective, Central Asia and Russia represent vulnerabilities in this perceived US strategy.

Despite the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in 2021, China remains cautious of US involvement in Central Asia, as other powers may encourage "color revolutions," which China sees as a threat to its interests, that Xi explicitly mentioned this term during his remarks at the China-Central Asia Summit. Concerns persist about the US Central Asia strategy unveiled by the Trump administration in 2020, which designated the pursuit of a "more stable and prosperous Central Asia" as a "primary strategic interest,"²⁰ allowing the region to pursue political, economic, and security interests with various partners on its own terms. For China, the stability of the eastern region is of utmost importance. Simultaneously, building stronger relations with Central Asian states is integral to China's national security. Russia's conflict with Ukraine has introduced another layer of complexity, as China worries about potential US maneuvers in the region.

Therefore, China's diplomacy in Central Asia should be understood within the context of evolving regional dynamics.²¹ The resolution of past conflicts has helped stabilize the border

areas and fostered greater cooperation, while alignment on regional issues like the South China Sea disputes highlight the level of collaboration and shared interests between the two countries. However, these conflicts also demonstrate the potential for tensions and competition that can arise, underscoring the delicate nature of the power balance between Russia and China in the region.



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