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## THE IMPACT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE ON THE RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND CHINA

### Abstract

The history of relations between China and Russia goes back several centuries, and it must be said that these relations have never been single-sided friendly or a sole partnership. It is true that in the modern world, China and Russia are often consensual in their positions at the official level and seem to share common values, but the reality is much more complex.

The seizure of Ukrainian territories by Russia in 2014 and the war that started in February 2022 created a serious crack in the relationship between the West and Russia. Sanctions have forced Russia to start looking for alternative markets and partners, benefitting China, priorly perceived as a potential threat by Russia. Western pressure is increasingly forcing the Russian economy, and not only the economy, to lean towards the Eastern market. In this situation, Russia has to take Chinese demands and terms as much as possible into consideration, with the latter often being not only unprofitable for economic interests but sometimes even detrimental.

On the other hand, in the international arena, China either directly supports Russia or prefers to remain silent and neutral in favor of Russia.

This article describes the main vectors of Sino-Russian relations against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine.

**Keywords:** China, Russia, international relations, Xi Jinping, Putin.

The twenty-first century began with serious positive changes in the relations between China and Russia. The newly elected President Putin directly stated that Russia is a Eurasian state and deepening relations with Asia, in particular with China, is one of his priorities (Putin 2000). In 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was established, and in 2004, Russia and China finally agreed on the demarcation of the border strip, thus solving the long-standing problem; various political, economic, cultural, and other agreements were achieved, and documents were signed. Nevertheless, Russia still considered the West as its main partner and had an appropriate course, which Beijing did not favor. China was not yet an international political stakeholder on a global scale, and relations with Russia to balance the latter with the US were important for them. One of the experts of the “Xinhua” agency wrote at the time: “...Russia has lost a lot and gained a little by entering into strategic partnership relations with the USA. The US did not take into account the fact that Russia was against the start of the war in Iraq, further narrowing the Russian strategic space. Therefore, after the war, although Russia maintained “strategic partnership relations” with the US, it did not want to become a “junior partner” of Washington. To increase its weight in contact with the USA, Russia must strengthen relations with China” (Wan 2010).

A certain mistrust towards China was dominant in the Russian political elite and society at that time. Although the border problem was officially resolved, it seems that Russia still remembered the words of Deng Xiaoping, which he uttered during a meeting with Gorbachev in May 1989: “The two countries that benefited most from China were Japan and tsarist Russia, and in a certain period of time and in certain respects, the Soviet Union. He repeated Mao Zedong’s assertion that Russia had seized more than 1.5 million sq. km of Chinese territory...” (Bazhanov 2013, 286).

China’s rapid development has forced Russia to impose a moratorium on the trade of the latest weapons, as well as to limit China’s participation in Siberian energy and other projects, etc. The situation was changed first by the global economic crisis of 2008 and then by Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, which was accompanied by heavy sanctions for the Russian economy. As a result, Russia

announced the so-called *Turning to the East*<sup>1</sup> and was forced to get closer to China, which the latter, in turn, took advantage of and ensured the most profitable contracts for itself.

For instance, according to the agreements signed in Moscow in 2014 and 2015, China had sourced its Su-35 and S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems from Russia<sup>2</sup>. In addition, in 2016, at the meeting of G20 in the city of Hangzhou, Xi Jinping expressed his desire to deepen military relations with Russia, which was followed by bilateral and multilateral (in the format of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) military exercises<sup>3</sup>, during which the Chinese military was allowed access to strategic facilities to which they were not allowed before (Li and Poh 2019, 30).

Vladimir Putin being the first foreign leader that Xi Jinping met after the pandemic, demonstrates the special nature of the relations between Russia and China. The President of Russia attended the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games. Following the meeting, a joint statement was issued on February 4, covering all key issues of importance to both sides. In particular, security, sustainable development, health care, cyber security, climate change, territorial integrity, cooperation, biological weapons, etc. It was emphasized that *the forces, which represent a minority in the international arena*, continue to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries and force them to share a value system alien to them; Russia once again confirmed that Taiwan is an integral part of China; the parties expressed concern about the actions of NATO and AUKUS, which pose a potential threat to the stability of the respective regions; “the sides will strongly condemn actions aimed at denying the responsibility for atrocities of Nazi aggressors, militarist invaders, and their accomplices, besmirch and tarnish the honor of the victorious countries” (“Joint Statement” 2022).

Within the framework of the visit, other important intergovernmental, energy, etc. agreements were signed. Chairman Xi expressed his desire to increase the volume of cargo turnover to \$240 billion this year, hence doubling the previous year’s volumes (“Russian-Chinese Talks” 2022).

China agreed that Russia should accept certain security guarantees in the European neighborhood. Both countries oppose the expansion of NATO, as well as the activation of the US and its partners in the Pacific region. Sharing common interests and threats, of course, does not mean that Russia and China are an alliance. In Beijing, they understand very well that their economy is largely dependent on the West, and the so-called consequences of the “trade war” have not yet been completely eliminated. Joining Russia in a conflict against the West would be an absolutely unpragmatic move for China. Territorial integrity is the most important principle of international relations for China, therefore China does not recognize Abkhazia and the so-called “South Ossetia” and does not give Russia the right to influence Central Asian countries in this regard (Kaczmarek, Katz, and Tilikainen 2018, 27). At the official level, China still recognizes Crimea and other occupied and annexed regions of Ukraine as an integral part of Ukraine.

In addition, at a press conference held on February 23, 2022, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Mrs. Hua Chunying, emphasized that it is impossible to draw a parallel between Taiwan and Ukraine because Taiwan is an integral part of China, and Ukraine is an independent and sovereign state. However, she repeatedly emphasized the responsibility of the West in the escalation of the conflict and the special historical background and conditions of Ukraine-Russia relations (MFA of China 2022, February 23).

When Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was condemned by the United Nations, China did not support Russia, although it did not join the resolution<sup>4</sup>, it maintained its neutrality. On March 1, at the initiative of the Ukrainian side, the first telephone conversation between the foreign ministers of the two countries took place, during which Wang Yi noted that China supports the territorial integrity and sovereignty of any country and also emphasized that the security of the region cannot be achieved through the expansion of military blocs and at the expense of the security of other countries (MFA of China 2022, March 01). Thus, here as well as elsewhere, China has maintained a *balanced* position as much as possible.

According to some experts, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was unexpected even for China. On the one hand, a large part of the Chinese population had a positive assessment of this, as Russia is perceived

<sup>1</sup> The course announced by Russia towards the East implies the development of the eastern part of Russia itself, as well as the deepening of relations with the so-called “non-West”, i.e., Eastern countries, mainly, of course, with China.

<sup>2</sup> Since 2007, Russia has stopped trading advanced military equipment with China.

<sup>3</sup> For example, «VOSTOK-2018», which took place in the Far East and was the largest military exercise since the collapse of the USSR.

<sup>4</sup> In China, they do not directly talk about Russia’s invasion of Ukraine but use the words “conflict”, “crisis”, and rarely “war” (“China’s Xi” 2022), however, it is never clear which side is the aggressor.

by the masses as a power fighting against Western hegemony, whose positions are in many ways similar to China's. On the other hand, the Chinese authorities have generally taken a measured and cautious stance. Such unanimity of the West<sup>5</sup> and the prolongation of the war turned out to be unexpected for Beijing – it became clear that Russia's military potential was overestimated.

Ultimately, China is trying to take advantage of this situation. It does not violate sanctions, does not engage in confrontation, and does not supply Russia with military weapons, moreover, Chinese smartphone manufacturing companies have been slowly leaving the Russian market following this spring. For example, the company "Honor" left the Russian market in March, while "Huawei", "Lenovo" and "Xiaomi" reduced their representation in Russia in June. It is noteworthy that the companies have not made any official announcements, and their representatives explain this with a decrease in demand and distribution problems (Strumpf 2022).

Nevertheless, simultaneously, China has seriously increased its purchases of Russian oil. According to the data for May, the amount of oil shipped daily to China was 1.1 million barrels, while in the first quarter, it was only 750 thousand barrels. Given the high quality and favorable oil price, China plans to replenish its strategic reserves as well (Cho 2022).

Exports of Russian oil to India, which has so far avoided buying Russian oil due to distance and price, have increased sixfold; however, Russia is forced to impose serious concessions, which India enjoys. This does not mean that Russian companies are losing money, but rather that at the current prices, theoretically, they could see much more profit.

Russia's relative lack of seaborne oil exports to China is due to several reasons: firstly, there is an East Siberian-Pacific oil pipeline between Russia and China that has been steadily operating at full capacity, and secondly, China is still under relatively strict COVID regulations, with the country remaining closed and limited travel in the country, hence naturally reducing the oil demand. Even after the lifting of restrictions, it is unclear whether China will massively import Russian oil. For many years, Beijing has been concerned about diversifying its energy market and is reluctant to increase its dependence on a single supplier. In addition, the purchase of large quantities of Russian oil may cause additional irritation in the West.

Unlike oil, the situation with natural gas is much more complicated. Its transportation is mainly carried out with the appropriate infrastructure, and Pipelines connect Russia only to Europe, Turkey, and China. The "Power of Siberia" gas pipeline will be able to operate at full capacity only by 2025. Thus, after the introduction of sanctions, the share of China and Turkey in Russian gas exports increased, although the amount of natural gas exported decreased.

Attention to solving this problem should have continued during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Uzbekistan, which took place on September 15-16, although there was no thorough discussion of "Power of Siberia 2", as well as no agreement on various projects between Russia, Mongolia and China (Stognej 2022).

At the summit, Vladimir Putin noted that he understands the *concern* expressed by Beijing regarding the current events in Ukraine and thanked China for its *balanced position*. The strategic comprehensive partnership that exists between the two countries was also emphasized. For his part, Xi Jinping noted that the world is facing colossal changes, and Russia and China should play an active role in stabilizing the situation ("Meeting with PRC President" 2022).

It should also be noted that the first persons of China and India did not appear at the informal meeting, which is quite a telling fact. Nevertheless, the leaders of China and Russia received some benefits from this summit. It is important for Putin that he is still a strong player in the international arena, while it was also significant for Xi Jinping to demonstrate his political weight ahead of the upcoming 20<sup>th</sup> Congress.<sup>6</sup>

Russia's invasion of Ukraine significantly changed international-political-economic-cultural relations. Naturally, the changes have also affected the relations between Russia and China. The so-called "Turning to the East" is proceeding at an unprecedented pace. At the Eastern Economic Forum held in Vladivostok on September 5-8, which was attended by the official representative of China, it was often announced that the *era of Western dominance was over, that the sanctions mainly hurt the West again,*

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<sup>5</sup> During the "trade war" with the USA, the neutral attitude of the European Union was important for China. After Russia invaded Ukraine, the entire West, despite its energy dependence, united against Russia. According to some experts, this is quite important fact for China in its relations with Taiwan.

<sup>6</sup> On October 16, the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of China was held, at which Xi Jinping was elected for a third term.

*that a new window of opportunity is opening for Russia in the form of Asia (mainly China), etc. (Lazarev 2022). The reality, however, is different.*

As mentioned above, for China, economic relations with the West hold greater importance than those with Russia. Russia is not even among China's top five trade partners (OEC n.d.). China's trade turnover with the US is almost five times greater than with Russia. Access to advanced technologies is vital for the world's second economy, and this type of product comes mainly from the West, namely the USA, and cannot be replaced. In Russia, they hoped that Chinese technologies, cars, chips, smartphones, etc., would replace Western ones; however, the result was the opposite. Some of the Chinese companies left Russia completely due to the sanctions; Chinese banks were also forced to stop financing the purchase of Russian products. In addition, the Russian market is not interesting for a wide range of Chinese companies, and Russian businessmen are also less familiar with the peculiarities of the Chinese market, which naturally complicates and delays the establishment of serious business and partnership relations at the non-state level.

The policy of de-dollarization initiated by Russia, in this context, is nothing else but Yuanization. China and Russia have been trying for many years to actively use their national currency in bilateral trade, and in the perspective of sanctions, they have been somewhat successful; however, the problem is that neither the yuan nor the ruble is as flexible currencies as the dollar, posing additional problems in the long run.

Despite everything, Russia is an important political and economic partner for China. First of all, these are neighboring countries with a common border, and naturally, China prefers to have good neighborly relations with Russia, especially since both of them successfully cooperate on important international platforms – in the Security Council, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the G20, etc. Russia's anti-Western sentiments resonate with China's, which brings them closer from a political point of view.

As noted, China is in no rush to sidestep Western sanctions. Indeed, the official Beijing does not join the sanctions, and in its statements, it always notes the ineffectiveness of the sanctions in general, but it is forced to take into account the existing reality and continue its partnership with Russia in these conditions.

The military partnership was also suspended for the same reason. On September 18-19, the Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev indeed visited China, after which the deepening of military cooperation was announced ("Putin Ally" 2022), but, in the current situation, this statement can only have a symbolic meaning.

Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine and the acute confrontation with the West, "turning to the East" is no longer Russia's free choice – it is forced to focus on China, which has long since become its "older brother". In recent years, China has been considered one of the main antagonists of the US, which has already been reflected in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review document by the US (Office of the Secretary of Defense 2018). Russia's invasion of Ukraine will help divert attention from China.

To summarize, it should be said that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was not a desirable scenario for China; however, China is undoubtedly the beneficiary of this situation. It is important for Beijing to maintain relations with Moscow, as well as with Brussels and Kyiv. China is successfully using the principle developed by Zhou Enlai – "seeking the common ground, regardless of the differences or problems" (Jibladze 2021, 3). Ukraine also understands the current difficult situation and, despite the ambivalence of China's position, they are not in a hurry to strain relations with it (Ivaniadze 2022, 11-12). Thus, China successfully manages to take into account its own strategic goals and maintain beneficial relations with all parties. In turn, isolated Russia is becoming increasingly dependent on China, which gives some experts a reason to assess this dependence as a vassal (Gabuev 2022).

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