

## Ukraine War: The Growing Chinese - Russian Alignment

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China's top diplomat Wang Yi visited Moscow on 21 February 2023, the first visit to Russia by a senior Chinese official since the invasion of Ukraine began nearly a year ago. Wang, who was named Chinese leader Xi Jinping's top foreign policy adviser last month, made the high-profile visit as the final stop in an eight-day international tour that included visits to France, Italy, and Hungary, as well as Germany for the Munich Security Conference. His trip came a day after the US President Joe Biden made a surprise visit to Ukraine.

The timing was just days after US officials went public with concerns about how China's continuing partnership with Russia could have an impact on the war in Ukraine and hours after President Putin announced plans to suspend Russia's involvement in its last remaining nuclear arms treaty with the US.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken while talking at CBS' "Face the Nation" from the Munich said; "the concern that we have now is based on information we have that they're considering providing lethal support, and we've made very clear to them that that would cause a serious problem for us and in our relationship." He also warned Wang "about the implications and consequences" if China increases its support for Russia's war effort, during a meeting between the two on the sidelines of the conference.<sup>[i]</sup>

A spokesman for China's Foreign Ministry said that Wang's visit to Moscow would provide an opportunity for China and Russia to continue to develop their strategic partnership and "exchange views" on "international and regional hotspot issues of shared interest". "China is ready to take this visit as an opportunity and work with Russia to promote steady growth of bilateral relations in the direction identified by the two heads of state, defend the legitimate rights and interests of both sides, and play an active role for world peace."<sup>[ii]</sup>

During his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, he commented that China-Russia relations "certainly can't be subject to pressure from any third countries" a clear dismissal of the idea that Beijing will allow NATO or the US to dictate its Russia policy.

Wang also told Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov, "No matter how the international situation changes, China has been and remains committed, together with Russia, to make efforts to preserve the positive trend in the development of relations between major powers."<sup>[iii]</sup>

President Putin praised the "new frontiers" reached by China-Russia relations, and said both sides had "agreed" that President Xi would soon travel to Moscow himself. The visit by Xi Jinping is, likely to take place next month, will be a defining moment and it is unlikely that Russia will launch any major offensive till the visit is over.

Wang also reassured Nikolai Patrushev, the powerful secretary of the Russia Security Council that China is "ready to join forces with the Russian side... to decisively stand up for national interests and virtues."<sup>[iv]</sup>

The ties between China and Russia underlines the consistency of Beijing's approach towards Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It is symptomatic of Beijing's unwavering partnership with Moscow or as China's leader Xi Jinping and the Russian president Vladimir Putin put it in February 2022, their "friendship without limits" where no areas of cooperation were "forbidden".

This is not a new development. China has demonstrated willingness to strengthen ties with Russia throughout President Xi's decade-long rule. Both countries share many ideas about the nature of the world. Most fundamentally, they believe that the Western-led international order and its underpinning rules and values constitute a threat to the current Chinese and Russian regimes.

Both countries also accuse the US of unfairly using the dollar in the world's financial systems. "Currencies should not be the trump card for unilateral sanctions, still less a disguise for bullying or coercion,"<sup>[v]</sup> as per the Chinese Foreign Minister Qin. So, is the glue that holds Xi and Putin together a joint struggle against so-called Western hegemony? The vice like grip of the ideological relationship endures.

This provides fertile ground for cooperation in areas as varied as politics, economics, ideology, the military, and people-to-people relations. Though the relationship is asymmetrical, as Beijing has the upper hand in economic terms as China accounts for 18% of total Russian trade whereas Russia accounts for only 2% of total Chinese trade. In the last eleven months, Sino-Russian trade totaled US\$172.41 billion, up 32 percent year on year. The goal of both Moscow and Beijing is to hit an annual trade target of US \$200 billion by 2024. The top item being crude which could decrease as China turns towards more renewable sources of energy. But Russia can still provide support to China, for example in key aerospace technologies and nuclear weapons, not to mention an abundant supply of cheap energy sources. <sup>[vi]</sup>

Despite the threat of secondary sanctions, trade between the two countries boomed last year. And recent data suggests that China has found ways to supply Russia with critical components such as microchips. It is therefore evident that both countries will continue to support each other's core interests.

Amid the war in Ukraine, trade between the two countries is on the rise. Chinese and Russian diplomats maintain frequent contact. Bilateral military exercises continue unabated. While Chinese diplomats continue to express rhetorical support for territorial integrity in Ukraine, over the last year, China has not supported Russia in UN but has chosen to abstain. It has refrained from providing Russia with weapons, and has publicly proclaimed neutrality.

China has also refused to condemn the invasion, often repeated the Russian perspective about the war, opposed sanctions against Russia and helped prop up its economy. But will relations between Moscow and Beijing grow more or less asymmetric in the years to come? The question that needs to be answered is that would China prefer a defeated, weak and destabilised Russia as its nuclear neighbour as the two countries share a 4,200 kilometers border.

The prospect of a weakened regime in Russia will be viewed with uncomfortable uncertainty by China. Friendship and close ties with Russia provides China with secure borders, access to inland rail and road routes and there is no doubt that China benefits from the US focus and engagement in Europe as it takes the pressure off the Indo-Pacific.

As per Andrew Small, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund and the author of 'No Limits: The Inside Story Of China's War With The West', "The relationship is still understood as a real asset and prize for Xi, even if there will be a weaker Russia emerging from this war." Conversely, Russia is also more dependent on China economically, militarily and politically.

For Beijing, the worst-case scenario for the end of the war in Ukraine is Russia's defeat and subsequent regime change. The Chinese leadership will go to great lengths to prevent this from

happening. But could this go beyond China's current rhetorical and economic engagement and translate into bolder attempts to strategically support Russia as, the US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken suggested regarding China's consideration of supplying "lethal support" to Russia.

There is no doubt that the Chinese who are finding colliding with the US on a large range of issues particularly after the outbreak of Covid and due to their aggression and assertiveness need the friendship of Russia. President Xi in a recent statement said; 'Western countries led by the US are implementing all round containment, encirclement and suppression against us.' The Foreign Minister Qin said; "why talk big about respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity on the Ukraine question but then not respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of in the question of China's Taiwan." [\[vii\]](#) In such an atmosphere it is only to be expected that China sees President Putin as an essential partner.

While relations between the US and China continue to plummet most recently due to the fallout from a suspected Chinese spy balloon that entered US airspace, China and Russia are as close as ever since their leaders declared a "no-limits" friendship a year ago partly driven by their shared animosity towards the US. But will this present escalation of Chinese support result in greater unpredictability in resolving the Ukrainian crisis?

On 28 February President Lukashenko of Belarus arrived in Beijing for a three-day visit. Ned Price, the US State Department spokesman said; "the fact that the PRC is now engaging with Lukashenko, who has, in effect, ceded his own sovereignty to Russia, is just another element of the PRC's deepening engagement with Russia, with all of those who are engaged with and supporting Russia's brutal war against Ukraine." [\[viii\]](#)

The war in Ukraine and the growing US-China rivalry will have a deep effect in the future. China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang talked of an invisible hand on 07 March and stated; "the "invisible hand" is "using the Ukraine crisis to serve certain geopolitical agendas". He further said; "Conflict, sanctions, and pressure will not solve the problem...The process of peace talks should begin as soon as possible, and the legitimate security concerns of all parties should be respected."

The West's hope for an international system based on democracy, rule of law, and multilateral cooperation seems to lack the traction it had. Current trends point toward a further ramping up of geopolitical competition. However, presently the protective shield is economic interdependencies, ties are likely to remain strong enough to prevent a complete lapse. In the meantime, the capacity for meeting global challenges, such as climate change, poverty, and global health threats, will suffer.

Ukraine is no doubt the dominant story in the world. It is also evident that Chinese support for Russia is not going to wane. Further it is unlikely that the US will soften and reset relations with the US as President Biden has continued with Trump's policies. More increasingly, the similarities in the characters of the regime being authoritarian versus democratic is now being seen as issue that cannot be ignored with the shift in public opinion. The geopolitical consequences of the new alignment between Russia and China are critical and will continue to be challenging to deal with especially if we want to circumvent competition and confrontation.

## End Notes

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[i] Sophia Barkoff, China considering providing "lethal support" to aid Russian invasion of Ukraine, Blinken says, 19 February 2023 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/antony-blinken-china-russia-lethal-support-ukraine-face-the-nation/>

[ii] Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on February 13, 2023 [http://rw.chinaembassy.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/202302/t20230213\\_11024546.htm](http://rw.chinaembassy.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/202302/t20230213_11024546.htm)

[iii] Putin says Xi to visit Russia, ties reaching 'new frontiers'

[https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/putin-says-xi-to-visit-russia-ties-reaching-new-frontiers/articleshow/98156364.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/putin-says-xi-to-visit-russia-ties-reaching-new-frontiers/articleshow/98156364.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

[iv] China continues to condone Russian aggression

<https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/china-continues-to-condone-russian-aggression20230227155241/>

[v] Russia-China trade on pace to hit \$200 billion this year

<https://www.rt.com/business/572577-russia-china-trade-record/>

[vi] Alicja Bachulska, Brothers (not yet) in arms: China-Russia relations a year into the war in Ukraine 28 February 2023

<https://ecfr.eu/article/brothers-not-yet-in-arms-china-russia-relations-a-year-into-the-war-in-ukraine>

[vii] Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang asks U.S. to respect China's sovereignty over Taiwan 07 March 2023

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/chinese-foreign-minister-qin-gang-asks-us-to-respect-chinas-sovereignty-over-taiwan/article66591017.ece>

[viii] China and Belarus pledge deeper ties, 01 March 2023

<https://thechinaproject.com/2023/03/01/china-and-belarus-pledge-deeper-ties/>

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