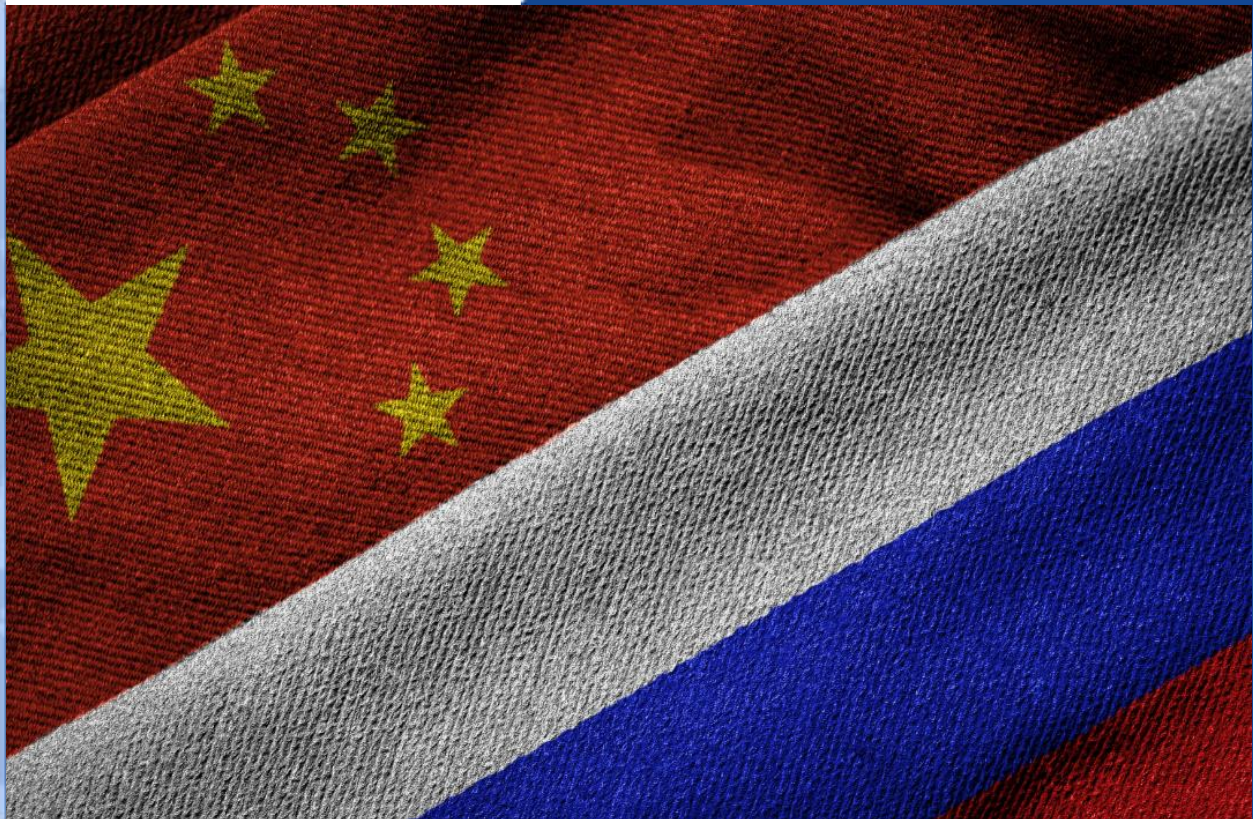


# Sino-Russian Global Reordering?

Comparing visions and assessing practical cooperation



**Richard Ghiasy**  
**Eric Siyi Zhang**  
**Matt Ferchen**



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M. de Vrieshof 3, 2311 BZ Leiden, The Netherlands



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## 2. Executive Summary

There is a widespread perception, particularly in parts of Europe and North America, that an unprecedented Sino-Russian strategic objective of cooperation and world reordering has emerged since China's President Xi and Russia's President Putin met in February 2022 preceding the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This brief report assesses this perception's accuracy by comparing Chinese and Russian visions of world order and actual cooperation across security and political economy dimensions.

It is important to note that Russia and China signed a joint declaration on promoting multipolarity and establishing a "new, just, and democratic" world order in 1997. They have since continuously reaffirmed the declaration's tenets, and joint official references to "world order" have significantly picked up since 2014. Declarations, however, have only marginally translated into substantive cooperation on security and the political economy. The Xi-Putin meeting and following depositions since the invasion have not resulted in a constitutive break from this pattern. Nor is there evidence of a new grand strategy for world order. While overlaps in the Russian and Chinese respective visions are ample – driven mainly by a mutual desire to erode what Russia and China perceive as a US hegemonic role in the international order—these stem from individual opportunism and tactical pragmatism. Furthermore, China, which unlike Russia is a major beneficiary of the international order, prefers gradual reform over sudden disruptions.

China therefore approaches reordering much more cautiously and patiently than Russia. It tries to reconfigure the international order by actively partaking in and promoting its preferences in existing bodies, and encouraging and building new regional and international institutions to fill voids. Russia, on the contrary, has come to hold a more "negative agenda." Russian leadership sees the international order as the platform on which the US and the West can sustain primacy and continue to thwart core Russian security interests. Consequently, Russia does not refrain from undermining, spoiling, and attacking the current international order, as it did in Ukraine.

On regional order, especially in their respective neighborhoods, Chinese and Russian reordering efforts share more in common, predominantly through shared antipathy toward US-led alliance structures. Consequently, both actors have increased their security and military-technical cooperation since 2015. However, beyond a degree of coordination on strategy and defense in, mostly, continental Asia, they do not operate as a joint force. Russia and China are much closer to a non-aggression pact with close strategic coordination, rather than a military alliance. Compared to full-fledged alliances such as NATO and even the US-

led so-called Hub-and-Spokes alliance system, China and Russia still lack critical components, including a common defense policy, shared permanent military infrastructure, and adequate interoperability between their armed forces.

Similarly, across the political economy, China and Russia have enhanced their trade relations in recent years, with a dramatic spike since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While the value of Russian exports to China was greater than that of Chinese exports to Russia in the last year, both countries have clearly stepped up their economic cooperation, especially in the area of oil and natural gas trade. Despite the uptick in trade relations and some monetary cooperation, Chinese firms and banks have been careful not to run afoul of international sanctions, limiting the nature and scale of the China–Russia economic partnership. More importantly, Russia has become more economically dependent on China in recent years, giving China structural advantages compared to Russia's sclerotic, commodity-dependent, and increasingly isolated economy. Considering their divergences in vision, methodology, and practical cooperation, the two neighbors are not partners “without limits,” but clearly are partners *with* limits regarding world reordering.



### 3. Introduction

Reasonably extensive academic and policy literature exists on Sino-Russian relations since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, there is less examination of the convergence of these two actors' specific visions, and real-world cooperation, for world (re)ordering since the 2019 upgrade to a "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era," and especially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022.

Indeed, there is speculation about whether a collective vision and closer cooperation have emerged since the announcement by Russian and Chinese leaders three weeks before Russia's invasion of Ukraine that the bond between the two countries "has no limits."<sup>1</sup> Only a few weeks after the invasion, in March 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, in his opening remarks at a meeting with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, said that "The world is entering a historical stage in international relations," and "we, together with you, and with our sympathizers, will move toward a multipolar, just, democratic world order."<sup>2</sup> While Lavrov's statement is not repeated in official readouts of that meeting by either side, these declarations do raise two critical questions:

- 1) What exactly are Sino-Russian visions for world order in recent years and especially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine?; and,
- 2) To what extent do China and Russia pursue these visions through practical cooperation on security and the political economy?

This report attempts to answer these two questions through desk research, online interviews with analysts, and by studying Russian, Chinese, and English-language official public documents since 1997.<sup>3</sup> That year marked the beginning of a tradition of joint Sino-Russian

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<sup>1</sup> "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development," Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, available at [en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770#sel=1:21:S5F,1:37:3jE](https://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770#sel=1:21:S5F,1:37:3jE).

<sup>2</sup> Opening statements by Lavrov to Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, Tunxi, March 30, 2022 [Вступительное слово Министра иностранных дел Российской Федерации С.В.Лаврова в ходе переговоров с Министром иностранных дел Китайской Народной Республики Ван И, Туньси, 30 марта 2022 года], available at [mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1807067/?lang=ru](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1807067/?lang=ru). On the day of the Lavrov-Wang meeting in Tunxi, China, on March 30, 2022, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said "There is no ceiling for China-Russia cooperation, no ceiling for us to strive for peace, no ceiling for us to safeguard security, and no ceiling for us to oppose hegemony;" available at [english.news.cn/20220330/e5a621bb23d843229ca4d22fbd760971/c.html](https://english.news.cn/20220330/e5a621bb23d843229ca4d22fbd760971/c.html).

<sup>3</sup> We applied textual analysis to all readouts (2,726 in total) of meetings between Chinese and Russian officials in a bi- or multilateral setting since 2001. As a sample, we analyzed the Russian versions of 2019-2022 readouts (301 in total) to check for (in)consistency with the Chinese versions. To evaluate China's stated positions on the war in

detailed public declarations, which continue today, on their desire for “a new and more just post-Cold War international order.”<sup>4</sup> This desired world order includes: 1) the rejection of [US] hegemony and the promotion of multipolarity in the world order; 2) respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and non-interference in internal affairs; 3) rejection of the “Cold War mentality” and promotion of a new concept of security with “universal applicability;” 4) the centrality of the United Nations, especially the UN Security Council (UNSC), and a rejection of “unilateral” sanctions; and 5) an increased role for developing countries in global governance.

Russia and China also reflected on the world order individually at the highest level. In 2007, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin criticized the international order in Munich.<sup>5</sup> Another critique (or alternative) came more recently in 2017 with Chinese President Xi Jinping’s imprimatur “of a global community with a shared future” and Lavrov’s call for a post-West world order.<sup>6</sup>

With this prologue set out, we would like to note that we designed this report’s accessibility to serve a broad range of societal members. Before we begin answering the two aforementioned questions, in the next section we first briefly lay out the Sino-Russian historic and contemporary broader relationships – which resonate today.

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Ukraine, we also examined all of the 2022 transcripts from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ regular press conferences. We also conducted eleven virtual interviews with prominent scholars, including from China and Russia.

<sup>4</sup> See United Nations Digital Library, available at [digitallibrary.un.org/record/234074](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/234074).

<sup>5</sup> President Putin at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, available at [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034](https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034).

<sup>6</sup> Deutsche Welle (2017), “Lavrov Calls for ‘Post-West’ World Order,” February 18, available at [dw.com/en/lavrov-calls-for-post-west-world-order-dismisses-nato-as-cold-war-relic/a-37614099](https://www.dw.com/en/lavrov-calls-for-post-west-world-order-dismisses-nato-as-cold-war-relic/a-37614099).



## 4. Considering Contemporary Relations

To understand (dis)similarities between Chinese and Russian visions for world order, and the opportunities for and limits of practical cooperation, it is important to have a brief discussion of their historical and contemporary relationship. These neighbors have oscillated between intense rivalry and partnership since Czarist Russia's eastward territorial expansion. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) played a crucial, if contentious, role in the foundation and eventual rise of the Communist Party of China (CPC). No less than a decade later, building in acrimony throughout the 1960s, the leaders of the two Parties had a severe falling out over their respective domestic and foreign policies. The ensuing Sino-Soviet split produced a military clash in 1969 and opened significant Cold War realignments, such as the radical improvement in China-US relations during the 1970s. The relationship found a less conflictual equilibrium in the 1980s, ushering in the increasingly close relationship that China and Russia have developed since the 1990s.

Today, these legacies of Sino-Soviet relations still resonate. Institutionally, China and Russia share a range of similarities in terms of bureaucratic structures for media and their educational systems. Yet the CPC leadership, including under Xi, has used the example of the downfall of the CPSU as a lesson for how the CPC must strengthen its own internal discipline and grasp of politics and economics if China is to avoid a similar fate to the former USSR. Moreover, in foreign policy, China continues to claim leadership among the non-Western, developing world, including in parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Such claims are rooted in China's foreign policy from the 1950s to 1970s and China's efforts to distinguish itself as a natural and preferred partner for countries in the so-called "Third World," which were a key feature of the Sino-Soviet split.<sup>7</sup> As we analyze the more recent relationship, these complex legacies continue to condition opportunities for cooperation and possibilities for disagreement or conflict on world-reordering.

The two countries have upgraded their 1996 strategic partnership on three occasions (in 2001, 2011, and 2019), keeping most, if not all, normative elements of the contemporary Sino-Russian relations in place.<sup>8</sup> China maintains a certain degree of strategic ambiguity, and increasingly so as the power asymmetry between the two nations grows. For example, although the "three nons" (that is, non-alignment, non-confrontation, and non-targeting of

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<sup>7</sup> Friedman, Jeremy (2015), *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press).

<sup>8</sup> President Xi and President Putin met no fewer than 30 times between 2013 and 2019; see Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Una Aleksandra (2022), *Perfect Imbalance: China and Russia* (London: World Scientific), p. 4.

third parties) formed a diplomatic discourse prior to the strategic partnership between China and Russia, it has remained relevant in the past two decades when China describes its relationship with Russia – particularly when China appears discombobulated by, or aims to prevent, certain Russian actions.

Consolidation of Sino-Russian relations in recent years has been enabled by two coinciding developments: 1) the Russian annexation of Crimea; and 2) the shift in US policy toward China from engagement to containment. For both China and Russia, those developments have significantly diminished the prospects of strategic cooperation with the West. This reality has also boosted security cooperation and has underpinned greater economic ties. Against this background, the power asymmetry between Russia and China continues to grow in China's favor, particularly in the economic and technological sphere. Moreover, Russia is far more strategically isolated than China, whose economy is about ten times the size of Russia's and is much more diversified and globally integrated. Against this background, it is possible to assess overlaps and divergence in Chinese and Russian visions for world order, which is the subject of this report's next section.

## 5. Comparing Visions

This section covers three things. First, it provides the individual key tenets of Russian and Chinese visions for world order.<sup>9</sup> Second, it assesses where these visions converge. Third, it evaluates whether the Ukraine invasion has affected Sino-Russian convergence of their visions.

### 5.1 Key tenets

#### 5.1.1 Russia

Russia's core foreign policy goals *vis-à-vis* its role in the global and regional order – which comprise retaining great-power status and closer integration with and dominance in the so-called “post-Soviet space” – have been fairly consistent since 1995.<sup>10</sup> What *has* evolved is how interests are perceived and pursued – with the Ukraine invasion as the primary culmination – and an intensifying perception of the main antagonist of these interests: the West, led by the United States.

Indeed, while there may have been some hope for rapprochement with the West in the early 2000s, conditional on Western acquiescence to Russia's hegemony in its proclaimed sphere of influence, by 2007 this hope had vanished. In that year, Putin publicly criticized US hegemony and called for “constructing a fair and democratic world order that would ensure security and prosperity not only for a select few, but for all.”<sup>11</sup> As one interviewee stated: “Russian leadership believes that the international rules-based order simply does not exist and the US is the biggest violator of this order.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In this report, we interchangeably use “international order,” “global order,” and “world order.” Russian official sources use “world order” (“мировой порядок/миропорядок”) almost exclusively. Chinese official sources use three versions: “global order” (“全球秩序”); “world order” (“世界秩序”); and “international order” (“国际秩序”) interchangeably.

<sup>10</sup> See Kremlin document bank (1995): Strategic course of the Russian Federation with the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent Nations [Стратегический курс Российской Федерации с государствами — участниками Содружества]; and see Kremlin document bank (1997): Concept of national security of the Russian Federation [Концепция национальной безопасности Российской Федерации]; retrieved from [kremlin.ru/acts/bank/11782](http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/11782).

<sup>11</sup> Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia, February 10, 2007, available at [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034).

<sup>12</sup> Interviewee in online conversation with the authors, January 2023.

In 2008, another Rubicon was crossed in the confrontation between Russia and the United States. In April that year, at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, the US, apparently unscripted and in Putin's presence, offered the prospect of NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia. Six months later, in October 2008, Putin again publicly criticized the post-Cold War liberal international order.<sup>13</sup> Russian leadership sees this order as the platform on which the US and the West can sustain and continue their primacy, continue to thwart core Russian interests, and "impose" policies (such as NATO enlargement) on Europe in Russia's proclaimed sphere of influence, with complete disregard for Russian security interests.<sup>14</sup> With several Russian proposals for reordering the world order rebuffed by the West throughout the years, Russia has come to adhere to a "negative agenda" for the international order,<sup>15</sup> one in which it does not refrain from undermining, spoiling, and outright attacking the current international order, as the invasion of Ukraine proves, when need be. One Russian scholar argues that collective defense institutions such as NATO restrict their members' ability to find lasting diplomatic solutions in their relations with external actors such as Russia,<sup>16</sup> leaving Russia constrained and with few options to act.

Nevertheless, beyond Russia's criticism of US hegemony<sup>17</sup> and its apparent beliefs that the current international order's days are numbered and that the world is transitioning to a multipolar order,<sup>18</sup> Russia has not articulated precisely enough an agenda for what a "fair and democratic" world order should look like. Nor has Russia proposed how such reordering can

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<sup>13</sup> Valdai International Discussion Club, Sochi, Russia, October 24, 2014, available at [en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860). Interestingly, Putin mentions that a polycentric world is no guarantee for greater stability.

<sup>14</sup> Interviewee in online conversation with the authors, January 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Interviewee in online conversation with the authors, January 2023. Also, Russian policies *vis-à-vis* the international order hover across three major perspectives, each with their respective shortcomings: revanchist; defensive; and aggressive. See Götz, E. and Merlen, C.R. (2019), "Russia and the Question of World Order," *European Politics and Society*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 133-153.

<sup>16</sup> Bordachev, T. (2022), *Europe, Russia and the Liberal World Order: International Relations after the Cold War* (Abingdon: Routledge).

<sup>17</sup> Russia is not per se against the liberal international order, but rather the type of liberalism embedded in this order; see Clunan, A.L. (2018), "Russia and the Liberal World Order," *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 45-59.

<sup>18</sup> From a Russian perspective, the United States no longer has the power to back up this unilateral approach, and thus the current international order is not sustainable; see Radin, A. and Reach, A. (2017), *Russian Views of the International Order* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation), available at [rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1826.html](http://rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1826.html), p. x. Also see Lukyanov, F. (2016), "A Failed New World Order and Beyond: Russian View," *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 40, no. 6, pp. 474-485.

best be devised.<sup>19</sup> Russia's vision is limited to: a) the centrality of the United Nations and especially the UN Security Council; b) a multipolar global order; c) respect for sovereignty; and d) seemingly contradicting the previous preference, a special role for great powers in the international order. This would entail great powers treading and interacting on an equal footing and maintaining a balance of power cognizant of each other's core security interests. The "special military operation" in Ukraine appears to signal just that. Whether Russia prefers such a great-power management system merely to set the rules of the road and serve as a transition to that "multipolar, just, and democratic" world order, or more permanently, is not clear. Either way, Russia's proposed G5 summit of the permanent members of the UNSC in 2020 was snubbed.

While its joint statements with China concretely discuss bilateral cooperation, and Russia has reaffirmed its willingness to contribute to reforming/building an international security architecture, beyond rhetoric there have been few concrete and widely acknowledged Russian public proposals and activities for world reordering. China, on the other hand, seeks to change the international order – as systematically as possible – from within.

### 5.1.2 China

China has a complex and contradictory engagement with the international order.<sup>20</sup> Chinese leadership recognizes that China has been a major beneficiary of the current US-led international order, especially since China's World Trade Organization accession in 2001. Indirectly, China's sustained and rapid economic growth, facilitated by this international order, has helped reinforce the CPC's legitimacy by facilitating China's economic miracle.<sup>21</sup> As one Chinese scholar argues, the convergence of visions of the global order between China and the West is larger than their differences.<sup>22</sup> China supports the open-economic-order component of the international order.

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<sup>19</sup> A conclusion reached by the authors, a wide range of interviewees, and distinguished experts from and on Russia and China at RIAC's December 2, 2020 online round table, "Future of the International System: Chinese and Russian Visions;" available at [russiancouncil.ru/en/news/russian-and-chinese-experts-exchange-views-on-the-present-and-future-of-the-world-order/](https://russiancouncil.ru/en/news/russian-and-chinese-experts-exchange-views-on-the-present-and-future-of-the-world-order/).

<sup>20</sup> Mazarr, M.J., Heath, T.R., and Cevallos, A.S. (2018), *China and the International Order* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation), available at [rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2423.html](https://rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2423.html).

<sup>21</sup> Lo, B. (2020), "The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order," *China International Strategy Review*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 306-324, at p. 313.

<sup>22</sup> Da, W. (2021), "The Evolving Direction of the Current International Order and China's Choice" [现行国际秩序演变的方向与中国的选择], *Guojiguanxi Yanjiu*, no. 1, p. 104.

However, China is skeptical about delegating too much authority to international organizations at the expense of state sovereignty.<sup>23</sup> It also wants greater acknowledgement of political diversity in this international order and better respective representation of developing countries. In recent years, China has also—like Russia—increasingly voiced objections to the existing global security order, specifically security alliances based on common defense policies.<sup>24</sup>

China's discontent with the world order is thus nuanced and selective, and it thus aims to modify it by alternating between working with others in the international order and, on occasion, by leading.<sup>25</sup> China has therefore become an active (and often supportive) member of hundreds of (extra)regional and international institutions.<sup>26</sup> However, in the last five years the external strategic environment has increasingly become more challenging to China. The receptiveness of the United States and many US allies to China's continued rise has diminished considerably. The Chinese leadership recognizes that the age of stability is now probably over: as Xi expresses, "[there are] global changes of a magnitude not seen in a century [... and] the world has entered a new period of turbulence and change."<sup>27</sup> China, which is itself of course a driver of change and revisionism, may as a result reconsider the extent to which it can continue to rise in the current international order.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, China's long-term strategic objectives of national rejuvenation and regime security depend starkly on a stable, predictable international order and thus it may come to tread (more) cautiously.<sup>29</sup> This is a key difference with Russia, which sees more potential gain

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Liu, J. (2017), "The concept of sustainable security is a bright light that illuminates world peace: In-depth study of Comrade Xi Jinping's important exposition on establishing a common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security concept" [可持续安全观是照亮世界和平的一盏明灯——深入学习习近平总书记关于树立共同、综合、合作、可持续安全观的重要论述], retrieved from [theory.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0316/c40531-29148225.html](http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0316/c40531-29148225.html).

<sup>25</sup> Tang, S. (2018), "China and the Future International Order(s)," *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 31–43, at pp. 33–35.

<sup>26</sup> Mazarr, M.J., Heath, T.R., and Cevallos, A.S. (2018), *China and the International Order* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation), available at [rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2423.html](http://rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2423.html).

<sup>27</sup> President Xi at the 2022 CPC Congress (2022), "Transcript: President Xi Jinping's Report to China's 2022 Party Congress," *Nikkei Asia*, October 18, available at [asia.nikkei.com/Politics/China-s-party-congress/Transcript-President-Xi-Jinping-s-report-to-China-s-2022-party-congress](http://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/China-s-party-congress/Transcript-President-Xi-Jinping-s-report-to-China-s-2022-party-congress).

<sup>28</sup> Interviewee in online conversation with the authors, February 2023.

<sup>29</sup> This is more the case now that coalitions are shaping up against it under the Indo-Pacific construct, the global economy's struggle to grow amid mayhem since the Sino-US trade war started, recovery from the COVID-19



in disruption and destabilization.<sup>30</sup> That notion of order is also what China intends to embed in its (attempted) gradual reordering of the international order and erosion of what it perceives as the United States' hegemonic/unilateral role and its corresponding liberal values. China mostly tries to reconfigure the international order through two strands:<sup>31</sup> "intra-systemic," by actively partaking in and promoting its preferences in bodies such as the Human Rights Council; and "extra-systemic," by encouraging and building regional and international institutions to fill voids, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Belt and Road Initiative, and for co-founding the BRICS grouping of emerging economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). These bodies are not to be seen as separate or outside of the international order, but are "extra-systemic" in that they are not initiated by and exclude the principal initiator and sustainer of the international order: the United States.

During the last 25 years, China has also introduced four major concepts to reconsider the security order and ordering, the component of international order that it objects to the most. These are: 1) the "New Security Concept," which began in 1997 and extended the interpretation of "security;" 2) the 2005 "Harmonious World Concept;" 3) the 2014 "New Asian Security Concept," which called for Asian security to be run by Asians; and 4) back to the global situation through the "Shared destiny for mankind" in 2017<sup>32</sup> and "Global Security Initiative" in 2022. The Global Security Initiative (GSI)<sup>33</sup> promotes security for the entire world, and puts at the center "cooperative security" and "indivisible security" – a concept borrowed from Russian diplomatic rhetoric, which recognizes that any state's attempt to strengthen its security should not be at the expense of another state.<sup>34</sup>

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pandemic, diversification of global supply lines away from China, greater economic protectionism, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

<sup>30</sup> Interviewee in online conversation with the authors, January 2023.

<sup>31</sup> Wu, X. (2018), "China in Search of a Liberal Partnership International Order," *International Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 5, pp. 995–1018, at p. 1016.

<sup>32</sup> In that same year, coincidentally or not, the US in its National Security Strategy declared both China and Russia as rivals and threats to the balance of power and global stability; available at [nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2017.pdf](https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2017.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Presented in speech form by Xi Jinping at the April 2022 Boao Forum. For the full speech, see [news.cgtn.com/news/2022-04-21/Full-text-Xi-Jinping-s-speech-at-2022-Boao-Forum-for-Asia-19ppia190Eo/index.html](https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-04-21/Full-text-Xi-Jinping-s-speech-at-2022-Boao-Forum-for-Asia-19ppia190Eo/index.html).

<sup>34</sup> Marcin Kaczmarek offers a good analysis of the interchanging of concepts and narratives (p. 210), and the relationship more generally, in Kaczmarek, M. (2019), "Convergence or Divergence? Visions of World Order and the Russian–Chinese Relationship," *European Politics and Society*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 207–224.

The GSI calls for new approaches to global-security architecture based on indivisible security, but overall, like the New Asian Security Concept, it lacks in the specifics of what can be reformed and, importantly, *how much and how*.<sup>35</sup> On February 21, 2023, China released a more structured and practical update of the GSI, welcoming global input.<sup>36</sup> This could be a step in the right direction, as China, unlike the United States, does not yet appear to have the regional or global legitimacy to establish and lead (a) security ordering.

## 5.2 Convergences and divergences

Currently, there is an unduly popular perception in the West that the Xi–Putin meeting on February 4, 2022 introduced an *unprecedented* common strategic objective for cooperation and world reordering. China and Russia had already signed a joint statement on promoting multipolarity and the establishment of a “better” world order in 1997 and have continuously reaffirmed these tenets.

However, we would be utterly misguided to assume that China and Russia have coordinated these visions in the past two decades and a half, as narratives have only marginally translated into substantive coordination and cooperation. Moreover, as can be seen in Graph 1 below, the relative frequency of “world order” mentioned in their bilateral meetings significantly fluctuated in the 2010s.<sup>37</sup> The rapid growth in references to “world order” happened after 2014; this trend also coincides with more references to “the West” in interactions between China and Russian officials, indicating a higher frequency of shared diplomatic narratives critical of the West. The trend of increasing Sino-Russian rhetorical convergence on visions of world order has significantly accelerated since the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing deterioration of China’s relations with parts of the West.

Overlaps in Chinese and Russian visions and preferences are ample. These mostly stem from strategic opportunism, tactical expediency, and self-interest, rather than a shared outlook on a future world order.<sup>38</sup> The underpinnings for cooperation between Russia and China in the context of world order include: a) the preservation of their autocratic political systems by

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<sup>35</sup> A point also made by Tang Shiping (2018), “China and the Future International Order(s),” *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 31–43, at p. 34.

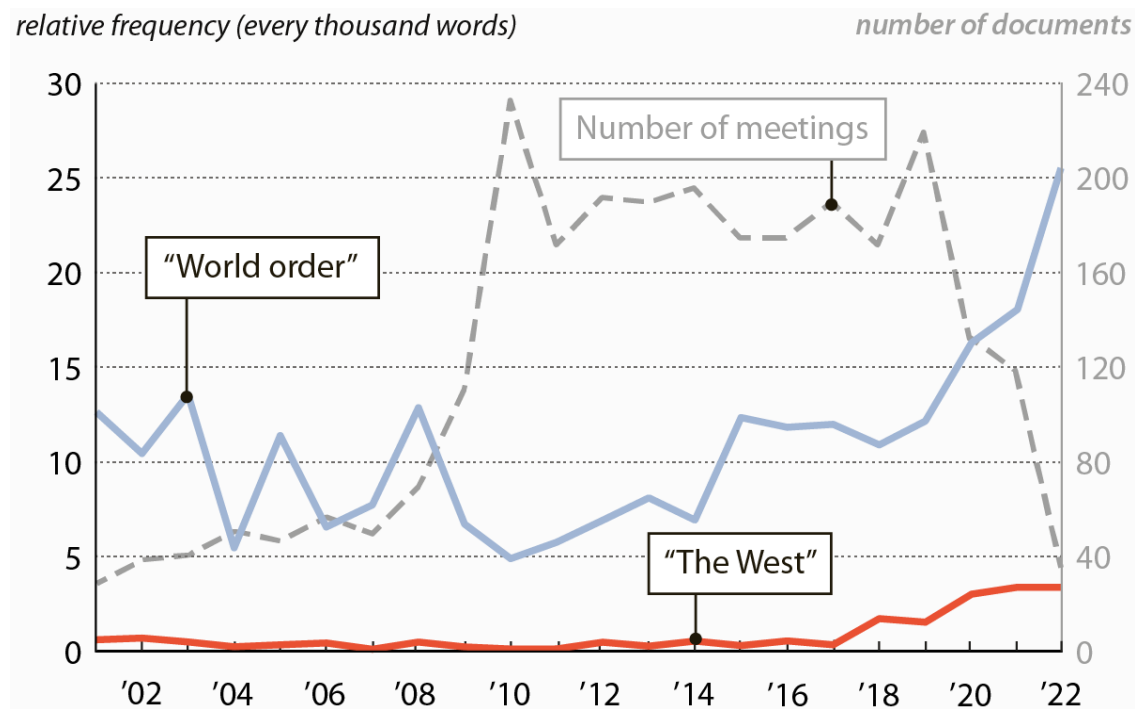
<sup>36</sup> See Wang Yi’s keynote speech at the 59th Munich Security Conference, available at [youtube.com/watch?v=wxS1rS6oNPA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxS1rS6oNPA).

<sup>37</sup> Textual data collection and analysis performed by the authors, based on 2,726 readouts from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>38</sup> Lo, B. (2020), “The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order,” *China International Strategy Review*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 306–324.

rejecting perceived foreign interference;<sup>39</sup> b) full and unconditional sovereignty over domestic and foreign policy; c) multipolarity; d) defiance toward US hegemony; <sup>40</sup> e) the marginalization of the United States’ role in their respective neighborhoods; and f) the centrality of the UN, and in particular the UNSC, in the world order.<sup>41</sup>

**Graph 1: Relative frequency of terms mentioned in meetings between Russian and Chinese officials since the year 2000**



Source: All 2,726 available press releases from the website of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on meetings between Russian and Chinese officials since 2000. Data collection and analysis performed by the authors.

Nevertheless, visions and preferences amply diverge.<sup>42</sup> The main difference with key proponents of the current (liberal) international order is that it is the external geopolitical environment that has brought Russia and China to a closer relationship since the mid-2010s,

<sup>39</sup> Interviewees in conversation with the authors, January 2023; also, a conclusion by various authors in Kirchberger, S. et al. (2022), *Russia–China Relations: Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?* (Cham: Springer), p. 294.

<sup>40</sup> The Chinese MFA has recently released a document that addresses its views on what it labels “US hegemony;” see China’s MFA (2023), “US Hegemony and its Perils,” February 20, available at [mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230220\\_11027664.html](http://mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230220_11027664.html).

<sup>41</sup> Other domains of convergence within the security realm are non-proliferation, non-militarization of space, and non-deployment of missile defense systems.

<sup>42</sup> Kaczmarek, M. (2019), “Convergence or Divergence? Visions of World Order and the Russian–Chinese Relationship,” *European Politics and Society*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 207–224.

rather than some intrinsic sociopolitical, historical, ethnic, or religious affinity. Nor is there evidence of a grand strategy or joint design and building of an (alternative) authoritarian order. China and Russia simply do not operate as a joint force: “strategically, their [mutualistic] relationship is less than the sum of its parts.”<sup>43</sup> The geopolitical environment, of course, does not apply identically to both. Within Asia, the two broadly coordinate strategy, economy, and defense; beyond Asia, however, much less so. In Latin America and Africa, China and Russia frequently compete for influence. Geographically, Russia’s main security-ordering interests and problems lie to its west in Europe, while those of China mostly lie in the Asia-Pacific region, with deepening political, security, and economic cooperation under the Indo-Pacific rubric, including security arrangements such as the Quad (that is, Australia, India, Japan, and the United States) and AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States).<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Russia, contrary to China, perceives NATO as its primary adversary in the security sphere. China does not currently share Russia’s antagonism toward NATO to the same degree. Of course, the NATO alliance’s pivot toward Asia and global commons<sup>45</sup> could have ramifications for China’s future attitudes to NATO.<sup>46</sup>

As stated above, China’s revisions for the global order are indisputably more selective and more nuanced than Russia’s—China prefers gradual reform over sudden disruption to the current world order.<sup>47</sup> As a Chinese Russia-expert points out, China’s rise is a process of it accepting and integrating into the current world order, instead of undermining it.<sup>48</sup> This may have to do with dissimilarities in Russia’s and China’s historical and sociopolitical contexts, their stakes in the global economy, and whether they are optimistic about respective future

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<sup>43</sup> The same conclusion was reached by Lo, B. (2020), “The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order,” p. 307 (square brackets inserted by authors).

<sup>44</sup> Krishnamurthy, R. and Ghiasy, R. (2022), “The Transitioning Security Order in the Indo-Pacific: Furthering India-EU and Triangular Collaboration,” LeidenAsiaCentre, December, available at [leidenasiacentre.nl/the-transitioning-security-order-in-the-indo-pacific/](https://leidenasiacentre.nl/the-transitioning-security-order-in-the-indo-pacific/).

<sup>45</sup> NATO (2021), “Brussels Summit Communiqué,” June 14, available at [nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185000.htm](https://nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm).

<sup>46</sup> China has already become more critical of NATO, while Russia has publicly criticized AUKUS and the Quad; see Lo, B. (2022), “Turning Point? Putin, Xi, and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” *Analyses*, Lowy Institute, May 25.

<sup>47</sup> Zhao, H. (2023), “The Priority Direction of Sino-Russian Strategic Cooperation under the New Situation” [新形势下中俄战略合作的优先方向], January 4, available at [ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/china\\_wzft/5737](https://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/china_wzft/5737).

<sup>48</sup> Zhao, H. (2020), “Sino-Russian-US Relations and International Order” [中俄美关系与国际秩序], *Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia Studies*, no. 3, p. 3.

prospects.<sup>49</sup> China's and Russia's differences in vision and prowess are also visible when comparing the multilateral institutions they have established. Russia has mostly founded institutions that facilitate cooperation and cohesion in the former Soviet space, while China looks (extra)regionally and globally.

China's and Russia's respective self-images – and the way they deal with their self-image – are another factor in their visions for and dealings with the international order. While China sees itself as a victim of imperial aggression in the so-called “century of humiliation,” it has opted to play the global game of modernization, and that modernization requires (as much) stability and predictability in the world order. Russia, on the other hand, sees itself as a victim of this international order, in which it feels marginalized and belittled – its most disadvantaged member.<sup>50</sup> Since the Soviet Union and the regional order it led collapsed, Russia has never truly felt comfortable taking its place in an order that helped to topple its glory days. Moreover, Russia's claim of great-power status is first and foremost based on its conventional and nuclear military capabilities, position in the UNSC, and influence in the former Soviet space. Russia's conventional military capabilities have become significantly less credible following its subpar performance in Ukraine.

China, on the other hand, sees acknowledgment of its great-power status, based on the size of its economy and its economic influence, reverberate throughout the globe. China placates Russia as a great power and wants to maintain a working and predictable relationship with the United States, even if this relationship remains highly competitive. For Russia, on the contrary, there are no near-term prospects of re-establishing a working relationship between Russia and the United States.

These differences in Chinese and Russian preferences for global stability and relations with the United States narrow the ways in which they can go about coordinating policies *vis-à-vis* US hegemony, and in their efforts to promote shared norms and visions for world order. Zooming in, visions for regional order – in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, respectively – converge (more) strongly. At this level, China and Russia fully share anti-Americanism, criticism of collective defense structures, and grievances toward the “unjust” status quo. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and China's stance on it, is a case in point.

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<sup>49</sup> Two interviewees in conversation with the authors, January 2023.

<sup>50</sup> Address by Lo, B. to the Institute of International and European Affairs in 2019, available at [youtube.com/watch?v=RAHvsCBJXQ8](https://youtube.com/watch?v=RAHvsCBJXQ8).

### 5.3 The effect of the Russian invasion of Ukraine

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China's support to Russia, although important for President Putin's internal "legitimacy" and propaganda, has been largely rhetorical.<sup>51</sup> Military-technical cooperation continues within existing frameworks, yet its size is limited.<sup>52</sup> Since December 2022, there have been reports of the Chinese supplying dual-use parts and goods to sanctioned Russian entities.<sup>53</sup> At the time of writing (in late February 2023), however, this has certainly not resulted in a tangible increase in the combat capabilities of Russia's armed forces in Ukraine. Nor, at this time, has China provided Russia with direct financial support. Contrary to common perception, there was no new normative element in their vision for world order in 2022 and there was no notable shift in their stances at international fora. Ukraine has not changed their relationship much.<sup>54</sup> If anything, a) previously blurred red lines between China and Russia on the potential use of nuclear weapons have now become less blurred, as China dreads a "normalization" of nuclear weapons, considering it has four nuclear-armed neighbors;<sup>55</sup> and b) the confidence of China's People's Liberation Army in Russian conventional military strategy and ability may have fallen after Russia's subpar performances in Ukraine.

While emphasizing that other Chinese channels, such as media outlets, individual diplomats, and journalists, have consistently engaged in pro-Russian and anti-Western messaging,<sup>56</sup> China's official position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine is more nuanced and dynamic. As shown in Graph 2 below, on the one hand, China has attributed the root cause of Russia's

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<sup>51</sup> Incidentally, this is also the consensus among Russian commentators in 2022.

<sup>52</sup> According to China Customs data, the total amount of Chinese weapons and ammunition exported to Russia in 2022 is 3,413 million USD; in China Customs (January 18, 2023), Table of amounts of commodities exported to some countries (regions) in December 2022 (in US dollars) [2022 年 12 月对部分国家 (地区) 出口商品类章金额表 (美元值)], retrieved from [customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfxxgk/2799825/302274/302277/302276/4808281/index.html](https://customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfxxgk/2799825/302274/302277/302276/4808281/index.html).

<sup>53</sup> *Wall Street Journal* (2023), "China Aids Russia's War in Ukraine, Trade Data Shows," January, retrieved from [wsj.com/articles/china-aids-russias-war-in-ukraine-trade-data-shows-11675466360](https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-aids-russias-war-in-ukraine-trade-data-shows-11675466360); and Lo, K. (2023), "Chinese Satellite Start-up Named in US Sanctions Aimed at Wagner Group Denies Aiding Russia in Ukraine War," *South China Morning Post*, January 30, retrieved from [scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3208451/chinese-satellite-start-named-us-sanctions-aimed-wagner-group-denies-aiding-russia-ukraine-war](https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3208451/chinese-satellite-start-named-us-sanctions-aimed-wagner-group-denies-aiding-russia-ukraine-war).

<sup>54</sup> Zhao, L. (2022), "The Conflict between Russia and Ukraine Will Not Change the Internal Logic and Independent Value of the Development of Sino-Russian Relations" [俄乌冲突不会改变中俄关系发展的内在逻辑和独立价值], SIIS Special Edition on the Russo-Ukrainian War.

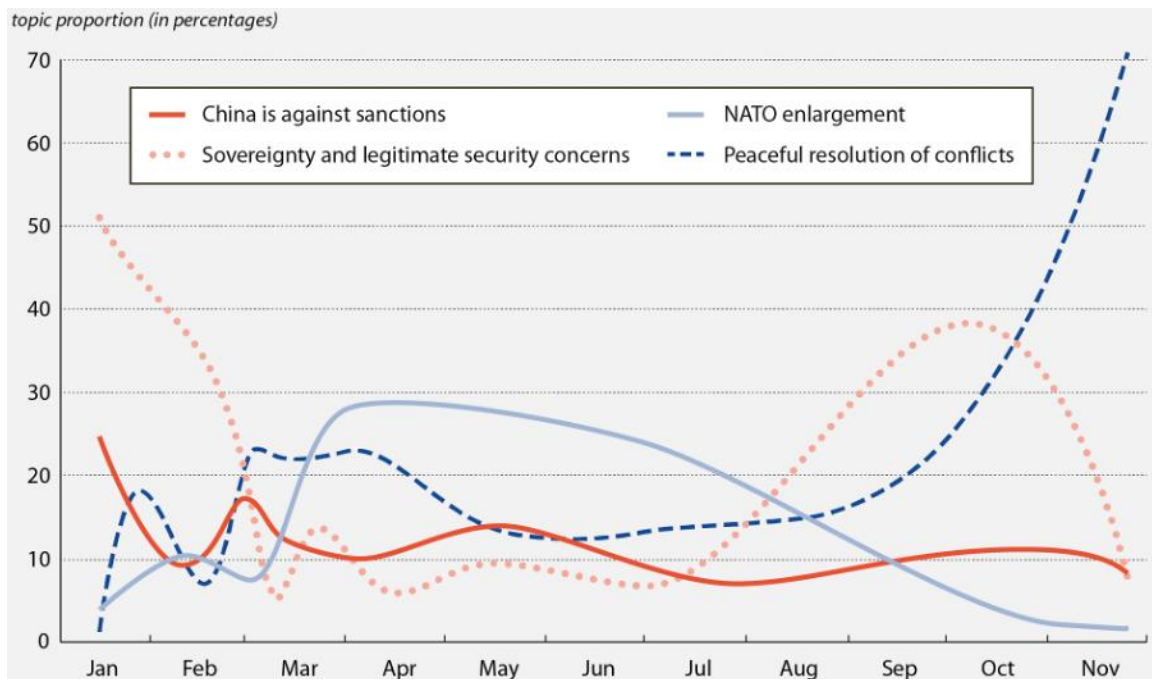
<sup>55</sup> Interviewee in online conversation with authors, January 2023.

<sup>56</sup> Interviewee in online conversation with authors, January 2023.



invasion to NATO enlargement, as well as the United States' provocation of Russia by supplying Ukraine with weapons and sounding the alarm since late 2021 that a Russian invasion would be imminent.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, there is a more recent, mostly unnoticed, shift in China's official stated positions, with narratives that blame the war on the US-led collective West having dwindled since summer 2022.<sup>58</sup>

**Graph 2: Proportion of topics in Chinese official narratives on the Russian invasion of Ukraine during 2022**



*Source:* Transcripts of 270 answers provided by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to journalists' questions on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Data collection and analysis performed by the authors. Note that at the time of data collection, the Chinese Ministry had not yet published transcripts for December 2022.

Objections to sanctions as a narrative remained, although at a much lower frequency and intensity. Until November 2022, almost all of the statements by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) called for negotiations. It should be emphasized that Russia also

<sup>57</sup> "When the US violated its agreement with Russia five times and expanded NATO eastward to Russia's doorstep, and deployed a large number of advanced offensive strategic weapons, did they ever think about the consequences of driving a big country into a desperate situation?" [在美方违背同俄罗斯的协议 5 次将北约东扩至俄家门口并部署大量先进进攻性战略武器时,他们有没有想过把一个大国逼到绝地的后果?], see [mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt\\_673021/jzhsl\\_673025/202202/t20220223\\_10644870.shtml](https://mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/202202/t20220223_10644870.shtml).

<sup>58</sup> The last time the Chinese MFA mentioned "NATO" or alleged "US biolabs in Ukraine" was on July 6, 2022. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian hosted a regular press conference [2022 年 7 月 6 日外交部发言人赵立坚主持例行记者会], retrieved from [mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt\\_673021/jzhsl\\_673025/202207/t20220706\\_10716331.shtml](https://mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/202207/t20220706_10716331.shtml).

repetitively suggested the resumption of negotiations in the final quarter of 2022, perhaps in an attempt to freeze the conflict while retaining its control of occupied Ukrainian territories. Calling for peace negotiations without asking for the withdrawal of Russian forces is not a reduction of rhetorical support for Russia.

However, against the background of the announced heavy-armor deliveries to Ukraine and the United States' allegation of Chinese companies supporting non-lethal military aid to Russia in January 2023, the Chinese MFA spokesperson repeated the earlier narrative that the United States had started and is fueling the "Ukraine crisis" and that the supply of weapons to Ukraine will only prolong the conflict.<sup>59</sup> It remains to be seen whether the anti-US messaging, which was mostly prevalent during the early months of the war, will be retained systematically in 2023.

In a less explicit manner, China has also echoed the Russian narrative that Ukraine is responsible for the invasion as it has not implemented the Minsk II agreement.<sup>60</sup> Those narrative elements – the so-called "pro-Russian neutrality"<sup>61</sup> – are certainly different from the more avoidant approach that China took in 2014 after Russia's invasion of Crimea.<sup>62</sup> China has also consistently opposed sanctions in its rhetoric, although the majority of Chinese firms appear to have been following the sanctions in practice, likely out of self-interest.

In the next section, we examine the extent of Chinese and Russian coordination and cooperation, and assess whether this shows evidence of a pursuit to reorder the world.

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<sup>59</sup> Chinese MFA spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on January 30, 2023, retrieved from [fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/202301/t20230130\\_11016450.html](http://fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202301/t20230130_11016450.html).

<sup>60</sup> "The evolution of the Ukraine issue to today is the result of various factors, among which the delay in the effective implementation of the new Minsk agreement is closely related" [乌克兰问题演变到今天各种因素共同作用的结果,其中与新明斯克协议迟迟未能得到有效执行密切相关], in [mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt\\_673021/jzhs1\\_673025/202202/t20220223\\_10644870.shtml](http://mfa.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/jzhs1_673025/202202/t20220223_10644870.shtml).

<sup>61</sup> According to one of the interviewees, Chinese diplomatic channels also replicated the Russian narrative of US biolabs in Ukraine, although it is interesting that no other Russian disinformation was echoed by official Chinese sources, the reasons for which remain to be debated.

<sup>62</sup> Interviewee in online conversation with the authors, January 2023.

## 6. Assessing Practical Cooperation

Despite Sino-Russian rhetorical convergences on the world order and the critical need for its reordering, there are major limits to and underappreciated elements of their practical cooperation. These, across security and the political economy, are explored in this section.

### 6.1 Security cooperation

Contrary to some perceptions, Russia and China are nowhere close to having a military alliance—but, rather, a non-aggression pact—let alone able to challenge the international order's subset security order. Compared with full-fledged alliances such as NATO, the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, and even the US-led Hub-and-Spokes alliance system in the Asia-Pacific region, China and Russia still lack three critical components: 1) a common defense policy; 2) shared permanent military infrastructure or mutual access rights to their individual military infrastructure; and 3) ample interoperability between their armed forces.

Nor is there ample evidence of well-coordinated cooperation to limit their technological dependence on the United States, to marginalize the US in their respective neighborhoods, bar Central Asia, or to collectively counter the two principal alliances that embody the security order subset of the international order: NATO and the US-led Hub-and-Spokes alliance system. A Sino-Russian military alliance can therefore be easily “demystified.”

Nonetheless, there is evidence of growing security and military-technical cooperation between the two neighbors—beyond longstanding coordination at the UNSC. Arguably, the Chinese describe the nature of this evolving cooperation best, by referring to it as “strategic coordination” and “back-to-back coordination.” Contemporary security and military-technical cooperation between Russia and China began in the 1990s through Russian arms exports to China.<sup>63</sup> These once accounted for almost half of total Russian arms export in 2000,<sup>64</sup> and dwindled to 15 percent in 2011.<sup>65</sup> However, Russia's annexation of Crimea and the shift in the United States' China policy toward containment and NATO enlargement have pushed

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<sup>63</sup> As the US and (then) European Community imposed an arms embargo on China, post-Soviet states became the only significant source of modern weaponry. From the Russian perspective, the cooperation with China secured much-needed funds for the revival of its arms industry.

<sup>64</sup> Fudan University & Russian International Affairs Council (2014), 中俄关系研究报告 2014 [*Sino-Russian Research Report 2014*], p. 75.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

China and Russia closer, reviving their military–technical cooperation since the mid-2010s. Although Russia’s share of global arms exports fell from 24 percent from 2012–2016 to 19 percent from 2017–2021, there was a substantial increase in Russia’s arms exports to China: 60 percent.<sup>66</sup> From 2017–2021, Russia was China’s top supplier at 81 percent.<sup>67</sup> Imports included aircrafts and surface-to-air missile systems.<sup>68</sup>

While aviation and air defense systems remain priorities in Russian arms export to China,<sup>69</sup> there are some notable new dynamics in their military–technical cooperation. While the arms trade was previously mostly one-directional, this has since changed because of growing Chinese technological prowess and international sanctions imposed on Russia following the Crimea annexation. Diesel engines for warships are one such example.<sup>70</sup> Reportedly, Russia was also interested in purchasing Chinese drones and electronic components for space programs.<sup>71</sup> In addition, China and Russia have concluded several cooperation agreements for joint R&D projects on jet engines, helicopters, and submarines.<sup>72</sup> As a result, Russian interest in Chinese weaponry powered by digital technologies will likely grow, whereas China is likely to remain dependent on Russia for individual components of the aviation industry, such as jet engines, for the rest of this decade. It is likely that the poor battlefield

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<sup>66</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) (2022), *Yearbook 2022: Armaments, Disarmament, and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 311–312.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, p. 320.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 311–312.

<sup>69</sup> For example, China became the first international buyer of the Russian S-400 air defense system in 2014, and all were delivered as of 2020; China is still reliant on Russia for multiple types of jet engines; China and Russia concluded contracts on the sale of Su-35 combat aircraft and Ka-32, Mi-171, and Mi-171Sh helicopters between 2015 and 2019; in Fudan University, Russian International Affairs Council & Russian Academy of Science Institute of Far Eastern Studies (2018), “Russia–China Dialogue: The 2018 Model” [中俄对话 2018], retrieved from [russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/russian-chinese-dialogue-the-2018-model/](http://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/russian-chinese-dialogue-the-2018-model/); and Fudan University & Russian International Affairs Council (2020), “Russia–China Dialogue: The 2020 Model” [中俄对话 2020], retrieved from [russiancouncil.ru/papers/Russia-China-2020-Report58-En.pdf](http://russiancouncil.ru/papers/Russia-China-2020-Report58-En.pdf).

<sup>70</sup> For example, diesel engines for warships, which Russia had previously been purchasing from Germany; in “Russia–China Dialogue: the 2018 Model,” p. 87.

<sup>71</sup> Korolyov, A.N. (2019), *Насколько близки Россия и Китай? Военно-стратегическое сотрудничество в международных отношениях* [“How Close are Russia and China? Military–Strategic Cooperation in International Relations”], *Russia and the Asia–Pacific*, no. 3, pp. 138–160.

<sup>72</sup> “Russia–China Dialogue: The 2018 Model;” and “Russia–China Dialogue: The 2021 Model” [中俄对话 2021], retrieved from [russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/russia-china-dialogue-the-2021-model/](http://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/russia-china-dialogue-the-2021-model/).

performance of some Russian military equipment in Ukraine,<sup>73</sup> and Russia's need to redirect manufacturing capabilities intended for export to the Russian war efforts, will have severe ramifications for future Chinese purchases of Russian weaponry.<sup>74</sup>

Apart from the arms trade, regular military exercises are another critical component of political and security cooperation between the two actors. These have grown at a faster pace since 2015, notably also targeting Japan through recent joint drills and strategic bomber patrols around Japan and joint drills in the East China Sea. They can be broken down into three categories:

- “Peace missions:” these typically biannual<sup>75</sup> military exercises have been held since 2005. Officially, the objective is counterterrorism, but these exercises have involved heavy military assets.<sup>76</sup> This involvement suggests that the objectives of these exercises could be wider. Since 2007, these exercises have also been carried out under the framework of the SCO, although other SCO member states' participation is somewhat limited.<sup>77</sup> The most recent edition (in 2021) included elements that aimed to enhance the integration of command structures and the interoperability of the Russian and Chinese armies, bringing their security cooperation to a qualitatively closer level.<sup>78</sup>
- “Joint sea exercises:” these are regular annual naval drills by the Russian and Chinese navies since 2012.<sup>79</sup> Compared with the “peace missions,” these exercises are somewhat

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<sup>73</sup> Among others, Russian air defense systems, which form an important part of Chinese arms purchases from Russia.

<sup>74</sup> Interviewee in online conversation with the authors, January 2023.

<sup>75</sup> Although held consecutively in 2020 and 2021, the next edition is planned for August 2023; see *Chelyabinsk Online* (2022), Челябинской области пройдут учения ШОС «Мирная миссия» [The SCO Exercise “Peace Mission” will be Held in the Chelyabinsk Region], December 13, retrieved from [74.ru/text/world/2022/12/13/71893922/](http://74.ru/text/world/2022/12/13/71893922/).

<sup>76</sup> For example, attack aircraft, air defense systems, and electronic warfare systems, etc. See TASS (2014), “International Anti-terrorist Exercises of the SCO Countries ‘Peace Mission 2014’ Began in China” [В Китае начались международные антитеррористические учения стран ШОС “Мирная миссия-2014”], August 24, retrieved from [tass.ru/politika/1396572](http://tass.ru/politika/1396572); and RIA Novosti (2007), “‘Peace Mission’ Haunts the West” [“Мирная миссия” не дает покоя Западу], August 17, retrieved from [ria.ru/20070817/72066838.html](http://ria.ru/20070817/72066838.html).

<sup>77</sup> RIA Novosti (2007), “‘Peace Mission’ Haunts the West.”

<sup>78</sup> CCTV (2021), “Anti-terrorist Exercises of the SCO Member Countries ‘Peace Mission 2021’ Achieved the Expected Goals – Chinese Ministry of Defense” [Антитеррористические учения стран-членов ШОС “Мирная миссия-2021” достигли ожидаемых целей-- минобороны КНР], October 1, retrieved from [russian.news.cn/2021-10/01/c\\_1310220699.htm](http://russian.news.cn/2021-10/01/c_1310220699.htm).

<sup>79</sup> Twice in 2015.

demonstrative of the two nations affording mutual support in their respective confrontations with the West. In 2015, after Russia's annexation of Crimea, joint sea exercises were held in the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea. In 2016, with the South China Sea Arbitration Case in the background, the exercise was held in the South China Sea. In February 2023, China and Russia, together with South Africa, held ten-day trilateral naval exercises off the southern coast of Africa.<sup>80</sup>

- “Joint strategic air patrol:” these consist of annual joint air patrols of Chinese and Russian strategic bombers, from 2019 onwards.<sup>81</sup> In 2022, two patrols were held. For the first time, Chinese and Russian strategic bombers landed at each other's airports.<sup>82</sup>

In sum, as China and Russia continue to coordinate at the UNSC and pursue increased security and military-technical cooperation, the two nations are not “partners without limits,” but rather are partners *with* limits across security and defense coordination and cooperation.

## 6.2 Political economy cooperation

In addition to security cooperation, the other arena for real and/or potential Sino-Russian cooperation is in trade, investment, and monetary ties. Evaluation of the content, size, and direction of the two nations' economic relationship has important implications beyond the purely commercial aspects. Sino-Russian economic ties are politically important for at least three reasons. First, the two countries' expanding bilateral trade ties indicate a concrete dimension to their leaders' claims of close partnership, while at the same time highlighting that in economics, Russia depends on China more than China on Russia.<sup>83</sup> Second, an overview of the two countries' economic ties also provides a comparative reference: even

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<sup>80</sup> Chuhtel, L. and Eligon, J. (2023), “South Africa to Hold Naval Drill With Russia and China Amid Ukraine War,” *The New York Times*, January 19, available at [nytimes.com/2023/01/19/world/africa/south-africa-naval-drill-russia-china.html](https://nytimes.com/2023/01/19/world/africa/south-africa-naval-drill-russia-china.html).

<sup>81</sup> Ministry of Defense of Russia (2019), “Russian Defense Minister, General of the Army Sergei Shoigu Held Talks with Vice Chairman of the Central Military Council of China Zhang Yuxia [Министр обороны России генерал армии Сергей Шойгу провел переговоры с заместителем председателя Центрального военного совета КНР Чжаном Юся], September 4, retrieved from [function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12250782@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12250782@egNews).

<sup>82</sup> *Xinhua* (2022), “The Chinese and Russian Militaries Conduct Joint Air Strategic Cruises. Experts: The Two Armies' Command Organizations and Guarantee Mechanisms are Organically Combined” [中俄两军进行联合空中战略巡航. 专家: 两军指挥组织保障机制有机结合], December 1, retrieved from [news.cn/mil/2022-12/01/c\\_1211705907.htm](https://news.cn/mil/2022-12/01/c_1211705907.htm).

<sup>83</sup> On the latter, see Gabuev, A. (2022), “China's New Vassal: How the War in Ukraine Turned Moscow into Beijing's Junior Partner,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 9, available at [foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-new-vassal](https://foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-new-vassal).



though Sino-Russian trade and financial relations have deepened in recent years, and especially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this is part of a longer-term trend. Moreover, Russia's ability to maintain strong fossil-fuel export earnings is not only a function of growing Chinese purchases, but also includes strong demand from India, as well as Russia's ability to bypass Western sanctions. Third, despite strong trade growth in 2022, the nature and scale of Russia–China investment and financial relations remain limited. The rhetorical claims that the two countries make about their partnership therefore need to be measured against these limiting realities. In the end, even though China–Russia trade, investment, and financial ties have been increasing in recent years, and especially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there are limits to both the scale and content of their economic ties, as well as clear indications that China is increasing its economic leverage over Russia.

An overview of recent Sino-Russian economic ties is revealing across these three dimensions. China–Russia economic relations have, undoubtedly, expanded since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Yet the drivers of this expansion, how trade and investment relations will develop in the months and years ahead, and who has gained a relative advantage are all issues that deserve more careful scrutiny. It is true that Chinese purchases of Russian oil and gas have provided an important alternative source of demand for Russia (see Graph 3 below), as Europe, the United States, and others have curtailed their purchases and imposed sanctions on Russian fossil-fuel suppliers. Yet some key takeaways from our interviews and analysis of the economic data are that China has been opportunistic in its expansion of trade ties with Russia, especially in its purchases of discounted Russian oil and gas, and that Russian dependence on China has only increased over the last year. Moreover, the rapid growth in China–Russia commerce during 2022 is part of a longer-term trend of expanding trade over the last decade, which had already picked up pace even before the outbreak of war in Ukraine (see Graph 4 below). Furthermore, despite the acceleration in trade relations and Russia's growing economic reliance on China, the overall impression that emerged from our interviews and our desk research was that China ultimately still has little leverage to compel Russia to alter its conduct over the war in Ukraine, let alone Russia's overall foreign policy.

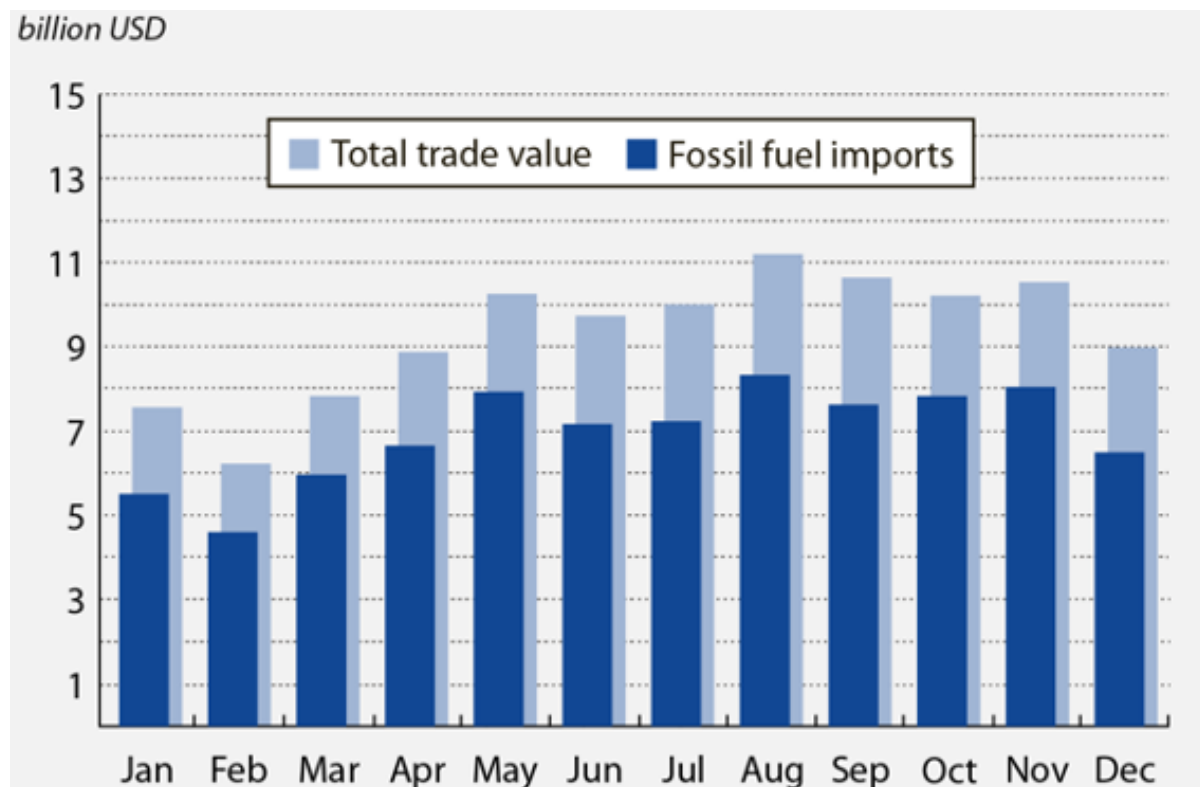
The almost 29.3 percent year-on-year increase in overall Russia–China trade in 2022, following on from an even bigger 35.9 percent increase in 2021, certainly demonstrates the vitality of the two countries' recent economic ties. Expansion in the value of China's imports from Russia (at 43.4 percent) outpaced the growth in value of China's exports to Russia in 2022 (at 12.8 percent), underscoring the trend of a growing Russian trade surplus with China since 2018.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> China Customs data from January 2023, available at [customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfxxgk/2799825/302274/302275/4794352/index.html](https://customs.gov.cn/customs/302249/zfxxgk/2799825/302274/302275/4794352/index.html).

Some of this rapid rise in the value of China’s imports from Russia was driven by higher quantities of oil imports, but also by higher oil prices (see both Graphs 3 and 4 below). Indeed, in any given year, crude oil accounts for half of Russia’s exports to China: in 2022, the volume of China’s imports of Russian crude expanded by 8 percent, while the value increased by almost 44 percent.<sup>85</sup>

**Graph 3: Chinese monthly total imports and fossil-fuel imports from Russia in 2022**



*Source:* China Customs Data, monthly reports in 2022.

Chinese oil refiners were speculated to have received a discount on Russian oil during much of 2022, aided in part by pressure on Russia from the oil-price cap imposed by Western countries in late 2022.<sup>86</sup>

Despite such robust oil trade in 2022, Russia remained China’s second largest supplier of crude oil behind Saudi Arabia (supplying 15.6 percent in 2022 and 17.4 percent in 2021). China

<sup>85</sup> See China Customs data.

<sup>86</sup> See [oilprice.com/Energy/General/China-Ignores-Price-Cap-And-Buys-Russian-Oil-At-Deep-Discounts.html](https://oilprice.com/Energy/General/China-Ignores-Price-Cap-And-Buys-Russian-Oil-At-Deep-Discounts.html). Legitimate debate about the actual prices charged and paid for Russian fossil fuels by China and others is a hot topic; see Vakulenko, S. (2023), “Double Win: How Russian Oil Companies Defied Sanctions and Paid Less Tax,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 15, available at [carnegieendowment.org/politika/89052](https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89052).

also imported nearly 44 percent more liquified natural gas from Russia by volume in 2022 compared to 2021,<sup>87</sup> and yet it is pipeline gas flows from the yet-to-be-completed Power of Siberia 2 project that remain a far more important potential source for China–Russia natural gas cooperation in the years ahead (see Graph 3, above, for an overview of the growth of Chinese imports of Russian fossil fuel as part of overall trade).

In addition to traditional trade relations, we have also seen some recent expansion in other dimensions of Russian–Chinese economic relations. For example, the two countries have established, and discussed expanding, renminbi–ruble swaps.<sup>88</sup> Despite being limited in scale, such currency swaps have a symbolic value in terms of aligning with the two nations’ calls to establish alternatives to international dependence on the dollar or euro. They also help to limit exchange-rate risks for oil and natural-gas transactions in dollars, for example. Yet given the still limited internationalization of China’s renminbi, let alone the Russian ruble, there is a limit to the appeal of holding or transacting in the two currencies, even for state-owned firms, let alone private companies. Aside from such monetary cooperation, there has also been expanded speculation about the ways in which Russia and China could cooperate in the Arctic,<sup>89</sup> including potentially as a quid pro quo for China’s continued partnership (however limited) and reticence about criticizing Russia’s war effort in Ukraine.

Despite such robust China–Russia trade and other economic cooperation since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a number of structural and strategic barriers need to be kept in mind, as they can place limits on the scope and nature of the two countries’ economic relationship. First, in terms of their economic interdependence, China matters more for Russia than the reverse: China is Russia’s largest trade partner, accounting for over 21 percent of its trade (in 2021), while Russia is only China’s 15<sup>th</sup>-largest trade partner, accounting for 3 percent of its overall trade (in 2021). For perspective, in 2022 the value of EU–China trade was more than four times greater than that of Russia–China trade (see Graph 4 below). Moreover, Chinese firms have been careful not to violate Western sanctions, and have instead sought opportunities for expanded trade or currency swaps that fall short of overt economic support in defiance of

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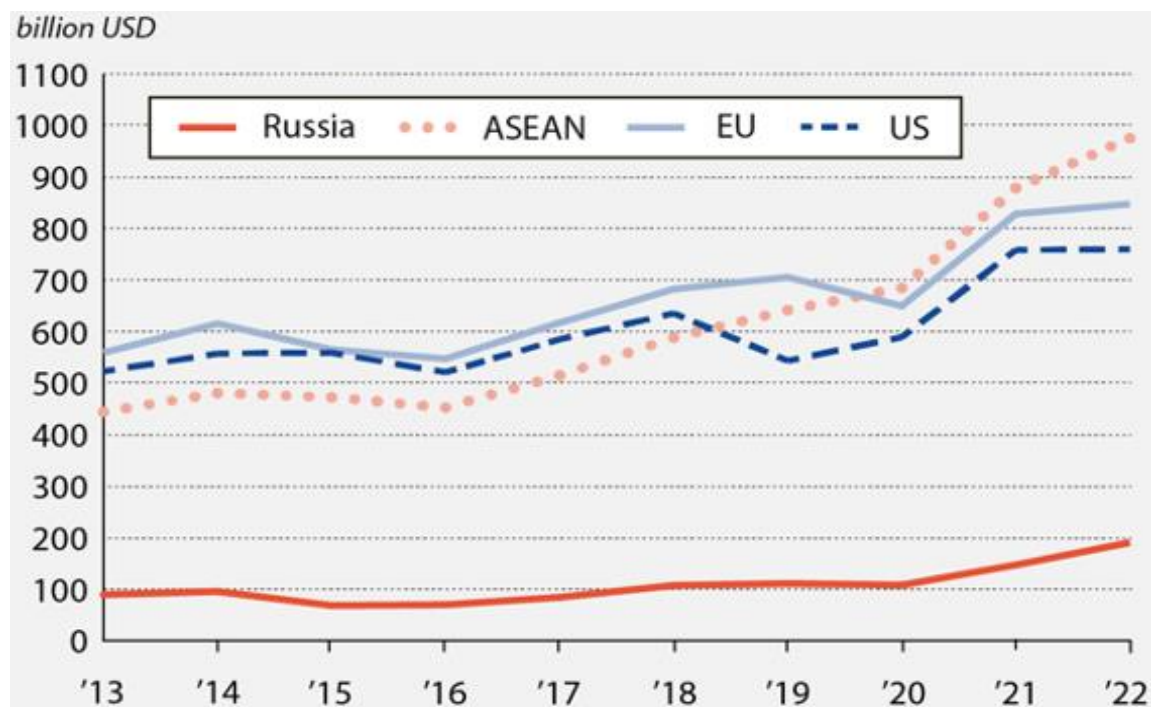
<sup>87</sup> See China Customs data.

<sup>88</sup> Prokopenko, A. (2022), “Bartering, Cryptocurrencies, and Yuan: Russia Seeks Alternatives to Trading in Dollars,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 5, available at [carnegieendowment.org/politika/87814](https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87814).

<sup>89</sup> On China–Russia cooperation in the Arctic, see Jüris, F. (2022), “Sino-Russian Scientific Cooperation in the Arctic: From Deep Sea to Deep Space,” in Kirchberger, S., Sinjen, S., and Wörmer, N. (eds), *Russia–China Relations: Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?* (Cham: Springer, 2022).

sanctions.<sup>90</sup> Countries such as India also expanded their imports from Russia in 2022, with Russia supplying record amounts of crude to India, moving from its 17<sup>th</sup>-largest supplier in 2021 to its third-largest in 2022.<sup>91</sup> Even though Chinese refiners can be expected to purchase higher volumes of Russian oil or natural gas if the price is right, China has worked hard structurally to maintain a balance among its oil suppliers. China is therefore unlikely to allow Russia’s share of its overall supply of key energy resources to move past pre-set limits. Russia, on the other hand, faces more constraints on its potential customers and may see its dependence on the Chinese market rise for sales of its oil and gas.

**Graph 4: Value of Chinese trade with Russia, the EU, US, and ASEAN**



Source: Russia–China Dialogue: The 2022 Model, p. 33, available at [russiancouncil.ru/papers/Russia-China-Report78-Cn.pdf](https://russiancouncil.ru/papers/Russia-China-Report78-Cn.pdf), and China Customs Data (monthly reports in 2022).

In terms of the bigger picture of the future of the Russian and Chinese economies, the diversity and interdependence of China are likely to continue to give it structural advantages compared

<sup>90</sup> Despite such caution, there may be more surreptitious dealmaking taking place, including Chinese exports to Russia of dual-use products and technologies; see Swanson, A. (2023), “China’s Economic Support for Russia Could Elicit More Sanctions,” in *The New York Times*, February 22, available at [nytimes.com/2023/02/22/us/politics/china-russia-sanctions.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare](https://nytimes.com/2023/02/22/us/politics/china-russia-sanctions.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare).

<sup>91</sup> See Reuters at [reuters.com/business/energy/indias-russian-oil-binge-drags-down-opecs-share-lowest-2022-2023-01-17/](https://reuters.com/business/energy/indias-russian-oil-binge-drags-down-opecs-share-lowest-2022-2023-01-17/).

to Russia's sclerotic, commodity-dependent, and increasingly isolated economy. Beyond such bilateral issues, there are two areas where Chinese and Russian foreign economic policies have implications for both countries' power and influence on the global stage, including their ability to implement their respective visions for global order. The first is in their use of economic instruments, especially trade, for foreign policy purposes. In recent years, including since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, both countries have been increasingly willing to use instruments of economic coercion openly against foreign governments and firms that are seen as acting against Russian or Chinese interests. The most dramatic example is Russia's restrictions on exports of natural gas to EU countries in response to their criticism of Russia's invasion. China, too, has been very active in using trade restrictions in political disputes, including with countries such as Australia and Lithuania.<sup>92</sup> Despite the reality of both countries' growing willingness to engage in economic coercion, it is far from obvious whether they would agree to cooperate in such coercion and more likely that they view each other's resort to such coercion with wariness. After all, the use of such coercive tactics is reliant on dependencies that both countries feel acutely, including China's reliance on fossil-fuel imports and Russia's dependence on their export.

Second, the use of economic carrots and sticks also matters when it comes to Chinese and Russian efforts to build and maintain economic and political partnerships with countries in the so-called Global South, including in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and parts of Asia. Beyond material economic cooperation, we have seen coordination of Russian and Chinese propaganda efforts in regions like Africa and Latin America, including coordinated messaging about Russia's war in Ukraine. However, more often than not, China and Russia are still competing for economic and political influence in those regions, with Cold War legacies still resonating. In some places, such as Venezuela, Russia's long political experience and its position as an oil exporter have allowed it to avoid the complications in which China, as a relative newcomer and fossil-fuel importer, has become embroiled.<sup>93</sup> Yet China has had

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<sup>92</sup> On Chinese economic coercion against Australia, see McGregor, R. (2022), "Chinese Coercion, Australian Resilience," in *The Lowy Interpreter*, October 21, available at [lowyinstitute.org/publications/chinese-coercion-australian-resilience](https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/chinese-coercion-australian-resilience).

<sup>93</sup> Rouvinski, V. (2019), "Russian-Venezuelan Relations at a Crossroads," Wilson Center, February, available at [wilsoncenter.org/publication/russian-venezuelan-relations-crossroads](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/russian-venezuelan-relations-crossroads); and Ferchen, M. (2020), "China-Venezuela Relations in the Twenty-First Century: From Overconfidence to Uncertainty," United States Institute of Peace, September 29, available at [usip.org/publications/2020/09/china-venezuela-relations-twenty-first-century-overconfidence-uncertainty](https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/09/china-venezuela-relations-twenty-first-century-overconfidence-uncertainty).

far more to offer in terms of trade, investment, and financial carrots, while Russian cooperation has been more political or military.

When it comes to presenting themselves as good diplomatic and development partners for countries in the Global South, China has far more resources than Russia. Outside observers should therefore take with a grain of salt how extensive Russian and Chinese cooperation can or will be in third regions. Central Asia is the area where there is the most geographical overlap in Russian and Chinese economic and political influence, and yet—as in the area of security cooperation—there is a clear division of labor rather than true partnership and cooperation.



## 7. Conclusions and Areas for Further Research

The China–Russia relationship, both nations’ attitudes toward the existing international order, and their practical bilateral relationship, including security and political–economic cooperation, are all of increasing importance to countries and people around the world. This report has attempted to shed light on these issues, particularly in the context of Russia’s continuing war in Ukraine. While we do find overlap in the two nations’ grievances with the existing US-led international order, with some coordination of key elements of their rhetorical and propaganda alignment regarding the war in Ukraine, as well as some enhanced security and especially economic cooperation, we find that the common perception of a “no limits” partnership amounting to an alliance, and a shared and coordinated vision for world reordering, are far from accurate.

It is mostly the external geopolitical environment that has brought Russia and China to a closer relationship since the mid-2010s, rather than intrinsic sociopolitical, historical, ethnic, or religious affinity. Stakeholders, including European policymakers, may want to consider exercising a greater degree of scrutiny and nuance in evaluating Sino-Russian ties and in their corresponding planning. Granted, the Sino-Russian relationship is currently in a stage of flux, but their joint agenda mostly has anti-Americanism as its thrust, rather than a joint constructive vision for world reordering – despite their ongoing joint rhetoric.

Going forward, our study points to a number of areas worth further research and analysis. Across all three dimensions of our project – visions, security, and political economy – there are topics that could and should be explored further. We find that far more research is required to understand the ways in which Russia and China view regional order and cooperate to restructure in their respective neighborhoods. For example, would Russia and China be happy to assist each other in creating stronger, mutually exclusive spheres of influence in, say, Eastern Europe (for Russia) and East and Southeast Asia (for China)? In turn, would such cooperation amount to a return to a nineteenth-century “Concert of Europe” form of great-power regional order? A logical corollary of such research would be to understand better the ways in which China and Russia will, or more importantly will not, cooperate or accommodate one another in terms of the security architecture order and political economy order in Central Asia. A good starting point would be to follow the implications of China’s proposed role as a mediator or facilitator for future peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, a role that China raised on the first anniversary of Russia’s invasion.

Another related area of follow-up research to this report would be to explore the scope for potential expansion, or the limitations, of the Sino-Russian relationship in the months and

years ahead. Despite this report's findings about the limitations of Sino-Russian visions for global reordering and in the areas of security and economic cooperation, these areas could transform in nature and volume depending on domestic events in either country or changes in the international environment, including developments in Ukraine. Alleged Chinese considerations about supplying Russia with lethal weapons in its war with Ukraine are one such example. At the same time, developments that further limit the scope of their individual or shared efforts to alter the global or regional order, or to cooperate on security or economic issues, might drive China and Russia further away from one another. For example, if Russian becomes wary that it has become too dependent on China economically, or if Chinese leaders worry that Russian decision-making has become irrational or overly provocative, then a rift between them could develop.

Russia and China have not been before, nor are they today, the sole agents of change in the international order – an 'order' which, by definition, is not static. Given the profound shifts the order has undergone since the end of the Cold War and coupled with fierce competition between today's superpowers (the US and China), the rapprochement between one of them, China, and a (former) great power, Russia, is bound to raise concerns among the US and its allies. The more so since it coincides with the growing appeal both Russia and China seem to have to the Global South.

However, cooperation between China and Russia is less straightforward, more thoroughly shaped, and, perhaps, more constrained by their shared history than most observers would assume. This being said, their common stance against the US will impact multilateral and bilateral diplomacy. Therefore much research remains to be done to understand their role and influence, separately and together, in future decades as well.