

Russian Threats to the United States

The China-Russia Relationship (Dean Cheng)

Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have forged an unprecedented Eurasian partnership, tying together two of the largest nations on the European and Asian continents, and consequently posing a challenge unseen before to the United States and the West. From the Kuriles to the South China Sea to the shores of the Black Sea and the Baltic, these two nations are challenging everything from respect for human rights to the free flow of information through outer space to respect for international borders.

Both states are striving to make the world safe for autocracy. The Western liberal order challenges the foundations of authoritarian rule in both Moscow and Beijing. But beyond the ideological element, both Xi and Putin see the West as responsible for the decline and fall of their respective nations. Indeed, both have publicly lamented the West's role in precipitating what each has described as the greatest disaster of the 20th century — the fall of the Soviet Union.

Understanding the Russia-China Relationship

Their relationship has often been characterized as an “axis,” harkening back to the Axis powers of World War II. But the Germans, Italians, and Japanese signed an actual treaty (the Tripartite Pact) with formal commitments to aid each other. There is no treaty, at least not publicly, linking Russia and China. There are elements of cooperation in foreign policy (e.g., China has repeatedly cast its UN veto on behalf of Syria, a Russian client state), and economics, including growing use of the renminbi.

In the military sphere, the two countries have exhibited ever closer relations since their first joint exercises in 2005. Cooperative efforts now include not only large-scale land and air exercises (e.g., Zapad/Interaction-2021),⁴ but joint air and naval

4. [ZAPAD/INTERACTION-2021: A NEW MILESTONE IN CHINA-RUSSIA JOINT MILITARY EXERCISES. ICSIN.ORG/BLOGS/2021/08/25/ZAPAD-INTERACTION-2021-A-NEW-MILESTONE-IN-CHINA-RUSSIA-JOINT-MILITARY-EXERCISES/](https://www.icsin.org/blogs/2021/08/25/zapad-interaction-2021-a-new-milestone-in-china-russia-joint-military-exercises/)

transits of Japanese straits,⁵ joint naval exercises in the Black Sea (2015) and Baltic Sea (2017),⁶ and most recently, joint bomber probes of the North American air defense identification zone, involving Chinese and Russian nuclear-capable bombers (the H-6 and Tu-95, respectively).

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to take the Chinese and Russian claims of a “friendship with no limits” at face value. Chinese investments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) see major projects throughout Central Asia, the Caucasus,⁷ and even in the Balkans.⁸ But there has been limited investment under BRI auspices in Russia, despite major Russian shortcomings in terms of transportation and energy infrastructure.

China’s military support to Russia is similarly nuanced. While China has refrained from providing lethal arms to Russia and risk violating Western sanctions, it has surged sales of machine tools, microelectronics and other technology that Moscow uses to produce missiles, tanks, aircraft and other weaponry for use in its war against Ukraine.⁹ Secretary Blinken announced that about 70% of the machine tools and 90% of the microelectronics Russia imports come from China.¹⁰ China continues shipping millions of microchips to Russia, ostensibly as dual-use components but which ultimately sustains Russian arms production of some advanced weapons.

Where the PRC has made an enormous difference has been sustaining broader economic ties with Russia in the face of global economic sanctions. Over half of

5. REUTERS. CHINA, RUSSIA NAVY SHIPS JOINTLY SAIL THROUGH JAPAN STRAIT. [REUTERS.COM/WORLD/ASIA-PACIFIC/CHINA-RUSSIA-NAVY-SHIPS-JOINTLY-SAIL-THROUGH-JAPAN-STRAIT-2021-10-19/](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-russia-navy-ships-jointly-sail-through-japan-strait-2021-10-19/)

6. USNI NEWS. CHINA AND RUSSIA'S JOINT SEA 2017 BALTIC NAVAL EXERCISE HIGHLIGHT A NEW NORMAL IN EUROPE. [NEWS.USNI.ORG/2017/07/05/CHINA-RUSSIAS-BALTIC-NAVAL-EXERCISE-HIGHLIGHT-NEW-NORMAL-EUROPEAN-MARITIME](https://www.usni.org/2017/07/05/china-russias-baltic-naval-exercise-highlight-new-normal-european-maritime)

7. BRUDER, JASON AND FAWN, RICK. BUILDING THE WEST'S ON-RAMP TO CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD. SCIENCE DIRECT. [SCIENCEDIRECT.COM/SCIENCE/ARTICLE/PII/S0030438722000278](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0030438722000278)

8. ZENELI, VALBONA. THE CHINESE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON TAKING: THE WESTERN BALKANS. IWM. [IWM.AT/BLOG/THE-CHINESE-GIFT-THAT-KEEPS-ON-TAKING-THE-WESTERN-BALKANS](https://www.iwm.at/blog/the-chinese-gift-that-keeps-on-taking-the-western-balkans)

9. MADHANI, AAMER. U.S. INTELLIGENCE SHOWS CHINA IS SURGING EQUIPMENT SALES TO RUSSIA TO HELP WAR EFFORT IN UKRAINE, AP SAYS. PBS. [PBS.ORG/NEWSHOUR/WORLD/U-S-INTELLIGENCE-SHOWS-CHINA-IS-SURGING-EQUIPMENT-SALES-TO-RUSSIA-TO-HELP-WAR-EFFORT-IN-UKRAINE-AP-SAYS](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/u-s-intelligence-shows-china-is-surg-ing-equipment-sales-to-russia-to-help-war-effort-in-ukraine-ap-says)

10. MA, YI AND NG, KELLY. HOW IS CHINA SUPPORTING RUSSIA AFTER IT WAS SANCTIONED FOR UKRAINE WAR? BBC. [BBC.COM/NEWS/60571253](https://www.bbc.com/news/60571253)

Russian oil exports are now to China, constituting a vital source of income.¹¹ China has also substantially increased its imports of Russian foodstuffs, especially grain, since the Ukraine invasion.¹²

Meanwhile, China has been shipping millions of microchips to Russia, ostensibly as dual-use components, which likely ultimately help sustain Russian arms production of at least some advanced weapons. China has also been a major source of consumer products and other supplies. This has helped cushion the effects of economic sanctions and the withdrawal of Western companies from the Russian market since 2022.

This complex picture suggests that the Russia-China relationship cannot be easily reduced to “an axis of evil” or “an axis of resistance,” but neither should we assume that it is doomed to fail, especially in the short to mid-term. Russia and China are each pursuing their own national interests, which for the moment, and for the foreseeable future, will both entail countering the West. Although Xi has never expressed outright support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, he views the Ukraine conflict as part of a global struggle against U.S.-led Western hegemony. Joint statements between Russia and China hint that their partnership enables a shift toward a new global order.

Russia needs the PRC, especially in the short term. Much as the financial and industrial assistance of the United States was essential to keeping the UK in the fight in the dark days of 1940-1941, Russia needs trade with China to sustain its economy, as well as to provide some of the key components to keep its military competitive. If Russia is going to maintain its war effort until it achieves some form of “victory,” that path lies via Beijing.

China needs Russia, in the mid-term. What does China gain from partnering with Russia? In the first place, it gains a secure source of oil and food, two key imports that sustain the Chinese government. Shortages of either would lead to fundamental political instability. That Russia can provide both to China by land routes (which are far harder to interdict) and that Moscow has few political options make this relationship extremely attractive. As important, Russia

11. REUTERS. CHINA-RUSSIA 2023 TRADE VALUE HITS RECORD HIGH OF \$240 BLN - CHINESE CUSTOMS. [REUTERS.COM/MARKETS/CHINA-RUSSIA-2023-TRADE-VALUE-HITS-RECORD-HIGH-240-BLN-CHINESE-CUSTOMS-2024-01-12/](https://www.reuters.com/markets/china-russia-2023-trade-value-hits-record-high-240-bln-chinese-customs-2024-01-12/)

12. WIŚNIEWSKA, IWONA. RUSSIA SEEKS ACCESS TO CHINA'S AGRICULTURAL MARKET. OSW: CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES. [OSW.WAW.PL/EN/PUBLIKACJE/ANALYSES/2023-10-25/RUSSIA-SEEKS-ACCESS-TO-CHINAS-AGRICULTURAL-MARKET](https://osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-10-25/ruusia-seeks-access-to-chinas-agricultural-market)

provides a key political partner to demonstrate to the world that the PRC does not stand alone, whether in terms of challenging the Western rules based international order or in the event of a Chinese decision to invade Taiwan. Both elements factor into bolstering China's ability to challenge and counter the West.

While the depth of this partnership pales in comparison to the alliance between the U.S. and the UK or Japan, for example, it nonetheless constitutes an unprecedented challenge, as there has never been such an alignment of powerful Eurasian powers.

How America Can Push Back Against China-Russian Alliance

It is vital that the United States realistically assess this growing partnership to form an effective defense strategy. Opportunities to exacerbate the contradictions between the two states' interests must be an integral part of stressing that relationship. One potential arena is the Central Asian republics. On the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian forces intervened in support of President Tokayev. This effectively neutralized previous President Nazarbayev's influence,¹³a move that ruffled China's feathers.

Given the limited nature of their shared interests, finding and exploiting opportunities in these regions such as Central Asia and Latin America can help generate long-term contradictions between the two authoritarian powers, eroding their incentives to cooperate. Despite Russia and China's overtures in Latin America, for example, many countries continue to seek engagement with the U.S., leaving an open door for U.S. policy initiatives.

Meanwhile, the U.S. and its allies in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere need to forge a coherent strategy that incorporates political, military, and economic elements. Russo-Chinese joint military efforts in Asia, the Arctic, and Europe need to be confronted. Demonstrating resolve against one will certainly be noticed by the other.

Thus, we must create a deterrent capacity sufficient to cover two simultaneous aggressions (not necessarily military), if only to limit the likelihood of the two states "tag-teaming" the West, each creating distractions that the other can exploit.

13. KING, CHRIS. THE EVENTS IN KAZAKHSTAN PROVE THAT CHINA AND RUSSIA ARE STRANGE BEDFELLOWS... MEMRI. [MEMRI.ORG/REPORTS/EVENTS-KAZAKHSTAN-PROVE-CHINA-AND-RUSSIA-ARE-STRANGE-BEDFELLOWS-DIFFERENT-AGENDA-AND-FRAGILE](https://www.memri.org/reports/events-kazakhstan-prove-china-and-russia-are-strange-bedfellows-different-agenda-and-fragile)

Finally, the West must be able to exhibit that rarest of virtues: patience. In the short term, there is likely very little that the West can do to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing. It is important to remember that the Sino-Soviet split of 1960 occurred because of a confluence of developments. The CCP victory in 1949 made Mao Zedong the leader of a major country. On the passing of Stalin, Mao rightfully felt that he had a claim to being head of the worldwide Communist movement — a role that Nikita Khrushchev intended for himself. Khrushchev's subsequent denunciation of Stalin thoroughly alienated Mao. The two leaders' radically different willingness to risk war over the islands of Quemoy and Matsu contributed significantly to the final break between the two.

Even then, it still took another decade before it was possible to reopen ties with the West, because Mao was not about to compromise his ideological aversion to the West. It was the Sino-Soviet battles of 1969, and Soviet threats to attack the PRC's nuclear facilities, as well as the fall of Lin Biao, Mao's designated successor (who was fervently anti-Western), that persuaded both Washington and Beijing the Soviet Union was the preeminent threat. No amount of rushing could have accelerated ties without these events shifting the underlying conditions.

The Russo-Sino relationship is nuanced, but its threat to the U.S. is clear. The West needs to counter combined Russian and Chinese machinations, exacerbate the contradictions in their relationship, and deepen the understanding of each in order to defeat them. The world awaits the West's response.