



“Best and Bosom Friends”

Putin, Xi and the Challenge to the West

MICHAEL COX



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Challenge to the West

MICHAEL COX

The Author

Professor Michael Cox was appointed to a Chair in International Relations at the LSE in 2002. He was later a Founding Director of LSE IDEAS and is now Emeritus Professor in the Department of International Relations. He is the author, editor and co-editor of several books including works on the Cold War, US foreign policy, E.H.Carr and John Maynard Keynes. His most recent volume, *Agonies of Empire: American Power from Clinton to Biden*, appeared in 2022 and is now translated into Italian published by Vita E Pensiero Press in Milan. He has also just brought out a volume with LSE Press entitled *Afghanistan: Long War–Forgotten Peace*, and is now working on a study of the China-Russian relationship entitled *Comrades?* to be published by Polity Press in 2023.

Foreword

The Ukrainian war marks the end of an exceptional period, writes Simon Sebag Montefiore, a seventy-year peace divided into two phases: forty-five years of the Cold War, and twenty-five of American 'unipotency.'¹ The invasion is not a new way of exerting power; it is a return to normality. So, too is the renewed prospect of another Great Power war.

In this paper, Michael Cox describes how the relationship between the West's two most problematic powers—Russia and China—has evolved into a 'cooperation without limits', so declared just before Vladimir Putin's 'special military operation' began. Taking the metaphor to its logical conclusion, he asks whether it will remain 'fit for purpose' in the years to come.

Both countries are civilisational states. If anything, the war has crystallised their individual identities and their belief that they are involved in a historic clash with the West. Shortly before she was killed in a car bomb in Moscow in August 2022, Darya Dugin described the situation in Ukraine in Huntingtonian terms: as a 'clash of civilisations.' The Chinese have been careful to avoid such inflammatory language, but the CIA has noted increased cooperation between the Chinese and Russian militaries in intelligence sharing: China is on a learning curve to see how to counter the high- tech weapons the US and its allies have given Ukraine to be better placed in any future confrontation—such as a war over Taiwan.

The two countries, Cox argues, have entered into a strategic partnership, fuelled by many common perceptions: the belief that the US is in terminal decline; that the EU can no longer be counted upon as a third player, an 'interlocuteur valable'—between East and West; that NATO has a growing inclination to see security in global terms, with the tilt by its two principal European members to the Indo-Pacific theatre.

Several questions remain. If the war continues well into next year, how much deeper will the Sino- Russian partnership go? And, if Russia's military and economic power continues to be degraded, will the country end up an economic satellite of the PRC, a kind of 'Eurasian Iran', just as isolated internationally, but far more dangerous? The value of this paper is that it explains why China and Russia are strategic partners, if not yet formal allies and why—if an alliance is ever forged—historians in the future may tell us that this was on the cards from the late 1990s, the 'halcyon' days of American unipolarity.

Christopher Coker

¹ Simon Sebag Montefiore, *The World: a family history*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2022.

Introduction

There is still little consensus amongst analysts as to why Putin went ahead and took the risk of invading Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Indeed, the common view before the invasion took place—though interestingly one not shared by the US intelligence community - was that he would not do what he in fact went on to do. There is however pretty wide agreement by now that the war he launched to remove what he termed ‘that bunch of Nazis’ running Ukraine, has not only failed in achieving its immediate objectives, but that the longer it has gone on the more destabilising its impact has been on the global economy (now heading into a recession), Europe (now heading for a very miserable winter) and Russia (100,000 war casualties and rising).

Of course, we can only guess what was going on inside Putin’s head before he took that fateful decision. However, from all available evidence it would seem that he decided to launch his ‘war of choice’ for several complex reasons, amongst the more significant being a determination to punish Ukraine for drifting outside Russia’s orbit, a wish to rally all loyal Russians around the flag, a desire to show that a country with an economy the size of Texas was still a great power, and an almost paranoid fear and dislike of the United States and the West. He also calculated he would win easily. Indeed, drawing upon a rich vein of Russian nationalist thought which saw Russia as a superior civilisational state now armed with a modern military, Putin likely thought the war would be over in a matter of days.

This was not the only mistake Putin made; but it turned out to be the most critical. Nor should it have come as a great surprise given the nature of the decision-making process inside the Kremlin itself. In fact, having surrounded himself with a group of loyalists from the security services—the FSB—who were as enthusiastic as he to settle the Ukrainian problem once and for all, there was nobody in the loop prepared to put forward a serious case for not going to war.¹ Speaking truth to power in the court of Vladimir Putin had never

been encouraged at the best of times. Unfortunately, one of its consequences was to lead to a form of 'magical thinking' inside a Kremlin where Putin could not even begin to contemplate the possibility that a people living in a country, which he insisted could only realise its sovereignty by being part of Russia, would be able to resist, and go on to do so most effectively.²

Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine continues with devastating consequences. The bare statistics tell their own horrendous story: eight million citizens forced to become refugees, seven million displaced internally, thousands of deaths and injuries of civilians, the mass destruction of schools, bridges and hospitals, the deliberate targeting of key infrastructure (by November, water and power were already running low in the capital), an untold number of Ukrainians deported and held incommunicado in Russia, clear evidence of war crimes having been committed, and if and when the war ends, a massive reconstruction bill of close to \$1trn to help put Ukraine back on its feet again.³

Nor does it look as if the disaster is about to come to end any time soon as Putin continues his war of attrition in the hope of forcing Ukraine and its western backers to the negotiating table. Nothing like this in Europe has been witnessed in over a generation; Russia appears to have drawn significant military lessons from its presence in Syria. which are now

being applied to the cities and towns of Ukraine itself.⁴

But what of the other actors in these events? Putin himself has made it only too clear that Russia's real target is not so much Ukraine—a nation which in his view has never existed anyway—but rather the United States, whom he claims tried to destroy Russia after 1991 and is now using Ukraine as a "battering ram" with the goal presumably of bringing about regime change. Naturally enough, his loyal followers agree. The Speaker of the Russian State Duma, Dmitri Volodin, expanded on Putin's remarks by even asserting that Ukraine has become 'a colony of the United States...occupied by NATO'.⁵ As Volodin put it using his own brand of topsy turvy logic now common in Putin's Russia, if 'Ukraine has lost the ability to exist as a state' it is not because of decisions taken in Moscow but in Washington and Brussels.⁶

There is however another significant player involved in this tragedy, one not fighting alongside Russia perhaps, but for which Putin still has nothing but praise: the People's Republic of China. Once a revolutionary threat but now the second largest economy in a western economic order that has helped make it both rich and powerful, China has shown remarkable loyalty to Putin throughout the war. Being one of the world's most devoted upholders of the Westphalian order—based on the sanctity of states—China has continued to proclaim its

support for Ukrainian sovereignty. Yet from everything it has said and done, it is perfectly obvious behind whom it has been standing. Thus, in China's telling of the story, Russia is not the aggressor but rather the United States which as the many cartoons in the nationalist newspaper *The Global Times* show, is for ever pouring oil on an already inflamed situation by sending arms and equipment to the Ukrainians. Even the words China has employed to describe the conflict have come from the Russian playbook. Hence Russia has not invaded Ukraine, say the Chinese. Rather, it has launched what the Kremlin calls a 'special military operation'.

Unsurprisingly, this display of loyalty—mixed in with rather vague and non-specific calls for both sides to settle their differences peacefully—has provoked a good deal of anguish and head scratching amongst that not insignificant number of analysts who were never convinced that the relationship was a serious or secure one anyway. Not only is China embarrassing itself, they argue. It is almost certainly acting against its own interests too. Moreover, by maintaining its bridge to Russia it has ended burning the many more significant ones it had built to Europe over the years. Xi, however, does not appear to be overly concerned, or if he is, certainly has not shown it. Indeed, even when the war started to go badly for Russia

after the summer stalemate in the east of Ukraine, he met an allegedly contrite Putin in September and responded not with criticism, but a promise that he would not be abandoning his 'best friend' leading a country whose 'core interests' China shared.⁷ Xi also went on to reassure Putin that China would be making 'great efforts with Russia' as another great power to 'inject greater 'stability and positive energy into a world rocked by social turmoil.' Then, just to make sure the world got the point, policy officials on both sides started planning for a state visit Xi would be making to Moscow sometime during the new year.⁸

All of which leads us to ask the question: how is it that a relationship, which many once saw as being merely 'convenient' and others of little international consequence—in 2015 Joe Nye was even arguing that Russia and China would never unite to challenge the West—has become as significant as it has in world affairs?⁹ How did this happen? When did this happen? And why did it happen? The answer to all this, as this Strategic Update will go on to show, must be sought not in a detailed analysis of what is happening in Ukraine today but rather in an exploration of the past; in particular, the last years of the Cold War and the very long road Moscow and Beijing have since travelled together, arriving at the destination they are at today.

In from the cold

The second half of the 20th century witnessed at least five major turning-points in the history of the Sino-Russian relationship. The first came in 1950, when the two communist powers signed a treaty of friendship intended to last thirty years. The next came in the 1960s, when Mao declared that China's old ally in arms was now led by revisionist traitors, who—amongst many other ideological sins—had the temerity to reject Stalin while working hand in glove with the imperialists.¹⁰ A few years later, China then met with the same imperialists in the shape of the Nixon Administration, followed in 1979 with the establishment of full diplomatic relations and increased military cooperation between the United States and People's Republic of China. Then, in the 1980s, the 'seemingly changeless' cold war between China and the USSR gradually began to come to an end.¹¹ Driven by Deng Xiaoping's desire to drag China's economy into the modern world, and the recognition on both sides that it was pointless looking to exploit a 'revolutionary global movement' which no longer existed, the two countries, slowly, but surely, began to move closer together.¹²

Significantly, the most serious change in the relationship only occurred in the last years of the Cold War, when relations took a decisive turn for the better, especially when Gorbachev embarked on a visit to Beijing in 1989—the first such visit by a Soviet leader in thirty years. Unfortunately for Gorbachev and the Chinese, not only did the former's trip coincide with the ongoing drama unfolding in Tiananmen Square—in part inspired by all his talk of reform—but the USSR was about to decamp from Eastern Europe and East Germany, causing a major crisis in the wider communist camp of which China still saw itself a part.

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Nonetheless, [the 2001 Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship] did point to a new configuration, bringing together two countries who still felt like outsiders in a world shaped and dominated by the United States.

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Putin, as we now know, became highly critical of his reforming predecessor. But as Arne Westad has shown, the Chinese were perhaps even more shocked by a leader of a great communist superpower who not only let Eastern Europe go, but went on to accept 'the banning of the party and then the dissolution of the Soviet state' itself 'almost without a shot being fired in anger'.¹³

That said, China was still faced with the task of working out how to manage the relationship with Russia going forward. The obvious solution, which was already in train anyway, was to improve ties in the hope that these would provide both countries—one rising economically and the other collapsing—with some degree of security in a challenging new environment defined by globalisation and in which democracy, in one form or another, appeared to be becoming the international norm. Thus followed a series of 'joint statements', a series of agreements on borders and military cooperation, a promise not to target each other with nuclear weapons, various discussions on improving economic relations, and quite a few summits (seven in all); all of which concluded in July 2001 with the two putting their names to what they regarded as a landmark treaty. Old time foes had now become 'good neighbours' and 'friends'.¹⁴

From friendship to strategic partnership

Though these early moves did not in of themselves mean that anything like a new 'axis of authoritarianism' had come into being, the significance of what had transpired should not be underestimated. Admittedly, none of what had happened added up to a formal alliance. The Treaty of 2001 was nowhere near as important as that signed by Stalin and Mao back in 1950. Nonetheless, it did point to a new configuration, bringing together two countries who still felt like outsiders in a world shaped and dominated by the United States. Beijing may have also been hoping to secure a partner in what some, though not all, strategists in China were already starting to see as part of the ongoing struggle against US hegemony. Anti-Americanism was hardly a new phenomenon in China. Indeed, following the crisis occasioned by Tiananmen in 1989, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had put a great deal of time and effort in linking pride in the Chinese nation with hostility to the United States. Hence, building a bridge to another outsider country—which, by the turn of the century, was beginning to move away from its earlier pro-western phase—made a great deal of sense.¹⁵

Moreover, even though both Russia and China claimed that nothing they were doing was directed against any 'third party', clearly this was not the case.

As both made clear in 1997, while insisting they were not hostile to the US—China after all needed US support to join the World Trade Organization—they were determined to move the world away from a unipolar system, which did not suit their interests, towards a 'multipolar' order which did; Putin made this point clearer still ten years later, in a famous speech delivered in Munich. As Russian President Boris Yeltsin declared at one of his long meetings with Chinese premier Jiang Zemin in the 1990s, there were some (unnamed) powers who were pushing for a world with one centre. This was simply unacceptable to either Russia or China, who from now on would be working together to create a 'new world order...with several focal points'.¹⁶

In of itself, this may not have led to conflict with the United States and the West. Nothing was set in stone. However, as soon became clear, unipolarity was not just a theoretical construct but created conditions on the ground which allowed the US to act with a degree of impunity without much fear of the consequences. How else, according to policymakers in both Russia and China, could one explain the many unilateral decisions taken by the US, from the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in May 1999, through NATO's continuing war against Russia's ally Serbia, and finally—and most importantly, according to Putin writing on the eve of his war against Ukraine—to Bush's war against Iraq in 2003? These were not accidents of history in their view, but rather expressions of an underlying power imbalance in the wider international system. Some in the West may have insisted that unipolarity engendered stability. Others insist that it did not really matter. This, however, was not the view in either Beijing or Moscow.¹⁷

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As critics at the time pointed out, what Russia was now doing in Ukraine—encouraging secession, using force to settle disputes, and intervening in the internal affairs of another state (with which China had a significant relationship)—contradicted every single principle upon which Chinese statecraft had hitherto been based.

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Russia and China may have been hoping that they could still work with the US on key issues. They did, after all, share Washington's views on the danger posed by international terrorism and nuclear proliferation. China and Russia also saw their future within pre-existing international institutions, such as the UN. From a purely economic point of view, Russia and China clearly needed the markets and the investment which only the West could provide. Yet, the logic of economics would never be enough to overcome the logic of power politics, and, slowly but surely, what had begun as an attempt by all sides of finding a way of working together in the end came to nothing.

History, however, never moves at the same speed for all actors, and relations between Russia and the West deteriorated even quicker than they had between China and the West. Putin's brutal war in Chechnya, his use of the fight against terror to clamp down on democracy, his own vast wealth accumulated by means of controlling the apparatus of state, and the imprisoning of key opponents—including one of the richest men in Russia, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, then-head of Yukos Oil Company—taken together certainly did nothing to reassure Europe or the US that this was someone with whom one could easily do business, though many in the West still hoped it would be possible.¹⁸ Nor was the West much assured either,

with Putin's oft-repeated assertions that his main goal now was to make his country 'great again', especially one now firmly under the control of an ex-KGB man and an inner circle whose ruthlessness at home was only matched by their willingness to see any move to bring about change in either Russia, or in its so-called 'near abroad' but most especially Ukraine, as the work of foreign agents.¹⁹

Nor did the relationship show any sign of improvement in the years thereafter. If anything, worse was yet to come when, at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, Bush called upon NATO to open its doors to both Ukraine and Georgia—a move which Putin claimed at the time 'complicated' his 'position'.²⁰ Relations cooled further when Russian forces invaded Georgian territory a few months later in what one writer called the first European war of the 21st century.²¹ Relations became cooler still when, three years later, the Arab world was convulsed by a series of upheavals, causing not only consternation in both Beijing and Moscow—'people power' was not something they wished to encourage—but a great deal of anger when the West, in their view, turned what had initially been a Responsibility to Protect operation designed to save lives into a policy of regime change. As they pointed out in a joint declaration signed in June 2011, they had been looking for a 'political solution' to the Libya crisis. The West on

the other hand was using military means and taking sides in ways that went far beyond that originally agreed at the UN.²²

But if the crisis in Libya provoked disagreement, the war in Syria caused something close to near breakdown in relations, especially when Russia decided to throw its military weight in behind the brutal regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Diplomatically, things became even more fraught when both Moscow and Beijing together deployed their veto power at the UN Security Council to prevent any sanctions being imposed on Assad's government.²³ Russia's decision may have been perfectly understandable, given the long-standing relationship it had had with the Syrian Ba'ath regime ever since the Cold War. China's reasoning, as one observer noted, was probably less driven by any interest it might have had in Syria, and more with demonstrating that it would, from now on, be adopting a more assertive, more proactive foreign policy, and significantly doing so alongside Russia.²⁴

Enter Xi

The desire to be more proactive internationally, especially alongside Russia, made a great deal of foreign policy sense to the incoming Chinese leader. Indeed, within a week of becoming President, Xi Jinping was already making his first overseas trip,

and the first country he chose to visit was none other than Russia. He even told a small group of invited journalists that the 'fact' he was visiting Russia shortly after assuming the presidency was itself 'testimony' to the great importance that China placed on its relationship with its 'friendly neighbour'.²⁵ Moreover, by making Russia what Xi called 'a priority', he was also sending out a message to the United States, who were by now taking what he felt was a dangerously intrusive interest in the affairs of the Asia-Pacific; China was no longer prepared to sit back and watch Washington dictate the field in international affairs.²⁶

Putin was clearly delighted by the visit and Xi's words, and responded in kind, even announcing that not only did he look forward to increased economic cooperation but to the two countries working closely together in producing 'a more just world order'; by 2013, trade between them had risen eightfold over a ten-year period.²⁷ In a joint declaration issued by Putin and Xi after their talks, they also made it clear who they believed was standing in the way of creating such an order. Indeed, without even mentioning the United States, the two governments concluded that together they would 'oppose' any country, or even 'bloc of countries', which 'unilaterally and without limit' harmed 'strategic stability and international security'.²⁸

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Facing, as it felt it now did, a ‘collective West’ and not the Americans alone, Beijing concluded that it now had few, if any, incentives not to move ever closer to Russia.

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But perhaps the real test of the relationship came just one year later, when Russia intervened in Ukraine to change the status quo by force. China may have been less than enthusiastic about this particular move, and even made it clear in its official statements even before the war began that it continued to support the basic norm of ‘sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity’ for all countries, including of course, Ukraine.²⁹ Yet, in spite of its various declarations, there was little doubt in the end whom it would be backing. As critics at the time pointed out, what Russia was now doing in Ukraine—encouraging secession, using force to settle disputes, and intervening in the internal affairs of another state (with which China had a significant relationship)—contradicted every single principle upon which Chinese statecraft had hitherto been based.

This however seemed to make very little difference to policymakers in China. China may well have been ‘deeply concerned’. But one had to be cautious when making bold statements about responsibility, it went on. There were, as one official noted at the time, ‘reasons’ (unspecified) why the situation in Ukraine ‘is what it is today’. The official news agency *Xinhua* then followed up and, while avoiding any criticism of Russia’s actions, argued it was perhaps ‘quite understandable when Putin said his country retained the right to protect its interests and Russian speakers living in Ukraine’.³⁰ Meantime, the ‘West’s biased mediation’ in the crisis was only making ‘things worse’, and would be well advised to stop wagging its finger at Russia and ‘respect’ its ‘unique role in mapping out the future of Ukraine’.³¹

From one Ukrainian crisis to the next

Even so, a number of analysts were still not convinced that a serious strategic partnership was in the making. We were even informed by at least one writer—and there were many more—that the West should not be too concerned about what was happening because ‘underlying tensions’ between the two countries were bound to keep them apart.³² Two Russian writers even asked whether this ‘strengthening of relations’ constituted a ‘durable strategy’, or was a mere ‘temporary rapprochement’ between two countries with very different interests?³³ Beijing and Moscow soon provided an answer, by signing another strategic agreement right in the midst of the Crimean crisis.³⁴ By 2015 they were even talking of creating a ‘Greater Eurasian Partnership’, to bring their two spheres of economic interest (the Belt, and Road Initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union) much closer together.³⁵ In 2016, Russia moved to provide official backing to China in its ongoing struggle with the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague, and the West’s regional allies, over the South China Seas dispute with the Philippines.³⁶ A couple of months later, following ‘a string of high-level meetings’ in both Beijing and Moscow, Russia also announced measures similar to those already in place in China to bring its internet under

tighter control.³⁷ Significantly too, in the light of what happened later, Russia—along with 36 other nations—wrote to the UN in 2019 supporting China’s policies in its western region of Xinjiang.³⁸

Nor did the rapidly improving relationship peak there. In 2015, for example, Russia finally agreed to sell China twenty four Sukhoi35 (Su-35) combat aircraft and four S-400 SAM systems.³⁹ Sino-Russian military ties also became much closer, especially in the area of joint military exercises; ‘the most important’ part of Russian-Chinese military cooperation’ according to Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu.⁴⁰ Indeed, by early 2021 one senior Chinese official was moved to declare that there now appeared to be ‘no limit’ to Chinese -Russian ‘military cooperation.’⁴¹ What followed only appeared to confirm this when, in October, Chinese and Russian warships conducted joint naval drills in the western Pacific for the first time, followed only a month later with both militaries sending bomber flights into Japanese and South Korean air defence zones. The message could not have been clearer: this was a partnership that needed to be taken extremely seriously.⁴² As one well-informed western analyst pointed out at the time, it was by now clear that the relationship was ‘the strongest, closest and best’ the two countries ‘have had since at least the mid-1950s....possibly ever’.⁴³

Deep freeze

Meantime, as relations between Beijing and Moscow moved in one particular direction, theirs with the West moved in another. Earlier during his presidency, Obama had tried to ‘reset’ relations with Russia and ‘tilt’ the US more towards Asia in an effort he claimed to take advantage of the economic opportunities presented there. But, as we now know, the reset soon collapsed while America’s so-called ‘rebalancing act’ was read in Beijing as just a cover for a new and more effective means of containing the China’s rise.⁴⁴ Moreover, when Obama was followed by Trump, who had already declared that the US was being economically ‘raped’ by China, it had become abundantly clear to policymakers and foreign policy experts in China that they were now engaged in a long-term competition with Washington from which there would be no easy escape.⁴⁵ Trump alone was not the cause of this. But reflecting as he clearly did a decisive shift in US attitudes towards China, as expressed most clearly in a raft of official reports detailing the threat China now posed to US national security, Beijing drew the logical conclusion that to offset the challenge posed by an increasingly hostile America, it needed all the friends it could gather around it.⁴⁶

But what in the end may have driven the final nail into the proverbial coffin of China’s relationship with the West

was not what Beijing saw as the hard core ‘China threat’ lobby in Washington, but Europe’s increasing concerns about the direction in which China was now travelling. Hitherto, neither the EU nor even NATO had seen China in the same way as it viewed Russia. No doubt the lure of its huge market influenced this judgement. But there was also a feeling that even if China was no longer a simple ‘stakeholder’, it did have an ongoing interest in a stable global economy and indeed in globalization itself. Soon, however, the rhetoric coming out of Brussels started to change. The EU may have continued to see China as a country which it could continue, and possibly needed, to do business with; even so, by 2020 it was already starting to view the PRC as a ‘systemic rival’, pursuing human rights policies as well as economic ones, inimical to its core interests. When China then decided to adopt sanctions on members of the European Parliament, including the Chair of its Delegation for Relations with China, relations inevitably deteriorated even more rapidly.⁴⁷

NATO found itself in a not dissimilar position. As late as 2020, it too was still refusing to see China as a threat or an enemy. However, by the time of its summit in 2021 it was already arguing that China’s policies overall now presented a serious challenge to the ‘rules-based order’. NATO left little room for misunderstanding, and in a lengthy communique of its own talked in increasingly tough-minded terms

of Beijing rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal, being opaque when it came to its own military modernisation, and significantly working ever closer with Russia in the Euro-Atlantic region.⁴⁸ Even more worrying, from the point of view of China, was NATO's growing inclination to see security in increasingly globalist terms in general, but with a discernible tilt of its own towards, what it now called, the 'Indo Pacific' region. Admittedly, it was only after Ukraine was invaded by Russia in early 2022 that NATO began to think seriously about 'practical and political cooperation' with a number of key allies, such as Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. But even before the invasion began, it was clear enough in which direction the Alliance was already moving.⁴⁹

The impact of all this back in Beijing was entirely predictable. Facing, as it felt it now did, a 'collective West' and not the Americans alone, Beijing concluded that it now had few, if any, incentives not to move ever closer to Russia—who, interestingly, now began to make its support for China's policies within its own region more explicit. Meanwhile, as the two began to coalesce around issues such as Taiwan, China began to step up its attacks on the West more generally. Indeed, having been careful hitherto not to attack NATO openly, it started to do so; nowhere more unambiguously than in the communique of 4 February 2022, which stated—probably for the first time and very similarly to Russia's rhetoric—of the organisation being a relic of the Cold War. The communique argued that NATO's continued existence not only threatened the security of its close friend, Russia, but provided no long-term basis for European security overall. By the middle of 2022 it was even talking of NATO as itself being a 'systemic challenge' to global security and stability, and a 'tool for the United States to maintain its hegemony' in order 'to instigate a "new cold war"'.⁵⁰

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Conclusion

As our long and detailed narrative has tried to show, China's political commitment to Russia, and vice versa, should by now be beyond dispute. This does not mean that their interests are identical. No two states in history have ever gotten that close. Even members of a more formal alliance like NATO do not agree about everything, and nor quite obviously do the Russians and the Chinese. There are moreover limits to what China will agree to, and one thing it has made clear to Putin is that it will always 'oppose the use of or the threats to use nuclear weapons.'⁵¹ Even so, it is still remarkable how close they have remained. The sceptics might point out (and have done so) that the relationship has always been a decidedly 'fragile' one.⁵² Yet even they have to explain why, through this most brutal of wars, Beijing has continued to stand by Russia.⁵³ Indeed, far from the war weakening China's relationship with its trigger happy partner—which some anticipated it was bound to—from all appearances it seems to have achieved the opposite, in part no doubt because a weakened Russia is now becoming ever more dependent on China, but also because Xi himself simply cannot see Russia defeated or Putin humiliated.⁵⁴

Xi also calculates that even a weakened Russia still brings something to the table of high politics. In fact, being aligned to a state with a serious presence in the UN,

which also happens to sit at the top table of the major energy powers, and also has a fair number of allies and friends around the world, does have its advantages. Moreover, having a relationship with Russia helps promote one of China's much longer-term ambitions, which Xi has never tried to hide: of contesting America power en route to creating a new world order more in line with its own values.⁵⁵ China even argues that this is not some distant dream but is already emerging. This may be a case of wishful thinking. But there is little doubt from everything Xi has said—and Putin clearly agrees—that he genuinely does seem to believe that the sun is fast setting on a declining 'West' and fast rising in the 'East'.⁵⁶ Indeed, this may have been one of the other reasons why Putin decided to invade Ukraine, possibly calculating (incorrectly, as it turned out) that a divided Europe and an America in disarray post-Afghanistan simply would not be willing or able to respond to his bold actions.⁵⁷

But where then does this leave China and Russia, and indeed the world as a whole? The simple answer is: in a very dangerous place, made all the more dangerous because several months into the war none of the main actors seem willing to call a halt: Putin because he believes he still has military options, and anyway cannot be seen to be negotiating from a position of military weakness; the US because it has to ensure Russia never tries anything like this again; and

Ukraine because not only does it believe it has Russia 'on the run' militarily, but finds it nigh impossible to negotiate with an enemy that has tried to destroy its country and to this day continues to deny Ukraine even exists.

One day, of course, the war will come to an end. All wars do. And when all the 'sides' decide to call a halt and start sitting around that proverbial negotiating table, China must be hoping that it will be to Beijing to whom the various players will turn to facilitate some kind of deal. Those more sympathetic to China will no doubt see this as proof of it being a responsible great power, motivated only by a desire for peace in a win-win world. Other, more cynical observers, might point out (not unreasonably) that having done nothing to stop this war going on while all the time repeating the Russian narrative about its causes, it would be ironic indeed that China turned out to be the war's one and only winner.⁵⁸ ■

Notes

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