



What Putin's War in Ukraine Means for the Future of China-Russia Relations

BJÖRN ALEXANDER DÜBEN



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The Author

Björn Alexander Düben is an associate of LSE IDEAS. He is a Lecturer at the School of International and Public Affairs, Jilin University. He previously taught International Relations, Security Studies, and Intelligence Studies at King's College London and at LSE. Besides his academic work, he has worked for the Foundation for an Open Society in Riga (Latvia) and as an analyst for a top-tier London-based law firm involved in high-profile litigation in the post-Soviet space (including Russia and Ukraine). He holds a PhD in International Relations from LSE and an MPhil in International Relations from the University of Oxford.

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Ever since Russian President Vladimir Putin began his invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, China has strenuously tried to distance itself from the war and to project an image of benevolent neutrality. Behind the scenes, however, Beijing's role has been exceedingly important from the very outset of the conflict. For decades, the China-Russia relationship has been growing closer, as was showcased at their most recent summit in early February.¹ Without the China-Russia axis being what it is now, Putin would probably not have felt confident in planning the invasion of Ukraine, especially in light of the expected economic backlash from the West. He also might not have felt confident enough to pull large numbers of troops from the Russian Far East to Ukraine to form part of his invasion force, leaving Russia's eastern frontiers unprecedentedly exposed.²

There is still debate about how much prior knowledge of the invasion Beijing had. US intelligence reports have indicated that China's top leadership was aware of the invasion plan by early February and might have requested that Russia delay its offensive until after the conclusion of the Beijing Winter Olympics.³ By contrast, most of the Chinese academic and policy community evidently remained clueless about Putin's plans; in the weeks prior to the war, Chinese diplomats frequently ridiculed US forecasts of a Russian invasion and

left the approximately 6,000 Chinese citizens in Ukraine *in situ* until the fighting began. Whether China's leaders did or did not know of the invasion, it was certainly no coincidence that Putin's operation to conquer Ukraine commenced exactly one day after the end of the Beijing Olympics, when Putin recognised the separatist Donbas republics and officially dispatched Russian "peacekeeping" troops there on 21 February. Two and a half days later, Russia began its wholesale invasion of the remainder of Ukraine.⁴

China's Reaction: "Don't mention the war"

Since Putin's war began, China's official reaction has been ambivalent, equivocal, and subdued. Beijing has not formally endorsed the invasion, but it has also strenuously refused to condemn it. Chinese officials never refer to Russia's actions in Ukraine as an "invasion", and they rarely describe events there as a "war". Like the Kremlin, Beijing has consistently maintained that the West is ultimately responsible for the war, since it backed Russia into a corner through NATO enlargement, and it has rejected all Western sanctions against Russia in the strongest terms.⁵

When the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly voted to condemn the Russian invasion in late February and again in late March, China abstained.⁶ But in a separate Security Council vote on a

draft resolution about the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, China was the only country to vote with Moscow. China likewise joined Moscow in voting against a General Assembly motion in early April to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council.⁷ Inside several UN-affiliated subordinate bodies, such as the aforementioned Human Rights Council and the International Atomic Energy Agency, China has also voted in solidarity with Russia to oppose Ukraine-related motions (sometimes as the only state present to do so).⁸ This was also the case during Ukraine-related decisions at the G20, as well as in a key ruling at the International Court of Justice.⁹

China's state-controlled media, in its coverage of the war, has strictly adhered to the government's official line. Chinese news outlets have adopted a heavily pro-Russia stance in their reporting on the war. While Chinese media have intermittently shown images of destroyed Ukrainian cities and the suffering of civilians, for the most part their reporting on the war has been a carbon copy of the Russian propaganda narrative, and it has often involved directly reposting the official statements of Russian government representatives.¹⁰ Since Chinese and Russian state-controlled mass media have spent the last several years progressively increasing their cooperation with each other, signing numerous agreements to publish mutually approved materials and mirroring each other's official media narratives, their analogous coverage of

the Ukraine war merely continues a long-standing trend.¹¹ A particularly aggressive case of China's state media amplifying Russian propaganda narratives was its extremely wide-ranging coverage of Moscow's baseless claims about purported US-run biological weapons laboratories on Ukrainian soil, which echoes similar false claims about US biological research laboratories that Beijing originally adopted in 2021 to deflect responsibility for the origins of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.¹²

On Chinese social media, amid a barrage of nationalist-tinged support for Russia, there have also been many critical voices deploring the war in Ukraine and expressing sympathy for the Ukrainians' plight.¹³ A notable example of this was an open letter published by five prominent Chinese historians in late February, which denounced Russia's invasion and labelled it a war of aggression.¹⁴ Shortly after its publication, however, the open letter was removed by government censors. In general, social media users who criticise Russia appear to have been much more thoroughly censored than those who endorse Putin's war. As a result of this profoundly one-sided media coverage, the Chinese public has largely been left in the dark about the true scale and nature of the conflict in Ukraine.

Overall, Beijing's reaction to Putin's war in Ukraine has been similar to its reaction to Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014: projecting ostensible neutrality but implicitly supporting Russia's actions.¹⁵ What is noteworthy, however, is that Putin's conduct in 2014, despite being a violation of international law in its own right, was incommensurate with Russia's current, unprovoked all-out invasion of its sovereign neighbour. A similarly muted and implicitly supportive reaction from Beijing to Russia's current actions as to those in 2014 can therefore be interpreted as a strong expression of support for Russia and a reflection of the continuous strengthening of Sino-Russian ties in the last eight years. It is worth recalling that in 2008, when Putin's military first invaded a neighbouring country, (the

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brief and abortive military incursion into Georgia) China's criticism of Russia was noticeably stronger.¹⁶

What Seems to Be Motivating China's Response to the War in Ukraine?

Beijing's supportive stance towards Moscow stands in glaring contrast to its own long-standing and vocally proclaimed foreign policy principles of preserving state sovereignty, "territorial integrity", and "non-interference", and it exposes how little relevance these principles actually have for practical Chinese policy-making.¹⁷ Had Russia's military operation been successful in swiftly installing a stable puppet regime in Kyiv, Beijing could have formulated a narrative in which these principles were somehow upheld. Instead, with Russian forces largely stalled in a drawn-out war, China's priority seems to be to adopt a pragmatic, low-profile stance, muddling through this crisis while minimally adapting its officially neutral stance to the events unfolding in Ukraine and the perceived reaction of the international community. Judging from its overall policy response and media messaging, however, Beijing's preferred outcome continues to be that Russia prevails in Ukraine, since its long-cultivated ties with Moscow—China's sole great power partner—remain exceptionally valuable for Beijing (at least as long as Putin remains in power). Consequently, even amidst the current crisis, China's government has

repeatedly and vocally reaffirmed its close partnership with Moscow.

Most certainly, Beijing has also been considering the benefits that Russia's actions might bring in terms of creating a wider distraction, directing Washington's attention away from the Indo-Pacific, exposing fissures between the Western allies, and providing useful lessons for future confrontations with the West.¹⁸ Beijing's eagerness to amplify Moscow's claim that the root cause of the Ukraine war was NATO enlargement seems to stem from its own concerns about US alliance-building in the Indo-Pacific—including Washington's rejuvenation of the "Quad" security forum with India, Japan, and Australia and the AUKUS security pact with Australia and the United Kingdom—as well as a wish to showcase what the consequences might be if the US and states in the region align against China.¹⁹

This is not to say, however, that Putin's military adventurism does not also pose significant threats to some of Beijing's interests. The Communist Party's quinquennial congress in the autumn makes 2022 a particularly sensitive year for China's leadership. The Party meeting is meant to cement Xi Jinping's personal rule over China for another decade (or more), in essence altering some of the fundamental principles of how China has been governed for the past three decades.²⁰ Beijing, which always views questions of sovereignty and territorial integrity through the lens of its own claims on Taiwan, is

likely not enthused about the fact that Putin's invasion is raising new fears among some of China's neighbours in East Asia. In reaction to the invasion, Japan's former prime minister Abe Shinzo, for instance, discussed invoking a nuclear sharing agreement with the US, allowing Washington to base nuclear weapons on Japanese soil and abandoning the policy of strategic ambiguity on whether the US and its allies would defend Taiwan from an invasion.²¹ In Taiwan itself, the Ukraine war has given added impetus to bolstering war readiness and reforming its military reservist programme.²²

Putin's repeated recourse to veiled nuclear threats against the West and his pursuit of overtly ethno-nationalist and irredentist (rather than "sober" geopolitical) objectives with regard to Ukraine might have further unsettled Beijing.²³ It is conceivable that some of the current discussions in the West about Putin's mental state are also being echoed in Beijing, particularly considering his evident strategic blunders and remarkable misperceptions at the start of the conflict.²⁴ In light of such concerns and the unexpected setbacks Putin's offensive has encountered in Ukraine, China has seemed to slightly backpedal from its initial support for Moscow as the war has increasingly turned into a bloody stalemate. It is likely that Xi—who is by all accounts an ardent believer in the superiority of authoritarian single-leader systems—initially expected a swift Russian military victory, achieving Putin's strategic aims without doing substantial

damage to China's interests in Ukraine.²⁵ US intelligence reports have suggested that Xi has been dissatisfied with Beijing's own political and intelligence estimates prior to the invasion, but it remains unclear whether the revised picture he has since been presented with has led him to doubt the wisdom of China's continued close alignment with Russia in the war.²⁶

In the economic sphere, skyrocketing energy and commodity prices as a consequence of the invasion are placing a disproportionate burden on Chinese manufacturers, while the logistics for some of China's Europe-bound exports have been disrupted by the conflict.²⁷ In addition, although Sino-Ukrainian trade pales in comparison with Sino-Russian trade, Ukraine has by no means been irrelevant as a trading partner for China, especially with regard to imports of military hardware. In 2019, China overtook Russia as Ukraine's biggest trading partner.²⁸

A much weightier concern for Beijing in its support for Russia is the potential for trade blowback from the West. There are indications that Beijing (like Moscow) did not expect that the sanctions imposed on Russia would be so severe or that the West would be so united in its reaction to Putin's invasion, a development that stands in contrast to the long-standing, prominent narrative in China of ongoing Western decline.²⁹ In Western Europe, public and leadership perceptions of trade relations with China have been worsening for years, and they will likely

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deteriorate further the more Beijing is perceived as an accomplice of Russia.³⁰ Beyond the concrete sanctions against Moscow, Putin's invasion has led to a heightened sense of urgency in European capitals (particularly Berlin) to accelerate divestment in critical infrastructures from Europe's geopolitical rivals, a development that could have severe repercussions for China as well.³¹ But in spite of the considerable risks that Putin's invasion poses for China's interests and signals of growing frustration coming out of Zhongnanhai, there is no indication so far that Beijing would be willing to drop its tacit support for Moscow, let alone apply any substantial pressure on its strategic partner to withdraw its troops from Ukraine.³²

What Can (and Will) China Do to Keep Russia's Economy Afloat?

As Moscow moves further into Beijing's orbit, one of the most consequential questions is to what extent China's economic relationship with Russia can render Western-imposed sanctions against Moscow ineffective. With Russia's economy in dire straits, China has emerged as the only non-Western power capable of substantially offsetting the coordinated sanctions imposed by the West, and Putin was undoubtedly factoring in Chinese economic support from the early stages of planning the invasion of Ukraine. In the medium to long term, China will probably be able to provide Russia with considerable economic relief, helping it to mitigate the effects of sanctions in the trade, finance, and technology spheres. However, as the first two months of the war have demonstrated, in the short-term China is not (yet) presenting Russia with a substantial outlet to circumvent sanctions. In spite of its vocal opposition to Western-imposed sanctions, China has in the past actually complied with most of the sanctions against Moscow, with many Chinese enterprises routinely over-complying to avoid breaching them by accident or oversight. A similar pattern has now emerged again, particularly in the financial sphere.

Following Putin's invasion of Ukraine, many Russian firms began to open Chinese bank accounts as they looked to make greater use of Chinese yuan for trade.³³ Between 2014 and the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Russia's Central Bank had already moved close to 14 percent of its foreign exchange reserves into Chinese yuan.³⁴ In response to Western restrictions on payment systems, Moscow also announced that Russian banks would increasingly shift their bank card services to China's UnionPay.³⁵ But so far, many Russian hopes for close cooperation with China in the financial sphere have been dashed. Shortly after the outbreak of the war, two major Chinese state-owned banks (Bank of China and Industrial & Commercial Bank of China) restricted financing for Russian oil and commodity purchases for fear of being hit with secondary sanctions.³⁶ The Beijing-dominated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) announced that it had paused all activities relating to Russia and Belarus due to the war in Ukraine, and the Shanghai-based New Development Bank (formerly known as the BRICS Development Bank) made a similar announcement.³⁷ Other Chinese banks have been endeavouring to find solutions for how to sustain their business with Russian clients whilst evading secondary sanctions, including by-passing some of their business to smaller, domestically focused banks to work on transactions that larger banks with overseas business interests wish to avoid.³⁸ Some smaller Chinese policy banks with less exposure

to the dollar system, such as China Development Bank or the Export-Import Bank of China, will likely continue lending to Russia. Meanwhile, China's UnionPay system has refused to cooperate with Sberbank, Russia's largest financial institution, and suspended negotiations with other sanctioned Russian banks so as to steer clear of secondary sanctions.³⁹

One of the most far-reaching anti-Russian sanctions has been to ban various Russian banks from using the SWIFT system of financial communications. Since 2015, China has been operating its own Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS), which settles international claims through an independent international yuan payment and clearing system. When the SWIFT ban was imposed in early March, some Chinese media proposed that CIPS could be used to counter these restrictions, but it has since become evident that this will provide very little short-term relief for Moscow.⁴⁰ For now, CIPS only covers a very small percentage of international trade. While it has the potential to run its own messaging network, it has been using SWIFT as its communication channel since 2016, and the two systems are largely complementary rather than mutually competitive. It is highly likely that the West's current financial pressure on Russia will inspire medium- to long-term joint efforts by China and Russia to build an alternative financial infrastructure. But for this to happen, Beijing and Moscow will have to agree on countless difficult

points, including data-sharing agreements and principles of how their currencies would be convertible out of a digital currency. In the immediate future, such efforts are therefore unlikely to yield any effective means of blunting the financial pressure on Moscow.⁴¹

The ban on using SWIFT, in combination with other sanctions, has also hit bilateral trade between China and Russia directly. In spite of repeated proclamations by Beijing and Moscow to “de-dollarise” their bilateral trade, most of it is still conducted in euros and US dollars, with national currencies only accounting for ca. 30 percent of trade (although both sides are planning to arrange for more of Russia’s oil and coal exports to China to be paid for in yuan).⁴² In the near future, some commodity imports from Russia to China, such as nickel, aluminium, and potash, risk being interrupted by sanctions.⁴³ Additionally, China’s main trading partners in Europe and the US have notified Beijing that an expansion of Sino-Russian trade that could help Moscow circumvent Western sanctions might have negative repercussions for its trade relations with them.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, in March 2022 overall Sino-Russian trade increased by more than 12 percent from a year earlier, outpacing the growth in China’s total imports and exports that month.⁴⁵ Within days of the invasion of Ukraine, Beijing announced that it would loosen restrictions on Russian grain imports, although this step had been pre-agreed weeks before the war.⁴⁶ China’s state-run shipping company Cosco is now

the world’s only major shipping line still operating in Russia, thus providing a lifeline for Russia’s maritime trade.⁴⁷ In the energy sphere, the impact of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on trade with China has been mixed. China has begun to purchase extra cargoes of Russian crude oil, which is trading extremely cheaply due to Western embargoes, at record discounts. But analysts consider it unlikely that China will substantially increase its intake of Russian crude, since it has little spare capacity along key pipelines and shipping routes.⁴⁸ In March 2022, China’s imports of Russian coal fell 30 percent from a year earlier, as Chinese traders struggled to secure financing from state banks that are worried about sanctions, but this came amid an overall reduction of Chinese coal purchases from abroad.⁴⁹ In the same month, China’s state-run Sinopec Group, Asia’s biggest oil refiner, suspended talks to invest up to \$500 million US dollars in a new gas-chemical plant and a gas marketing venture in Russia due to concerns about secondary sanctions.⁵⁰ China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs also summoned officials from Sinopec, China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC), and China National Offshore Oil Corp (CNOOC), the three largest Chinese state energy companies, to review their business ties with Russian firms and local operations, urging restraint when buying Russian assets.

China could become the long-term buyer of natural gas and other resources that Russia can no longer sell to Western countries. At their most recent summit

in early February, just three weeks prior to the invasion, Xi and Putin signed new energy deals, including a 30-year contract (between CNPC and Gazprom) to supply Russian gas to China via a new pipeline, “Power of Siberia 2”. But changing the flow of resources—particularly natural gas—will not happen overnight, since pipelines take many years to construct. Power of Siberia 2 is currently scheduled to launch in 2028, and even with its estimated capacity of 50 billion cubic metres, Russia’s total gas deliveries to China would only amount to half of its current exports to Europe. Prior experience has also shown that, in spite of their cordial partnership rhetoric, the deals China is willing to make with Russia are likely to be significantly less lucrative for Moscow than the deals it previously had with Western Europe, putting Russia at a long-term structural disadvantage.⁵¹

Another vital contribution that China can make to keeping Russia’s struggling economy afloat is to provide replacement technologies—from commercial IT equipment and specialised components for manufactured goods (including military hardware) to civilian airplanes—to substitute for the countless Western products and brands that have been withdrawn from the Russian market. To a limited extent, China has already been doing this since 2014, when an earlier round of smaller-scale and much more specialised sanctions was imposed on Russia.⁵²

China will be cautious not to become a conspicuous channel for the flow of banned Western technologies into Russia, lest its companies lose access to Western markets or to some of the high-end Western technologies that many of them continue to rely on. This was illustrated, for instance, by Beijing’s apparent unwillingness to supply Russia with spare parts for Western-designed civilian aircraft, as well as the decision of Chinese telecoms giant Huawei to suspend new supply contracts in Russia and to furlough its Russian staff.⁵³ Alongside Huawei, other Chinese electronics companies including Oppo, Xiaomi, and Lenovo as well as the car maker Geely have drastically cut their exports to Russia.⁵⁴ But critical companies like Huawei will probably find ways to resume supplies to Russia in the coming months, for example through the use of intermediaries in third countries. Beijing may also, in the future, look the other way if smaller Chinese companies violate Russia-related export controls (as it has frequently done in the case of North Korea). China’s role as a purveyor of replacement technologies will likely be substantial but also costly for Moscow, since Chinese enterprises will probably try to capitalise on Russia’s growing technological dependence by charging inflated prices.⁵⁵ Transitioning from Western to Chinese technological hardware and standards could also lead to long-term “lock-in” effects that will further tie Russia’s economic infrastructure to China’s and deepen Moscow’s structural dependence on Beijing.

Implications for the Future of Sino-Russian Relations

Irrespective of the extent to which Beijing may be willing to adjust its pro-Russia stance as the war in Ukraine progresses, it is already possible to draw two conclusions about the likely trajectory of future China-Russia relations in the wake of the conflict:

1) In structural terms, the war in Ukraine will tie China and Russia even closer together than they were in the past.

There are various reasons why one might expect that the Ukraine war could disrupt the deepening ties between Beijing and Moscow.⁵⁶ The global instability Putin has wrought is undoubtedly an annoyance for Beijing that showcases the perils of tying itself to a revisionist Russia and the wisdom of having eschewed any formal alliance ties with Moscow—all the more so in light of Putin's evident miscalculations in Ukraine and the Russian military's poor performance on the battlefield. With Russia's economy in a tailspin and many of its commercial assets rendered toxic by sanctions, Moscow now holds relatively little prospect as an economic partner for Beijing. In spite of these and other concerns, it is most likely that the war and its repercussions will ultimately lead to an even closer rapprochement between Beijing and Moscow—at least for as long as Putin remains firmly in power in Russia.

China's leadership, specifically President Xi, will likely stick with Putin, who has been a guarantor of bilateral stability and a united front against Washington. Beyond opportunistically trying to fill the commercial gaps left by the withdrawal of Western brands and products from Russia, Beijing probably regards it as a political imperative to prop up Putin's regime—to the extent that it feels it can do so inconspicuously and get around US countermeasures.⁵⁷ To date, Beijing does not seem to have provided Moscow with any substantial support in the form of shipments of weapons and military supplies. But following hours-long discussions with top Chinese government representatives in mid-March, senior US officials stated that the Chinese made it clear to them that “they have already decided” to provide economic and financial support to Russia and were contemplating sending military supplies as well.⁵⁸ Should Beijing decide to do so, it will try to keep its support for Russia as far away from the public eye as possible. Washington's recent spotlighting of this issue and its clear warnings, together with Brussels and London, that China would face consequences if it helps Russia, might make this objective more difficult to achieve.⁵⁹

According to US intelligence sources, Beijing's determination to support Russia in the present crisis is being driven from the top, by Xi himself, notwithstanding scepticism among more junior members of the government apparatus.⁶⁰ For Xi, a

catastrophic failure of Putin and the system he built in Russia might have repercussions at home, where he has been rebuilding China's political system into a personalist autocracy centred around himself, based on a narrative of the superiority of single-leader autocracies over other, more representative political systems.⁶¹

One of the overall drivers of Sino-Russian rapprochement in recent years has been the gradual convergence of their political systems and the increasing similarity of their modes of governance.⁶² In terms of its economic structure and development, Russia's low-tech, resource-dependent, and sanctions-stricken economy is now incomparable with the complex, fast-developing, manufacturing-based economy of China. In political and societal terms, however, and in terms of the essential functioning of their political systems, Russia now resembles China more closely than ever before: Both states are headed by a single uncontested leader who circumvented legal restrictions on his tenure through purpose-built constitutional amendments. Each oversees feeble political institutions and is surrounded by a coterie of loyal associates who control all *de facto* levers of power. They both feature an uncontested governing party and a rubber-stamp legislature, while the most important sectors of the economy are directly or indirectly controlled by rent-seeking political elites. In both states, the media landscape is almost completely controlled by the government, public protests against the leadership have *de facto* been criminalised and rendered impossible, NGOs critical of the government have been dismantled or expelled, and explicit criticism of the leader (or his family) is considered taboo and is rigorously suppressed. China has long had a much more sophisticated system of online censorship than Russia, but Putin is now implementing a similarly strict regime of online censorship and cyber controls that closely resembles the Chinese one.

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While this process of political convergence has been going on for years, the Ukraine conflict has sparked a new wave of repression in Russia which, in the space of a few weeks, has led to a dramatic deterioration of the few remaining civil and political liberties. This includes a massive rise in internet censorship, the closure of the country's last independent media, an unprecedentedly ruthless persecution of all protesters and opposition activists, and mass indoctrination campaigns for adults and minors on a scale not seen since the Soviet Union.⁶³ The degree of ruthlessness with which the Kremlin tries to ensure the stability of the regime and the power of the leader through political repression is now virtually indistinguishable from that in China. Even when the war in Ukraine ends (provided Putin retains his grip on power), it is hard to imagine that all the recently introduced repressive measures in Russia will be annulled. In terms of their political systems, China and Russia will resemble each other even more strongly going forward. Already in 2014, when Putin's Russia annexed Crimea and instigated conflict in the Donbas region, Xi's decision to provide consistent (albeit implicit) support for Moscow was at least partially rooted in the two regimes' shared aversion to the Euromaidan protests and the ouster of the semi-authoritarian Yanukovich government in Ukraine.⁶⁴ Throughout the last several years, Beijing and Moscow have consistently expressed their apprehension about pro-democratic "colour revolutions" at their joint summits,

not least due to shared concerns for domestic regime security.⁶⁵ It is thus likely that Xi's China has been observing political events in Ukraine through a similar lens as Putin's Russia and is therefore sympathetic towards the Kremlin's interpretation of its conflict with Kyiv.

In light of their increasingly similar practice of governance and repression, one particularly noteworthy aspect of Sino-Russian cooperation in recent years has been that China is supplying Russia with advanced technologies for surveillance and population control (such as facial recognition surveillance cameras, AI-enhanced internet control tools, etc.).⁶⁶ China has been developing and using such technologies domestically on a massive scale, with Xinjiang province in particular serving as a testing ground for applying these surveillance tools to exercise near-total control over a restive population. Russia has gradually followed suit in acquiring and applying such technologies in its own territory, drawing on Chinese hardware and advice in the process.⁶⁷ If Russia manages to occupy and hold substantial territories in Ukraine whilst being faced with hostility or even an active insurgency from the local population, China's population control technologies and expertise will likely be brought to bear in Ukraine as well—providing Russia with tools of repression and counter-insurgency that past authoritarian regimes had no recourse to.⁶⁸

2) While the Sino-Russian relationship will likely grow even closer, Russia will be relegated to an even more junior status relative to China.

The relationship between Beijing and Moscow has become consistently more lopsided in recent decades, with Russia falling far behind China in almost all indicators of aggregate power. But the events in Ukraine and their immediate consequences are cementing Russia's junior status more thoroughly than ever before, erasing even the pretence of an equal partnership. With its economy chafing under unprecedentedly harsh Western sanctions, Russia finds itself not only structurally weaker than before, but increasingly in a relationship of direct dependence on China—raising the question of whether it might risk ending up in a client relationship with Beijing that is more akin to Moscow's own ties with Alexander Lukashenko's Belarus. What's more, Russia's primary strength vis-à-vis China to date has been in the military and security sphere. With its relative economic size (even prior to the onset of Western sanctions) now barely one-tenth of China's and its technological and innovation capabilities severely lagging, Moscow's remaining core asset is its massive, battle-hardened and well-supplied military. This has been particularly significant in areas where Beijing's and Moscow's interests do not completely align. For instance, in Central Asia, a "division of labour" emerged in recent decades that saw Moscow adopt

the role of primary security guarantor as China became unquestionably dominant in the economic sphere.⁶⁹

While Moscow retains its primacy in the nuclear domain and continues to boast the world's largest arsenal of strategic nuclear missiles, many foreign leaders and analysts are likely to reassess Russia's conventional military strength in the wake of the war against Ukraine. There have been reports of consternation in China about the abysmal performance of the Russian military in Ukraine (a particular concern for Beijing, since China itself uses a lot of similar military hardware). According to US intelligence sources, China's leadership appears to have been unsettled by Russia's military difficulties after expecting a quick Russian victory that would strengthen Russia, divide Europe, and keep Washington distracted.⁷⁰ In the eyes of Xi, Putin might have lost much of his nimbus as a master strategist overseeing a formidable military.⁷¹ Irrespective of the outcome of the war, Moscow's considerable strategic miscalculations regarding Ukraine and the Russian military's unexpectedly poor performance so far might raise the question for Beijing of how powerful an ally and how much of an asset Russia can really be for China in the future.⁷²

Outlook

Irrespective of how great Beijing's doubts and misgivings about the progress of Putin's military campaign in Ukraine may be at this point, and in spite of the various manifest problems that Russian belligerence poses for China, Xi will almost certainly not drop Putin. Barring dramatic domestic political changes in Russia, the current crisis is unlikely to lead to anything other than a further tightening of Sino-Russian bilateral relations—albeit in a configuration that increasingly demotes Moscow from a great power peer to a client of Beijing. Xi's China will prop up Russia and try to ensure that Putin's power is preserved—not unconditionally, but to the extent that it can do so without inordinately hurting itself and incurring substantial economic losses. Since the result will likely be a further intensification of Sino-Russian inter-governmental cooperation amid a continuing mutual convergence of their regime types, the West will also need to find more common, integrated, and unified strategies and policy responses to Beijing and Moscow. This could include such comparatively simple measures as strengthening the promotion of alternative media narratives in Chinese and Russian languages or making internet access and anti-censorship tools (such as effective VPNs) more accessible in both societies.

The apparent shortcomings of China's intelligence and foreign policy establishment in providing competent forecasts of the events in Ukraine and the West's reaction to them have probably rattled Xi. Beijing is undoubtedly studying the West's reaction to Russia's invasion with great interest, not least to derive lessons for what it could expect as a reaction to a possible future conflict over Taiwan.⁷³ By providing support to Russia, Beijing risks solidifying the pro-Ukraine camp into a durable coalition that might muster a similarly unified response to any military move against Taipei. But if Putin were to remain entirely undeterred by the massive sanctions package that has been imposed on Russia and able to attain at least some of his primary objectives in Ukraine, there is a risk that the final lesson for China could be that the West burned itself out: that, in spite of having tried everything to stop Putin's war and unleashing the most comprehensive sanctions package in living memory, Western states were not able to substantially derail his plans, let alone force him out of office. Irrespective of what the ultimate effect of the sanctions will be in the present crisis, in the medium-term China will likely make accelerated efforts to shield itself from the kinds of sanctions levied against Russia, to maintain the initiative in decoupling from the US and Europe, and to build strategic reserves across many areas of its economic and political system.⁷⁴ ■

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What Putin's War in Ukraine Means for the Future of China-Russia Relations

BJÖRN ALEXANDER DÜBEN

Björn Alexander Düben analyses China's reaction to, and motivation in implicitly supporting, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, even as Putin's strategic blunder becomes increasingly difficult to deal with. The author finds that, as long as Putin remains in power, long-term alignment since 2014 and a shared authoritarian world-view will cement closer ties between the PRC and Russian Federation; this at the cost of the latter devolving to a client-state dependent on China to keep its economy afloat, whilst the PRC's cautious state banks further diminish Russian hopes of financial cooperation in order to avoid secondary sanctions from the West.

LSE IDEAS

Floor 9, Pankhurst House
1 Clement's Inn, London
WC2A 2AZ

+44 (0)20 7107 5619
ideas@lse.ac.uk
lse.ac.uk/ideas