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RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND CHINA AFTER FEBRUARY 2022: COMMON INTEREST BUT DIFFERENT VALUES AND VISIONS

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The evolving relationship between Russia and China, especially after Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, has stirred global concern. This study challenges the idea of a “no-limits friendship” between the two nations, highlighting their lack of mutual trust and shared visions. Using a Constructivist theory of International Relations, it examines Moscow and Beijing’s divergent perspectives on partnership and explores the complexities of their interactions. Through content analysis of various sources, such as official documents and expert assessments, the study reveals a nuanced understanding of their collaboration.

Russia views its partnership with China as a means to enhance its global influence but faces difficulty in articulating a clear vision for the future world order it aims to shape. China sees Russia as a strategic partner to counterbalance the US. However, historical tensions and differing global aspirations force China to approach this partnership with caution.

Despite official declarations of harmony, present-day realities differ. For instance, Russia is not officially a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and differences in infrastructure projects underscore ongoing tensions. Russia’s gas plans for China (Power of Siberia 1 and the potential Power of Siberia 2 pipeline) expose mutual dependencies and uncertainties. Central Asia emerges as a sensitive area, with China gaining ground as Russia’s influence wanes. The First China-Central Asia summit in 2022, which excluded Russia, underscores these shifting power dynamics. Other focal points, including joint ventures such as the CR929 aircraft programme, display disagreements. Russia’s withdrawal due to differing approaches to international suppliers highlights the discord between its present focus and China’s forward-looking perspective. While Russia grapples with immediate challenges, China prioritizes long-term strategies for stability and influence, showcasing a critical divergence in their approaches and priorities. Merely countering the US cannot reconcile these fundamental differences.

Keywords: Russia; China; common interest; different visions; mutual trust; Russia-China relations; US

Introduction

The evolving relationship between Russia and China has become a focal concern for the collective West. Key questions arise: Will China ultimately align with Russia following its large-scale invasion of Ukraine? And if so, how will the US and the EU respond? These uncertainties are the subject of intense scrutiny by global think tanks and multinational corporations.

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The potential alliance between China and Russia is viewed as a looming threat by the collective West. While some scholars characterize their bond as a “marriage” [Lubina 2017], others emphasize China’s dominant role in this alliance [Piechowski 2024]. Increasingly, Western media and academic discourse tend to underscore China’s economic, technological, and financial supremacy, often relegating Russia to a secondary role.

This paper offers an alternative perspective, contending that the relationship between Russia and China is far from being mutually beneficial or trusting, especially following Russia’s large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Despite a shared interest in counterbalancing the US and reshaping the global order, their collaboration lacks shared values and a unified vision for the future. Contrary to the proclaimed “no-limits friendship” and “no forbidden areas of cooperation”, this article states otherwise. It explores three key aspects: 1) Russia’s vision of its partnership with China; 2) China’s vision of its partnership with Russia; and 3) the differences between Russia and China.

In this article, the author will employ the theory of Constructivism in International Relations, as articulated by A. Wendt, to elucidate and analyze the dynamics within the relationship between Russia and China. The theoretical framework of Constructivism offers a lens to comprehend the intricacies of their interactions, emphasizing the significance of shared beliefs, norms, and identities in shaping international relations. Furthermore, the method of content analysis will be used as a tool to examine and interpret various sources, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of narratives, discourses, and implications within the context of Russia-China relations. Liu Ying analyzed the China-Russia strategic partnership from a Constructivist perspective by employing Wendt’s concepts and structures of identity. She argues that China and Russia were still on the way to forming a shared concept of strategic partnership, yet Beijing and Moscow were not likely to set an alliance arrangement against a third party in the foreseeable future. Ying’s analysis indicated that different concepts of harmony and honour made China and Russia act differently with third parties [Liu 2018; 2021].

This article relies on various sources, such as joint Russia-China documents, official publications from both countries, and analytical reports in English and Russian. By examining these sources (official statements, agreements, and expert analyses), the study aims to explore the intricate relationship between Russia and China.

1. Russia’s vision of its partnership with China

Before the visit of Xi Jinping to Moscow on April 19, 2023, Vladimir Putin published an article in *People’s Daily* titled “Russia and China: A Future-Bound Partnership”. In the article, Putin emphasized that “Russia-China relations have reached the highest level in their history and are gaining even more strength; they surpass Cold War-time military-political alliances in their quality, with *no one to constantly order and no one to constantly obey* [Putin 2023], without limitations or taboos”. He goes further and states that “we [Russia and China] have reached an unprecedented level of trust in our political dialogue, our strategic cooperation has become truly comprehensive in nature and is standing on the brink of a new era” [Putin 2023].

Interestingly, the Russian version of this official translation differs. “No one to constantly order and no one to constantly obey” is “в них [отношениях] нет ведущего и ведомого” that should be translated as “there is no leader and no follower [in the relations]”. It gives other meaning to this sentence. The Kremlin’s English translation supposes that nobody orders and nobody obeys, which is normal in relations. Yet, the Russian version focuses on the lack of a dominant or subordinate partner in the relationship.

In 2018, Sergei Karaganov, an economic and foreign policy adviser to Vladimir Putin, addressed this dynamic directly. When asked by Indrani Bagchi, an Indian foreign policy commentator, about the notion of Russia being a “junior brother” to China, Karaganov remarked:

We are nowadays *pseudoallies* (italized by O. M.) because the US decided to contain the ambitions of Russia and China, which is their strategic mistake. We have many common interests. Russia can't be a junior brother of any country, and it never was starting from the successors of Genghis Khan and finishing with Napoleon and Hitler, we destroyed them all [Bagchi 2018].

Russia usually establishes alliances with countries that are economically, politically, and militarily weaker to play a major role (e.g. the Collective Security Treaty Organization). While China and Russia have historical experience with alliances, they now prefer manoeuvring in their relations with third countries to avoid unfulfilled mutual obligations.

Being guided by Realism, Russia will never intentionally strengthen China to a level that may threaten its own interests. Even though beyond the scope of this article, it must be mentioned that Russia acknowledges the possible risks of becoming overly dependent on China. Therefore, it is actively working with other large countries, such as India, Brazil, and Iran. Russia perceives China as a country that can be a partner at the moment yet without counting that both states will share the same vision. Hence, their policy approaches and actions differ and will likely continue to diverge. Aleksandr Gabuev, a leading Russian expert-in-exile on Russia-China relations, states that Putin has shifted Russia's dependency from Europe to China. His arguments relate to economy and finance [Pomenyat' zavisimost... 2023]. However, following this line of analysis, the dependence on Europe did not prevent Russia from conducting independent foreign policy and disagreeing on many issues with the European states and the EU. The same can be said about today's and future relations between Russia and China. Economic and financial cooperation does not necessarily lead to political and security dependence. For instance, China's trade turnover with the EU, the US, and Japan far exceeds its trade with Russia.

Moscow is primarily guided by its geopolitical interests, rather than economy and trade. It has resources and leverages to create global situations in its favour, a dynamic well understood by China. Professor Yujun Feng from the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University indicates this peculiar aspect of Russia's approach [Feng 2017]. For Russia, its citizens and economy are the means to restore the nation's greatness. The Russian people support this idea because for them a "great Russia" is tied to a strong sense of national pride. In this way, Russia sees its cooperation with China as one of the mechanisms to restore Russia's former glory. Therefore, Russia evaluates all possible opportunities with China via this prism. This is why the Kremlin often rejects many initiatives that, theoretically, could bring economic benefits for Russia and its citizens but somehow diminish or limit its role in the region and the world. While China is focused on creating internal resources and improving the welfare of its citizens, Russia prioritizes foreign policy issues. The empire-building in China and Russia differs in the methods. Russia attempts to restore its status via foreign policy while China focuses on economic and financial strength.

The same Russian people who strive to restore a "great Russia" are likely to oppose the Chinese people and their interests the moment contradictions arise. At the human-to-human level, there is little trust between the two nations. Instead, prejudice outweighs mutual understanding and support.

Unlike China, Russia lacks a clear vision for the future to offer to the world. China is so far a real competitor to Western values, as noted by Aleksey Maslov, a Russian sinologist and Director of the Institute of Asia and Africa at Moscow State University [Nelyubin 2023].

The Russian political elite is divided regarding cooperation with China. While President Vladimir Putin and Nikolay Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, strongly advocate for closer ties with China, others, such as Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin, are less enthusiastic

[Chernyshova 2023]. Similarly, the Russian population is not eager to view the Chinese as priority partners.

Russia perceives its partnership with China as a foreign policy tool to pursue its own interests and restore its global status as a “great power”. Moscow sees itself as equal to Beijing, rejecting any notion of being a junior partner in the relationship. However, it does not have a vision for the future to offer on the global stage. Strengthening China does not align with the interests of the Kremlin, given the risk of retaliation, prompting it to foster alliances with India, Iran, and other countries.

2. China’s vision of its partnership with Russia

Prior to his state visit to Russia in March 2023, Xi Jinping published an article titled “Forging Ahead to Open a New Chapter of China-Russia Friendship, Cooperation and Common Development”, where he acknowledged that “our two sides have cemented *political mutual trust* and fostered a new model of major-country relations” [Xi 2023].

Like Putin, Xi emphasized the concept of political mutual trust. However, in International Relations, the term “trust” among countries, and specifically “political trust”, lacks a clear, universally accepted definition. In the case of Russia and China, it can be stated that mutual political trust refers primarily to the relationship between Putin and Xi. Yun Sun, Senior Fellow, Co-Director of the East Asia Programme, and Director of the China Programme at the Stimson Centre, writes the following:

The primary result of Xi’s “Russia complex” and positive view of Putin is a selective bias in his judgement about Russia’s national power. Xi is prone to overestimating Russia’s strengths and reliability, while underestimating its weaknesses and the risks posed to China. It means that Xi is more likely to see Russia in a favorable light, just like he sees the United States through a hostile lens. Consequently, he favors alignment with Russia, especially given his “struggles with the U.S. [Sun 2022].

Xi’s vision of Putin and Putin’s expectations for China’s support in achieving large common goals do not convert into coordinated actions based on mutual trust. In other words, the relationship between the two leaders does not extend effectively to lower levels of decision-making and policy implementation. There are two major reasons for this. The first reason is a lack of mutual trust on both sides, while the second one is the absence of common interests, except for counterbalancing the US. In his article, Xi continues that “[i]t is important that we increase mutual trust and bring out the potential of bilateral cooperation to keep China-Russia relations at a high level” [Xi 2023]. Hence, just like the Russian people are focused on restoring a “great Russia”, the Chinese people want to see their country as great “as it used to be” before the Opium wars and military conflicts with Russia.

China understands that its vision of the world order differs from Russia’s. Xi Jinping states that he has proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative on various occasions [Xi 2023]. China also promotes reforms to the “global governance system” as part of its diplomatic strategy to address the “profound evolution” of the international order. According to Yang Jiechi, a senior Chinese diplomat and retired politician, “The global governance system is at an important stage of profound evolution, and global governance has increasingly become the frontier and key issue of China’s foreign work” [US Department of Defense 2023, 12]. To “seize opportunities” for reform, Beijing actively participates in constructing a new global governance framework aligned with the Chinese Communist Party’s principles. This may be achieved through the creation of new multinational organizations and forums. For example, China promotes the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as “an “important practical platform for the concept of the community of common destiny” [US Department of Defense 2023, 12].

The Russian side lacks a visionary project for the future to propose to the world, even though it actively challenges the current global order. China is focused on domestic development to ensure stability, which forms the foundation for the Party's decision-making process. The usefulness of any given partner to China's economic development largely determines its significance [Makocki & Popescu 2016, 31]. That is why China is exploiting Russia's strategic weakness, such as its vulnerability to Western sanctions. While it cannot be entirely ruled out that Xi Jinping may shift toward a worldview oriented around geopolitical domination, for now, the key element of China's policy remains peaceful coexistence¹.

Putin states that Russia and China "jointly work to create a more just and democratic multipolar world order, which should be based on the central role of the UN, its Security Council, international law, and the purposes and principles of the UN Charter" [The Kremlin 2023b]. However, setting aside the fact that the UN is *de facto* dysfunctional, Chinese experts argue that Russia cannot cooperate or lead global initiatives but excels in undermining and disrupting others' efforts [Sun 2022]. This discrepancy is the fundamental reason why Russia "should not be underestimated". Russia's strength lies not in its ability to build, but in its capacity to destroy [Sun 2022]. As Yun Sun notes, Russia's ability to combine diplomatic skills, strategic manipulation, and hybrid warfare to achieve geopolitical goals is a trait that China has admired but does not possess [Sun 2022].

Moreover, China is fully aware that its partnership with Russia is not born out of genuine desire but rather a response to an unfavourable external environment for Russia. In other words, the true motive behind Russia's urge for friendship is clear to China, and it is far from reassuring. For instance, Guihai Guan, Executive Vice President of the Institute of International and Strategic Studies at Peking University and a well-known expert on Russian studies, remarked "proceeding from the knowledge of the Russian history I will never believe that a complete 'turn to the East' is possible. The Russian society still does not have consensus on this topic... All those years when Russia was talking about 'the turn to the East', China was in a role of 'spare bride'. It is embarrassing"². China also recognizes that Russia is culturally and mentally closer to the West. Therefore, the "turn to Asia" is not something Russia wants but rather something it feels forced to do. Hence, China does not exclude that Russia might switch back to the West should the geopolitical situation change. Ultimately, it is neither shared values nor a shared vision that underpins the cooperation between China and Russia.

Moreover, China never forgets its past. History is a key element of Chinese identity [Zhao 2023]. The ups and downs in its relationship with Russia, including the military conflict of the late 1960s and early 1970s, are deeply embedded in its memory. Beijing has also witnessed how painful and costly it was for EU states to cut financial and economic ties with Russia in 2022 after its large-scale invasion of Ukraine. Consequently, it is not in Beijing's interest to create a dependency on Russia that could later harm China. Aligning with Russia in its war would risk jeopardizing China's economy. China's primary focus is to create wealth and ensure economic well-being through trade and business. Sanctions are the antithesis of this goal. Any sanctions on China would lead to lost business opportunities, rising unemployment and potential social unrest in China. Additionally, the world would aggressively seek alternatives to China in supply chain management, causing significant economic losses for China and its current Western partners [Gopinath 2024].

Moscow does not support the idea of allying with China, and Beijing shares this perspective. History has taught China that if an alliance with Russia were established, the possibility of another breakdown in relations could not be ruled out, especially if inequalities in the partnership were to reappear [des Garets Geddes 2023]. Indeed, Chinese scholars are deeply aware of the profound impact that the dramatic shift in their country's relative power could have on a nation as proud as Russia. Moreover, forming an alliance

could risk intensifying the growing bipolarization of global politics, potentially involving China in conflicts that do not directly concern it. Such a move would undermine Beijing's long-standing principle of non-alignment [des Garets Geddes 2023].

China keeps official neutrality regarding Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine. "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukrainian Crisis" contains 12 points, among which the export of grain within the framework of the Black Sea Grain Initiative and ensuring the stability of production and supply chains are priorities for Beijing, even though not necessarily for Moscow.

There is another aspect that is rarely discussed: the fear of Russia's potential collapse. If Moscow suffers a significant defeat in Ukraine, it may lead to a regime change [des Garets Geddes 2023]. Be it pro-Western or more radical than Putin's, neither scenario is in China's interests. This concern probably prompted China to take a more proactive stance in February 2023, issuing a position paper and dispatching an envoy as a mediator [Ministry of Foreign Affairs... 2023a]. For China, an ideal Russia is one that, during and after the Russia-Ukraine war, and even in a post-Putin era, continues its current policies: openly and fiercely counterbalancing the US.

It is reasonable to assume that the fear of Russia's potential fall is shared by the US. While Washington actively counters Russia, it is not in its interests for the world's second-largest nuclear power to dissolve. This concern suggests that Russia's future could potentially become a shared topic on the US-China agenda.

To summarize, China sees Russia as a partner for counterbalancing the US and as a state from which Beijing can derive economic benefits through trade and finance. China is careful not to become overly dependent on trade with Russia, after witnessing how painful it was for the West after February 2022. The historical conflicts between these states, the lack of mutual trust, and differing visions of the current world system and its future are enduring obstacles to deeper cooperation. Different values, historical lessons, contrasting visions of the future, and Russia's ability to disrupt global stability add to China's unwillingness to ally with it. Additionally, Russia's policy of undermining the world order creates a threat to China as well.

3. Differences between Russia and China

In December 2016, Senior Visiting Academic Fellow at the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) Michal Makocki and Senior Analyst at the EUISS Nicu Popescu stated that

Russia and China have been working energetically to find compromise solutions on a number of commercial and political issues, but their shared resentment of Western domination cannot make up for divergent geopolitical goals. For neither of the sides can the proclaimed alliance justify the loss of strategic flexibility that would be incurred by deepening mutual economic dependency [Makocki and Popescu 2016].

The same is true for the current situation. Joint Declaration 2022 states "The friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation" [The Kremlin 2022]. Yet, nothing is said about the core of the cooperation, which is shared values. The 2023 joint statement notes that "relations between Russia and China, while not being a military and political alliance similar to the ones formed during the Cold War, are superior to this form of interstate interaction, and are not of a block or confrontational nature" [The Kremlin 2023a].

The joint declarations of 2022 and 2023 state that China-Russia relations do not depend on the external environment. The facts prove the opposite. Russia made its first turn to the East in 2014 after Western sanctions for the annexation of Crimea, and in 2022 after another round of sanctions for violating international law by starting a large-scale invasion of Ukraine. Hence, the relations are reactive to international events.

While Putin and Xi exchange polite messages of mutual understanding and an unprecedented level of cooperation³, their relationship lacks trust, shared beliefs, and values. According to the Constructivist theory of International Relations, a country's physical capabilities matter only in relation to how others perceive them. As Alexander Wendt explains, five nuclear bombs (a physical object) are perceived differently depending on their ownership: North Korea or Great Britain [Wendt 1994, 255]. Shared values and beliefs shape our perception that Great Britain, as a country adhering to international agreements, poses minimal risk of using nuclear weapons. At the same time, North Korea, having repeatedly violated international agreements, is perceived as a higher risk. Do Russia and China share common beliefs and values? An analysis of relevant documents suggests that both countries hold a shared belief that the current world order is unjust. However, they differ in their strategies for addressing this issue. Since Putin's 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, Russia has actively sought to undermine the world order [The Kremlin 2007]. In contrast, China takes advantage of the existing system without attempting to disrupt it.

While the joint documents present a rosy picture, the facts tell a somewhat different story. During Prime Minister Mishustin's delegation visit to China in May 2023, *The Moscow Times* reported that Chinese politicians refused to meet with Russian ministers included on the sanctions list [Kitayskiye ministry... 2023]. Even though this claim was not confirmed at the official level, such publications suggest the existence of some discrepancies. It is clear that their relationship is guided by their own agendas since China adheres to the sanctions due to a realistic assessment of its economic and financial interdependence with the West (see above).

In 2019, Russia launched gas transportation to China via the newly built Power of Siberia – 1 (Sila Sibiri – 1) pipeline. This pipeline has a capacity of 38 bcm per year, and Moscow expects to reach its full capacity by 2024. In 2022, Russia supplied 15.5 bcm of gas to China through this pipeline [Milkin 2023].

After the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia intensified negotiations with China on constructing the Power of Siberia – 2 (Sila Sibiri – 2) gas pipeline, which will have a capacity of 50 bcm per year. The plan is to supply gas from the Yamal peninsula, previously exported to Europe, to China. For Russia, this 50 bcm from Yamal will not compensate for the 150 bcm per year it previously supplied to Europe. Moscow proposes building the pipeline through Mongolia, but Beijing has its reservations. The estimated cost of constructing the pipeline is approximately 13.6 billion USD [Aizhu & Gurt 2023], and Russia aims to complete it by 2030 if terms and conditions are agreed upon by China and Mongolia. In 2022, China's total gas consumption was 390 bcm. If Russia supplies 100 bcm annually by 2030, this would account for almost 25 % of China's current consumption, raising concerns about potential dependency on a single supplier.

For Russia, the disadvantages are also obvious: reliance on a single buyer, selling gas at prices below the world market rate due to sanctions and China's policy of negotiating discounts, and the significant resources of time and money required to construct the pipeline. Moreover, China does not fully trust Russian business practices. For example, while China completed its portion of a bridge over the Amur River according to the agreed schedule, the Russian side delayed its completion by three years.

To mitigate the risks of dependence, China is strengthening its relationships with Central Asian states. Turkmenistan currently has three gas pipelines to China via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Construction of a fourth pipeline, Line D, has been agreed upon, and while the contract has not yet been signed, *Reuters* report that construction has already started [Aizhu & Gurt 2023]. Most probably, China has leveraged Russia's situation and its need to find alternative customers for gas supply to advance the project with Turkmenistan. Additionally, China continues to exert pressure on Russia regarding gas pricing

[Wong 2023]. Hence, the so-called “no-limits friendship” between the two countries clearly has its boundaries.

Another sensitive topic is the presence of China and Russia in Central Asia. In 2018, Paul Stronski and Nicole Ng noted that

Moscow’s annexation of Crimea and its aggression in eastern Ukraine alienated many Eurasian governments and caused Russia’s neighbors to step up their engagement with Beijing, seeing China as a key part of their security posture, particularly as the West disengages from Eurasia overall. This has further reduced Russian influence in Central Asia, and helped to expand Beijing’s [Stronski & Ng 2018, 33].

Russian large-scale invasion of Ukraine pushed the Central Asian states closer to China. The situation worsened when the Chinese Ambassador to France, Lu Shaye, said on April 21, 2023, during a French television interview, that the countries that emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union “don’t have effective status under international law because there is not an international agreement confirming their status as sovereign nations” [Chinese envoy... 2023]. Even though on April 24, 2023, Beijing officially stated that “China respects all countries’ sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity and upholds the purposes and principles of the UN Charter” [Ministry of Foreign Affairs... 2023b], questions remain about what China truly thinks regarding the sovereignty and independence of the former Soviet republics. Moreover, despite the international uproar caused by his remarks, Ambassador Lu Shaye retained his post. Bishkek-based security analyst Kasybek Zholchuev commented that China “like Russia, never considered us [Central Asian states] as equal partners. For them, our region is just a raw materials appendage, and they believe they can decide for us what we should do and how we should develop” [Rastut opaseniya... 2023].

On May 18–19, 2023, China held the First “China – Central Asia Summit”. At the joint event, Xi Jinping emphasized respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the five Central Asian states [Ministry of Foreign Affairs... 2023c]. Notably, Russia did not participate in the summit. Experts immediately interpreted Putin’s absence as a sign of Russia’s declining influence in the region, attributed to the war in Ukraine, its limited resources, and the cautious stance of the Central Asian states [Altynbayev 2023]. The summit focused on economic and financial cooperation, logistics routes (designed to bypass Russia due to sanctions), and security. The latter [security] appeared on the agenda due to Russia’s weakening power in Central Asia and its diminished geopolitical standing. Any destabilization in Central Asia could affect China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Therefore, Beijing is prioritizing regional stability to maintain political regimes in power and strengthen its influence [Rossiya, Kitay... 2023]. While Moscow monitors Beijing’s policies in Central Asia, it is unlikely to voice concerns, given its current reliance on Chinese support⁴.

Regarding other topics, Class 1 Russian State Advisor Tatyana Poloskova observes, “we [Russia] have lost to China in Latin America. Presently, some Chinese experts, in private talks, ironically comment on our Russian initiatives, stating that they are already working there and warning against conflict of interests” [Poloskova 2023]. She further cites Russian political scientist Grigoriy Trofimchuk regarding the war in Ukraine:

The council of leading world countries in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on the Ukrainian issue represents the first clear, demonstrative step toward building a future world without Russia’s participation... The most troubling aspect for Moscow is that this council is not explicitly anti-Russian – that would be only part of the problem – but entirely without Russia... There is poorly concealed dissatisfaction with China’s participation. It appears that China not only formally took a seat at the table but also made a choice for the future. The initiators of the Jeddah meeting seem prepared to discuss replacing the UN framework, leaving the Russian Federation excluded from this area as well [Poloskova 2023].

In 2017, China and Russia established the joint China-Russia Commercial Aircraft International Corporation (CRAIC) CR929 programme to challenge the dominance of Boeing and Airbus in the long-range, wide-body aircraft market. Since its launch, the programme has encountered major delays and disagreements between the two partners. In August 2023, under sanctions, Russia withdrew from the project due to its insistence on abandoning international suppliers for the aircraft [Wu 2023]. Instead, Russia suggested designing its own parts and involving countries from the EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union) and the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Association), BRICS, the Arab world, and other states in Asia, Africa, and Latin America [Ahlgren 2023]. Conversely, China advocates for continuing the project with the involvement of trusted international suppliers, recognizing that developing proprietary components would demand significant resources and might not meet required international standards. These differing visions have led to a split in the partnership, with the wide-body aircraft now being developed solely by COMAC (Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China), while Russia's United Aircraft Corporation (UAC) remains a supplier. Hence, Russia is focused on yesterday's and today's events, while China is planning for the future. Even though nobody knows tomorrow, China understands that addressing today's problems will not pave the way for tomorrow's success [Nelyubin 2023].

Last but not least is Xi's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia's official non-participation in it. In 2015, Putin declared that "a principal agreement has been reached on linking ("sopriazhenie" in Russian) Eurasian integration with the Chinese initiative "Economic Belt of the Silk Road" [Putin 2015]. However, in July 2021, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that "Russia is not directly involved in the Belt and Road Initiative. Interaction is carried out based on the Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on cooperation in linking the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Economic Belt of the Silk Road, dated May 8, 2015" [Ministry of Foreign Affairs... 2021]. In May 2024, during his visit to China, Putin stated that Russia and China "are committed to continuing efforts to link the integration processes within the Eurasian Economic Union and the Chinese initiative 'One Belt, One Road', with the aim of eventually forming a Greater Eurasian Partnership" [The Kremlin 2024]. This indicates that Russia aims to develop its own project, "Great Eurasian Partnership", and does not officially consider joining the BRI. Paradoxically, despite Russia's official stance, Putin was the primary guest at the 3rd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (Beijing, October 17–18, 2023).

The projects and areas of disagreement analyzed above stem from different perceptions and self-identifications of Russia and China. These differences have transformed into competitive rather than complementary or shared interests, except their mutual goal to counterbalance the US.

Conclusion

Russia views its partnership with China as a means to restore its global influence, aiming for a revival of a "great Russia". Moscow positions itself as an equal to Beijing but lacks a coherent vision for the future and does not officially endorse Chinese initiatives (it is not officially part of Xi's ambiguous Belt and Road Initiative). Russia perceives China more as a necessary partner than a trusted one. Moreover, strengthening China is not a priority for the Kremlin due to fears of potential retaliation, prompting Russia to seek collaborations with other nations, such as India and Iran. Also, in striving to restore the "greatness of Russia", the Russian population remains cautious toward states that aspire to global leadership. At the human-to-human level, there is more prejudice and mistrust than mutual understanding and support between the two nations.

History is a key element of Chinese identity. China does not trust Russia either since it is aware that Russia is culturally and mentally closer to the West. Therefore, the "turn to

Asia” is not something Russia desires but rather a move it is forced to make. Hence, China does not rule out the possibility that Russia could shift back toward the West should the geopolitical situation change. China sees Russia as a strategic tool to counterbalance the US and secure financial and trade gains. At the same time, Beijing is cautious about becoming overly reliant on Russian trade, considering the challenges faced by the West after February 2022.

Historical conflicts, mutual distrust, and differing visions of the world hinder the growth of their relationship. Russia’s inclination to disrupt the global order poses a threat to China, yet China does not seek a change in Moscow’s regime. Despite a shared interest in countering the US, Russia and China differ in their visions. Russia openly challenges the international order, while China strategically uses it for economic gains. Mistrust and conflicting policies on global issues, such as Central Asia and Ukraine, create further divisions. China takes advantage of Western sanctions on Russia to secure cheaper gas prices and engages in independent energy projects with Central Asian states, highlighting the strained nature of their relationship, which has deepened as Russia remains isolated under sanctions.

These summaries highlight the contrasting viewpoints Moscow and Beijing hold regarding their partnership, which lacks mutual trust and shared benefits. The longer Russia remains under sanctions, the more China will use the situation to pursue its own interests, further widening the gap between the two states. This growing divide underscores that, coupled with mutual distrust and the absence of shared visions and values, their partnership cannot be sustained solely by a common objective to counterbalance the US.

¹ Guihai G. (2023), “Abstracts from the speech at the Panel discussion of the conference Russia and China: history and prospects of cooperation”, May 25, available at: <https://t.me/china80s/2732> (accessed October 23, 2023).

² Guihai G. (2023), “Abstracts from the speech at the Panel discussion of the conference Russia and China: history and prospects of cooperation”, May 25, available at: <https://t.me/china80s/2732> (accessed October 23, 2023).

³ See for instance: [The State Council of People’s Republic of China 2023].

⁴ See for instance: [Zhil’tsov 2023].

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Відносини Росії та Китаю після лютого 2022 року: спільні інтереси, але різні цінності та бачення

Еволюціонуючі відносини між Росією та Китаєм, особливо після великомасштабного вторгнення Росії в Україну в лютому 2022 року, викликали глобальну обережність. Це дослідження кидає виклик ідеї "дружби без обмежень" між двома країнами, показуючи брак взаємної довіри та спільного бачення. Використовуючи підхід конструктивізму в міжнародних відносинах, автор досліджує різні бачення Москви та Пекіна щодо партнерства та аналізує складнощі в їхній взаємодії. Аналіз змісту різноманітних джерел, включно з офіційними документами та експертними аналізами, дає змогу дістати більш глибоке розуміння їхньої співпраці.

Росія сподівається, що співпраця з Китаєм посилить її глобальний вплив, але їй важко чітко сформулювати бачення майбутнього світу, який вона прагне створити. Тим часом Китай має власне бачення майбутнього і розглядає Росію як партнера для протизваги США, однак ставиться до неї обережно через напруженість у минулому та різні глобальні погляди на майбутнє.

Проте, незважаючи на офіційну гармонію, реальність відрізняється. Наприклад, Росія офіційно не є частиною ініціативи "Один пояс, один шлях", а розбіжності в інфраструктурних проєктах підкреслюють напруженість. Газові проєкти Росії для Китаю ("Сила Сибіру" – 1 і, ймовірно, 2) демонструють взаємну залежність та невизначеність. Чутливим питанням є Центральна Азія, оскільки вплив Китаю посилюється на тлі зменшення впливу Росії. Перший саміт "Китай – Центральна Азія" у 2023 році, на якому Росії не було, вказує на зміну силового балансу. Інші ключові моменти, як-от спільні проєкти, зокрема програма літака CR929, також демонструють розбіжності. Вихід Росії з проєкту через різні підходи до міжнародних постачальників підкреслює розбіжність між її нинішнім фокусом і далекоглядною політикою Китаю. Поки Росія бореться з нагальними проблемами, Китай буде стратегії для довгострокової стабільності та впливу, що демонструє ключову різницю в їхніх підходах та пріоритетах. Протистояння США не здатне подолати ці фундаментальні відмінності.

Ключові слова: Росія; Китай; спільний інтерес; різні бачення; взаємна довіра; російсько-китайські відносини; США

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