

Three years of war in Ukraine: the Chinese-Russian alliance passes the test

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China's support for Russia in its conflict with Ukraine and the West equates to it investing in Putin's Russia. Beijing cannot afford for Putin to fail, as this would threaten the stability of the anti-Western regime in Russia. The war in Ukraine ties up a portion of US resources and those of its European allies. For this reason, contrary to its propaganda narratives, China has little interest in pushing for a swift, negotiated end to the conflict.

For Russia, the war has become a test of its alliance with China – and the outcome has been positive. Despite intense Western pressure and its formal distancing itself from the conflict, China has provided Russia with tangible support which, particularly in the economic sphere, is absolutely crucial and irreplaceable for the Kremlin. The positive outcome of the *de facto* alliance with China will encourage the Kremlin to further extend the cooperation aimed at weakening the West's position and to continue working with China to build a new international order that would be 'friendly' to both regimes.

China's calculations

China believes there is a growing likelihood of a confrontation with the United States and this has shaped and continues to shape its approach to the war in Ukraine. China's decision to support Moscow and to maintain this support for nearly three years stemmed from its assessment of China's strategic situation, driven by deepening competition with the US. In this context, China needs security and stability along its northern border and a partner to push back against Western influence in Central Asia. For these reasons, Beijing is willing to invest political and economic capital in Russia's authoritarian, anti-Western and China-friendly regime. Due to Russia's aggressive revisionism, China can count on it to tie up some of resources which the United States and its allies have in Europe and the Middle East. The course of the conflict in Ukraine thus far has not altered this calculation.

Nevertheless, China's support for Russia has not been automatic, particularly after it became clear that the intended Russian 'blitzkrieg' had degenerated into a war of attrition, with Russia facing the might of the Western alliance – even if, due to a lack of political will, the West has only utilised this potential to a limited extent. Nor is China's support unlimited, as both the government and economic operators, undoubtedly acting under discreet instructions from the authorities, have been striving



to mitigate the economic and political costs of their backing for Russia, particularly those stemming from US secondary sanctions.

Neither China nor Russia has ever disclosed whether Vladimir Putin gave Xi Jinping advance warning of his intention to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, it is highly likely that, at the very

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least, he signalled his plans to undertake radical actions against Ukraine. This is demonstrated, for example, by shifts in Chinese propaganda narratives.¹ In addition, the content of the joint statement on international relations entering a new era and the global sustainable development’, issued on 4 February 2022 during Putin’s visit to Beijing,² suggests that he secured Xi’s support for such radical steps. However, Putin most likely presented the Chinese leader with a scenario he himself believed in – a swift and relatively bloodless operation rather than a protracted, full-scale war. This would explain Chinese diplomacy’s lack of preparedness for the evacuation of Chinese citizens.

China’s dilemmas and responses

Like the Kremlin and Western observers, China was surprised by the effectiveness of Ukraine’s resistance and the transformation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict into a prolonged conventional war. This unexpected development created several challenges for China.³ Firstly, it had a negative impact on its relations with the West, which stepped up its efforts to reduce its economic dependence on China. This effect was particularly pronounced in Europe, where China increasingly came to be seen as a strategic rival due to its material and diplomatic support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Secondly, the US responded by renewing and strengthening its alliances in the Indo-Pacific region while NATO stepped up its engagement with its partners there.⁴ Thirdly, Chinese operators conducting business with Russia faced the threat of US sanctions. Fourthly, particularly during the first two years of the conflict, the Chinese government feared that Russia could expand the war to other countries or resort to using weapons of mass destruction. From the perspective of the Chinese leadership, this risked triggering an uncontrolled escalation that could draw China into an open conflict with the West before it was prepared for this. Finally, as the war unfolded, Russia took assertive actions in the post-Soviet sphere, making a number of territorial claims against Kazakhstan and thus threatening regional stability.

In this situation, China has adopted a dual strategy combining tangible support for its ally with rhetoric and gestures designed to create the impression that it has been distancing itself from Russia while projecting a façade of Chinese neutrality. The primary goal was to help the Russian economy withstand the Western sanctions and ensure that the Kremlin could sustain its war effort. At the same time, the two sides have been working to develop mechanisms that would make their economic

¹ The day after a video call between the two leaders (15 December 2021), Chinese propaganda abruptly shifted its narrative. Previously, it had confined itself to brief reports on the growing tensions around Ukraine and condemning the United States for allegedly making false accusations that Russia was preparing an attack on Ukraine. However, following Xi’s conversation with Putin, both the domestic narrative and the one aimed at the Global South began echoing Russia’s claims about the “fascistisation of Ukraine, expansion of NATO and the need to defend Russia”.

² See M. Bogusz, J. Jakóbowski, W. Rodkiewicz, ‘Koniec gry pozorów: demonstracyjna koordynacja między Pekinem i Moskwą’, *Komentarze OSW*, no. 528, 23 February 2022, osw.waw.pl.

³ See M. Bogusz, ‘ChRL wobec kryzysu ukraińsko-rosyjskiego’, *OSW*, 27 January 2022; J. Jakóbowski, ‘Chiński dylemat. Rosyjska inwazja na Ukrainę a sytuacja strategiczna Chin’, *Komentarze OSW*, no. 435, 25 March 2022, osw.waw.pl.

⁴ See M. Bogusz, ‘China’s challenges in the Indo-Pacific in the shadow of Russian aggression against Ukraine’, *OSW Commentary*, no. 442, 29 April 2022, osw.waw.pl.

cooperation more resilient to Western sanctions, such as conducting transactions in renminbi and exploring alternative settlement methods.

China has also undertaken several initiatives to establish red lines for Russia's actions. Most notably, during the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Samarkand in September 2022, Xi Jinping expressed unequivocal support for the independence of Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian republics.⁵ Moreover, China has issued several public and private statements (for example, in October 2022, March 2023 and November 2024) that reaffirmed its opposition to the use and proliferation of nuclear weapons.⁶

A further tightening of Chinese-Russian cooperation...

China has supported Russia's war effort by importing Russian energy resources and filling the gaps in the Russian market caused by Western sanctions and the voluntary withdrawal of some Western companies. Crucially, this includes the supply of dual-use civilian-military products, such as electronic integrated circuits (with exports increasing by 140% between 2021 and 2023) and semiconductors (a 45% rise in exports during the same period⁷). China has also supplied industrial technologies, including machinery; for example, its share in Russia's imports of machine tools soared from 28% in 2021 to about 90% in 2023.⁸ As a result, economic ties between China and Russia have deepened further. China's share in Russia's foreign trade grew from 18% in 2021 to 33% in 2023, with imports rising from 25% to 39% and exports surging from 13.8% to 28%. In the first ten months of 2024, China accounted for 33.8% of Russia's foreign trade.⁹

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in all areas, including defence. The first clear indication that China would not distance itself from Russia came on 30 March 2022, when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, during the latter's first visit to China since the invasion began. Wang stated that Chinese-Russian relations had “withstood a new test in the evolving international landscape” and expressed Beijing's readiness to “elevate Chinese-Russian relations to a higher level”. He also echoed Russia's interpretation of the conflict's origins, but did not at that stage blame the US directly.

Xi Jinping reaffirmed this stance during a phone call with Putin on 15 June 2022, pledging deeper strategic coordination and extensive support on issues related to the “fundamental interests” of both sides. This commitment was underscored by Xi's official visit to Moscow in March 2023, followed by Putin's visit to Beijing seven months later, as the two leaders maintained the tradition of frequent

⁵ See K. Strachota, K. Chawryło, M. Bogusz, M. Menkiszak, ‘Against the backdrop of war. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Samarkand’, OSW, 20 September 2022, osw.waw.pl.

⁶ A. Rinke, ‘Xi opposing nuclear weapons in Ukraine was reason enough to visit China, Scholz says’, Reuters, 5 November 2022, reuters.com; ‘China's Xi: Nuclear wars cannot be fought in Ukraine – China foreign minister’, Reuters, 15 November 2022, reuters.com; Upholding the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons for World Peace and Development, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2 August 2022, fmprc.gov.cn; ‘Xi Jinping warned Vladimir Putin against nuclear attack in Ukraine’, Financial Times, 4 July 2023, ft.com.

⁷ Based on data from trademap.org.

⁸ P. Lugin, ‘Chinese Machine Tools Serve as Russia's Safety Net’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 21, no. 9, 22 January 2024, after: jamestown.org.

⁹ Data for 2021–23: С. Цыплаков, ‘Об основных трендах развития торговли России и Китая’, Российский совет по международным делам, 13 September 2024, russiancouncil.ru; data for 2024: ‘Таможня раскрыла топ-10 торговых партнеров России’, РБК, 2 January 2025, rbc.ru.

high-level engagements. Finally, during Putin's visit to China in May 2024, the two sides signed a declaration committing themselves to intensifying joint efforts aimed at countering the US policy of the 'dual containment' of Russia and China. In the context of Russia's confrontation with the West, this declaration, which contradicted the stated principle that Chinese-Russian relations are not directed against any third party, represented a clear signal of China's support for Russia and it may be seen a major political success for the Kremlin.

In another clear illustration of China's support for Russia, Chinese-Russian military cooperation has continued and even intensified. The armed forces of the two countries

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have been conducting joint exercises; the annual number of these drills increased from an average of three between 2011 and 2021 to five between 2022 and 2024.¹⁰ The complexity of these exercises and the depth of cooperation also appear to be growing. Over the three years of the war in Ukraine, several new elements have been introduced into these drills. These include combat aircraft using the partner's airbases and practising airstrikes on the partner's territory after taking off from domestic airfields as well as a joint Chinese-Russian command centre located on Russian territory.¹¹

...and its limits

In the clearest sign of limits to Chinese-Russian cooperation, a number of Chinese banks have refused to process transactions with Russia due to fears that they could be exposed to secondary sanctions. This trend became so widespread that Russian exports to China stalled in the second quarter of 2024 and even fell in the third quarter. Similarly, Russian imports decreased during the second quarter of 2024 compared to the same period in the previous year.¹² This appears to be linked to payment issues between businesses in the two countries stemming from Western sanctions. However, an uptick at the turn of the year suggests that the two sides have found ways to at least partially circumvent these restrictions.

Russia is also dissatisfied that the growing trade volume has not been accompanied by a significant increase in Chinese investments. It was not until August 2024 that the joint commission on promoting investments managed to agree on and approve a list of investment projects. However, this does not mean that these will swiftly move onto the implementation stage. Negotiations on updating the agreement on mutual investment protection, which have been dragging on for years, have yet to be concluded. Without this update, an increase in Chinese investments is unlikely. Another factor is that the ongoing war and sanctions have reinforced the long-standing perception in China that Russia is a risky and low-profit market for business.

The structure of bilateral trade, a persistent concern for Russia, has not improved either. Russian exports remain dominated by raw materials and semi-finished goods, while China primarily exports machinery and highly processed goods. This trend has become further entrenched due to China's expansion into the Russian industrial goods market to fill the gaps left by European producers, particularly in

¹⁰ R.D. Blackwill, R. Fontaine, 'No Limits? The China-Russia Relationship and U.S. Foreign Policy', Council of Foreign Relations, *Council Special Report*, no. 99, December 2024, p. 17, cfr.org.

¹¹ Yu Bin, 'Testing The Limits Of Strategic Partnership', *Comparative Connections*, vol. 25, no. 2 (September 2023), pp. 165–167; *idem*, 'Moscow and Beijing at the Dawn of A Grave New World of Trump 2.0', *Comparative Connections*, vol. 26, no. 2 (December 2024), pp. 195–196, 201, after: cc.pacforum.org; Ren Xu, Liu Baorui, 'Chinese, Russian troops get ready for Northern/Interaction-2024 exercise', China Military Online, 10 September 2024, eng.chinamil.com.cn.

¹² Data from trademap.org.

the automotive sector. The gradual opening of the Chinese market to Russian agricultural exports is the only positive development in the area of trade.

Similarly in the political and diplomatic sphere, Russia had to acknowledge and accept China's formal stance on the Russia-Ukraine war, even though it fell short of

unequivocal, full support for Russia's actions. Certain aspects of this position carried implicit criticism of Russia, although China has never condemned Russia's invasion or criticised its actions explicitly. These aspects included emphasising the principles of international law, notably the requirement to resolve conflicts through peaceful means and to respect the territorial integrity of states.

As a result, during voting at the UN (in the Security Council and General Assembly) on Russia's aggression, China chose to abstain rather than vote against resolutions condemning Russia. The peace plan that China announced in February 2023¹³ was designed to portray it as a neutral party. Although largely propaganda-driven, China's calls for an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine are politically inconvenient for Russia.

The balance of gains and losses for China...

After three years of war, China believes that it has succeeded in maintaining a semblance of neutrality, which is particularly crucial in its relations with the countries of the Global South. The ongoing conflict continues to absorb US attention and resources. The authoritarian, anti-Western and China-friendly regime in Moscow has survived and even gained strength, which is a key factor for China's strategic outlook. Furthermore, the risk of Putin resorting to weapons of mass destruction or dragging China into a premature conflict with the US out of desperation has diminished. In addition, the broader international environment, including the conflict in the Middle East, has deepened divisions between the West and the Global South, lowering China's political and reputational costs for supporting Russia. The expanding scope of sanctions targeting third-country entities (including Chinese firms) for aiding Russia's war effort remains a serious challenge. However, these measures have not had a major impact on China's economy as a whole.

In the overall assessment of gains and losses, China may conclude that while the Russian invasion of Ukraine has failed to deliver all the expected benefits after three years, those gains could still materialise over time. Meanwhile, the West continues to drain its resources and Russia is becoming increasingly dependent on China. The costs remain acceptable as long as there is no risk of the Kremlin regime collapsing or the conflict spiralling out of control, particularly into East Asia. For these reasons, it may be concluded that, contrary to its propaganda narratives, China has no incentive to push for a quick end to the war.

...and for Russia

For Russia, its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the parallel hybrid war against the West have also become a test of the relationship with China which it has cultivated since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Given the complexities of Chinese-Russian relations, the history of interactions within the Moscow-Beijing-Washington triangle and the scale of China's economic ties with the United States, the Kremlin may have been concerned that, in the event of a protracted conflict and mounting US

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¹³ See M. Bogusz, 'A tactical pause in relations with the West: China plays on hopes for peace', *OSW Commentary*, no. 478, 28 December 2022, osw.waw.pl.

pressure, China would distance itself from Russia and adopt a less favourable form of neutrality. However, their relationship has passed this test. Despite strong pressure from the West, particularly the United States, and China's formal distancing from the conflict, China has provided Russia with economic, political and diplomatic support.

China's support, particularly in the economic sphere, is critical for the Kremlin and cannot be replaced by any other partner. In the context of Russia's conflict with the West and its war against Ukraine, China

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has emerged as the Kremlin's most important and indispensable enabler. As a result, Chinese-Russian relations have continued to deepen. The framework that the two countries have been developing over more than three decades, currently described as a 'comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for the new era', has effectively evolved into an informal anti-US alliance and has proven its worth in practice. According to the official narrative, China and Russia share a relationship that "surpasses allied relations".¹⁴

Russian fears of Chinese dominance?

The deepening relationship with China, coupled with growing economic asymmetry, has sparked concerns within parts of the Russian elite and society about Russia becoming overly dependent on China. Russian experts on Chinese-Russian relations have acknowledged this relatively openly,¹⁵ while analyses published by Kremlin-linked commentators to dismiss these fears as unfounded have provided indirect evidence of this mindset. First of all, these analysts have argued that, given the escalating and irreconcilable conflict between China and the US, Russia has become an indispensable ally for China, which means that the dependency between the two partners is now mutual. Moreover, China's economic dominance is still, to some extent, offset by Russia's military advantage, particularly in terms of its nuclear capabilities.

The independence of Russia's policy is also illustrated by its ongoing close military-technical cooperation with countries at odds with China, such as India and Vietnam. With regard to Central Asia, many contend that Russia and China have managed to move away from a zero-sum game approach in favour of developing a framework based on shared interests – namely, maintaining the stability of this region and pushing back against the West as a strategic rival. Russia's autonomy as regards China is further reinforced by its alliance with North Korea, which Beijing had to accept despite the numerous risks it entails. Lower-ranking Chinese officials have repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the deepening cooperation between Russia and North Korea. However, it is difficult to determine whether these statements were intended as warnings to the governments Moscow and Pyongyang or formed part of a broader diplomatic effort directed at the West.¹⁶

These arguments can be considered valid. It is worth adding that, despite China's explicit disapproval, the Kremlin has repeatedly employed nuclear threats against the West and Ukraine. In addition,

¹⁴ Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov first used this phrase on 4 February 2022 during Vladimir Putin's visit to Beijing, referencing the words of Chairman Xi Jinping. See 'Ответы Министра иностранных дел Российской Федерации С.В. Лаврова на вопросы российских СМИ, Пекин, 4 февраля 2022 года', The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 4 February 2022, mid.ru.

¹⁵ See, for example С.Г. Лузянин, 'Россия и Китай: партнерство расширяется', *Азия и Африка сегодня* 2023, no. 4, p. 6., after: publications.hse.ru.

¹⁶ M. Bogusz, 'Acceptance regardless of the costs: China's stance on the Russia–North Korea alliance', *OSW Commentary*, no. 636, 3 December 2024, osw.waw.pl.

Russia took the decision to deploy its nuclear weapons in Belarus in defiance of China's officially stated opposition to such deployments in third countries. However, it should be noted that China has refrained from directly criticising these actions.

Therefore, all evidence suggests that the Kremlin is willing to accept the existing asymmetry in its relationship with Beijing, believing that the risk of China exploiting this imbalance is mitigated by the fact that Russia remains an indispensable ally for China in its confrontation with the US.

Outlook: the durability of the *de facto* alliance between China and Russia

The positive balance of its *de facto* alliance with China to date will encourage the Kremlin to continue its current policy towards China, extending the two countries' political and military cooperation in order to weaken the West's position and work together with Beijing towards building a new international order that would be 'friendly' to both regimes. Russia appears unwilling to revise this policy, even though it has failed to deliver the desired results in the economic sphere. However, the Kremlin seems to remain hopeful that this may eventually change.

Even an end to the war in Ukraine on Russian terms would not prompt the Kremlin to reconsider its 'pivot to China'. On the contrary, a potential victory over the West in Ukraine would serve only strengthen its ambitions to revise the post-Cold War order both in Europe and globally. It is clear that the alliance with China will remain a prerequisite for achieving these goals. Moreover, a Russian victory in Ukraine serving as a positive test of this alliance would reinforce the Kremlin's belief in a fundamental alignment of interests between Beijing and Moscow.

In the future, China may attempt to leverage its influence over Russia in order to seek tactical concessions from the United States. Given the high level of coordination between China and Russia, it is likely that any such efforts would primarily serve as an opportunity for both countries to extract the maximum benefits from Washington.