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Sino-Russian Relations and the War in Ukraine

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ABSTRACT: Claims that China has taken “Russia’s side” in the Ukrainian War oversimplify Sino-Russian relations. We contend Sino-Russian relations are a narrow partnership centered on accelerating the emergence of a multipolar order to reduce American hegemony and illustrate this point by tracing the discursive and empirical foundations of the relationship using primary and secondary materials. Furthermore, we highlight how the war has created challenges and opportunities for China’s other strategic interests, some at the expense of the United States or Russia.

Keywords: China, Russia, Ukraine war, strategic partnership, multipolarity

On February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation began an offensive on Ukrainian territory escalating a war that began eight years earlier with the annexation of Crimea. This event prompted a more resolute response by the United States and its partners, resulting in a two-pronged approach for compelling Russia to withdraw from Ukraine. One approach involved a series of economic sanctions, and the other involved steadfast support of the Ukrainian government and armed forces through financial aid and military equipment assistance.¹ However, despite rallying consensus on these key areas among its European and Asian partners, the United States has fared poorly in galvanizing support from the Global South.²

More concerning has been Washington’s inability to secure support from Beijing which has instead opted to amplify Moscow’s talking points rather than utilize its influence to change Russian President Vladimir Putin’s behavior. This problem has led US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to tell his Chinese counterpart, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, that China should “stand up and make its voice heard.”³ Blinken has also stated that “China in particular has a responsibility

1. “FACT SHEET: United States and G7 Partners Impose Severe Costs for Putin’s War against Ukraine,” White House (website), May 8, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/08/fact-sheet-united-states-and-g7-partners-impose-severe-costs-for-putins-war-against-ukraine/>; FACT SHEET: White House Calls on Congress to Provide Additional Support for Ukraine,” White House (website), April 28, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/04/28/fact-sheet-white-house-calls-on-congress-to-provide-additional-support-for-ukraine/>.

2. Heather Ashby and Joseph Sany, “On Ukraine, Africa Needs a Clearer U.S. Message,” United States Institute of Peace (website), May 17, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/ukraine-africa-needs-clearer-us-message>.

3. “Secretary Blinken with Jake Tapper of CNN – Interview,” US Department of State (website), March 6, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-on-cnn-state-of-the-union-with-jake-tapper/>.

to use its influence with Putin and to defend the international rules and principles that it professes to support,” adding he fears “China is moving in the opposite direction by refusing to condemn this aggression, while seeking to portray itself as a neutral arbiter.”⁴ For his part, US President Joe Biden communicated to his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, the “implications and consequences” should China aid Russia in its attacks on Ukrainian cities and civilians.⁵

These statements illustrate Washington’s growing frustration with Beijing as the conflict continues to unfold. In the context of the deterioration of US-Chinese relations in recent years, Beijing’s position is increasingly viewed as pro-Moscow and a sign of authoritarian unity against the “rules-based” international order. This view fundamentally oversimplifies Sino-Russian relations and fails to account for the impact the Ukrainian invasion might have on them.

In light of the current strategic context, we advance two arguments. The first is that the Sino-Russian relationship is best understood as a limited strategic partnership aimed at accelerating the emergence of a multipolar order to reduce American hegemony. It should not be viewed as a deep relationship involving coordination across the policy spectrum; instead each party perceives it will benefit from a multipolar order in which the other is a pole. The second is that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is simultaneously a challenge and an opportunity for China. Challenges include a potential blow to China’s credibility as a champion of sovereignty, territorial integrity, noninterference, and the possibility Russia’s poor performance will leave it unable to act as a pole in the emerging multipolar order. On the other hand, China has the opportunity to reorient pressure on itself by providing relief to developing countries impacted by the economic sanctions leveled by America and its allies. Furthermore, Russia’s isolation due to sanctions provides China with greater leverage in its bilateral relations.

This article breaks down into three parts to address these points. The first section focuses on the history of Sino-Russian relations and the emergence of their strategic partnership aimed at establishing a multipolar order. The second section focuses on how Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is simultaneously a challenge

4. “Secretary Anthony J. Blinken at a Press Availability,” US Department of State (website), March 17, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-press-availability-16/>.

5. “Readout of President Joseph R. Biden Jr. Call with President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China,” White House (website), March 18, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/18/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-president-xi-jinping-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-2/>.

and an opportunity for China by utilizing empirical cases in the Global South. Lastly, the conclusion outlines the implications of our findings for US interests.

Sino-Russian Relations: Promoting a Multipolar Order

The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance in 1950 gave way to a Sino-Soviet split within a decade. This split exposed the personality and ideological tensions between Chinese and Soviet leaders and the historical tensions over unequal treaties involving border demarcation dating from the nineteenth century.⁶ These issues resulted in several border clashes that brought the former allies close to war.⁷ Consequently, it would take a change in leadership in both countries for rapprochement to begin in earnest in the early 1980s.⁸ Then-General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev's speech in Vladivostok on July 28, 1986, provided an opening for the two countries to normalize relations. In his speech, Gorbachev indicated his willingness to address key Chinese concerns, particularly the reduction of forces along the Sino-Soviet border and the establishment of concessions on disputed territory along the border.⁹ Ultimately, the resumption of negotiations on these two issues paved the way for closer ties between China and Russia in the post-Cold War era.

Their relationship, however, is not predicated on deeply shared politics or economics. Instead, it hinges on how the two countries independently and jointly want to operate in the international system, which contrasts with how neither side viewed the other as a legitimate actor after the Sino-Soviet split. Differences among leaders, images of idealized communism, leadership roles, perceptions of threat, territorial disputes, and proxy wars contributed to an unequal partnership and growing separation.¹⁰ This separation became more apparent when the administration of President Richard M. Nixon pressured the Soviet Union by improving relations with its "chief rival in the communist world, the People's Republic of China."¹¹ About two decades later, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the bipolar system shifted to a unipolar one. Within a few

6. See Danhui Li and Yafeng Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1959–1973: A New History* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020); Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, University Press, 2010); "A Comment on the Statement of the Communist Party of the U.S.A.," *People's Daily* (website), March 8, 1963, 12, www.marx2mao.com/Other/CCP2CPUSA63.pdf.

7. Yang Kuisong, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement," *Cold War History* 1, no. 1 (2000): 21–52.

8. Sergey Radchenko, *Unwanted Visionaries: The Soviet Failure in Asia at the End of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10–50.

9. See Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, *Speech by Mikhail Gorbachev in Vladivostok, July 28, 1986* (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1986); and Joseph M. Ha, "Gorbachev's Bold Asian Initiatives: Vladivostok and Beyond," *Asian Perspective* 12, no. 1 (1988): 5–33.

10. Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 349.

11. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 292.

years, their relations improved considerably as the two countries reached landmark agreements on demilitarizing, demarcating, and delineating their respective borders. Consequently, despite sharing limited security interests, these gradual steps provided an avenue for a strategic partnership aimed at accelerating the emergence of a multipolar international order.

Susan Turner observes that in the early 1990s, China and Russia experienced an identity crisis as they began articulating their partnership. One area of converging interest was their mutual support for a multipolar order which became “a joint cause in many of their statements, declarations, and treaties.”¹² This goal was first encapsulated in the 1997 “Joint Russian–Chinese Declaration about a Multipolar World and the Formation of a New World Order.” This declaration was followed by the regional Shanghai Cooperation Organization agreement, where China and Russia were the senior partners involved in more in-depth multilateral military exercises than the various eras of the Treaty of Friendship.¹³

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization regional interactions do not extend to deep mutual expectations or obligations. Its charter from 2002 referenced the members’ historical ties and a desire for regional coordination and stability in an “environment of developing political multipolarity.”¹⁴ Their interaction through the organization increased coordination in the Central Asian region and competition more generally defined relations where individual states could play Russia and China against each other.

Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, many diplomatic statements from China and Russia have broadly stressed support for a multipolar order. For example, during a visit to China on March 30, 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov indicated Russia’s actions would clarify the international situation. Specifically, he claimed that with like-minded partners, the world would “move towards a multipolar, equitable, and democratic world order.”¹⁵ In his response, Wang Yi stated, “our striving for peace has no limits, our upholding of security has no limits, our opposition towards hegemony has no limits.”¹⁶ The readout of the meeting highlights the key roles China and Russia play in promoting greater

12. Susan Turner “Russia, China and a Multipolar World Order: The Danger in the Undefined,” *Asian Perspective* 33, no. 1 (2009): 159–84.

13. Alexander Marrow and Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber, “Russia, China Extend Friendship and Cooperation Treaty - Kremlin,” Reuters (website), June 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/russia-china-extend-friendship-cooperation-treaty-kremlin-2021-06-28/>.

14. United Nations, Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Saint Petersburg, June 7, 2002), 245, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%202896/Part/volume-2896-I-50517.pdf>.

15. “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Opening Remarks during Talks with Foreign Minister of the People’s Republic of China Wang Yi,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russia Federation (website), March 30, 2022, https://mid.ru/fr/foreign_policy/news/1807067/?lang=en.

16. “China, Russia Slam ‘Illegal’ International Sanctions Targeting Putin Over Ukraine,” Radio Free Asia (website), March 30, 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/russia-ukraine-03302022094602.html>.

multipolarity in the international system.¹⁷ In other words, the Ukraine war has not undermined the commitment of both sides to advancing the emergence of a multipolar order. Indeed, the response by the United States and its partners to Russia's aggression has buttressed the Sino-Russian partnership on this issue.

While China and Russia agree on a multipolar international order, they disagree on who its primary members will be. In Chinese President Xi Jinping's conversation with French President Emmanuel Macron in February 2022, he indicated China believes European strength is conducive to developing a multipolar world.¹⁸ In other words, Chinese officials see the EU as an important pole in the international system, while Russia views it as a threat. Although both China and Russia want the EU to move away from the United States, the Kremlin sees the European block as a security threat, whereas China considers it a trading partner. Nevertheless, while the composition of the order is contested, the general outline espoused by China and Russia has existed for decades, even if the individual characters and characteristics differ.

Chinese and Russian official statements promoting a multipolar order appear regularly in their respective post-Cold War documents. This consistent reaffirmation indicates China and Russia organize around the ideas and recognize that the other does as well. For example, China has historically associated multipolarity with greater domestic and international autonomy in decision making.¹⁹ Martin A. Smith argues that Russia sees multipolarity as a concept that evolved from a polemic tool to a unifying policy concept that reinforces sovereignty. Therefore, emphasizing multipolarity functions is an indirect critique of the established pole, the United States.²⁰ For both countries, the approach is about asserting the shared idea that more autonomous decision making exists under multipolarity.

Over time multipolarity has transformed from a criticism to a desired order. As articulated by Russia and China, this order primarily operates in the domain of ideas and argues they contest the ideas developed during the "Unipolar Moment" with the United States as the sole great power.²¹ The current emphasis on a multipolar order does not preclude the possibility of Chinese leaders eventually seeking their own unipolar moment. However, official narratives and empirical

17. "Wang Yi Hold Talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 30, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220331_10658029.html.

18. "Xi Eyes New Driving Forces for China-France Cooperation," *Xinhua* (website), February 25, 2022, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-02/26/c_139767737.htm.

19. Brantly Womack, "Asymmetry Theory and China's Concept of Multipolarity," *Journal of Contemporary China* 13, no. 39 (2004): 351–66.

20. Martin A. Smith, "Russia and Multipolarity since the End of the Cold War," *East European Politics* 29, no. 1 (2013): 36–51.

21. Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs*, December 1, 1989, 23, <https://www-foreigndaffairs-com.usawc.idm.oclc.org/articles/1990-01-01/unipolar-moment>.

evidence indicate that in the coming decades, their efforts are geared toward accelerating the emergence of a multipolar order. In their view, a multipolar order would result in a dominant position for China in the East Asia region and a key global role in which Beijing has greater capacity to shape international rules and norms.²²

A Future with the Commitment Problem

In the future, can we expect China and Russia to continue reaffirming the idea of a multipolar world where they have a prominent place at the global leadership table? While Russia's political and economic abilities are compromised, how China develops economically will be just as important a factor in their relationship. As was the case in recent decades of Sino-Russian relations, there continue to be bilateral interactions but no ingrained commitments.

In other words, the implications of the war and economic slowdown may make China and Russia play a closer coordinating role in influencing the international system because they would recognize the limitations of acting independently. While policymakers in the United States have understandably been interested in the Belt and Road Initiative, fewer have focused on China shifting to a dual-circulation model. The Chinese Communist Party is advancing the goal of producing goods for domestic and global consumption. This additional influence of increased domestic consumption in China is responsible for the International Monetary Fund revising downward the expectations of China's economic growth.²³ Furthermore, while the outcome of the Ukrainian war is unknown, Russia will likely be in a worse position in the international system. Its future seems to include less global energy demand and other countries aligned against it, including the pending membership of Finland and Sweden in NATO.

These are examples where China may capitalize on Russian isolation for access to resources and as a global financial intermediary. For decades a long-delayed, but now-online natural gas pipeline between Russia and China appeared to be mutually beneficial. While neither side has much interest in exchanging in respective currency or in bartering for goods, it bears watching to see how much China commits to the project going forward and assists Russia with its financial

22. Alastair Iain Johnston, "China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations," *International Security* 44, no. 2 (2019): 9–60.

23. "World Economic Outlook April 2022: War Sets Back the Global Recovery," International Monetary Fund (website), n.d., <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2022/04/19/world-economic-outlook-april-2022>.

strain. This commitment will be emblematic of how each side deals with existing bilateral differences in the face of new challenges.

For China and Russia to become much closer, the reasoning would be in tension with general arguments in balance-of-power theory. These arguments emphasize the role major powers play in global affairs because they more often perceive other powers as threats rather than allies.²⁴ This pair generally accepts a lot of assumptions about the economy of major and great powers. It seems likely that in a multipolar relationship, there would be more areas of agreement and disagreement between China and Russia than there have been in recent decades. Their opposition to the West will push them closer together within the constraints of their objectives and generally weaken ties. Simultaneously, they will also seem to be untrusting of each other to get involved in significant commitments.

The commitment problem influences a range of relations but is acute in the international system, where states sometimes break agreements and treaties. Therefore, the general assumptions for how Russia and China operate in the international order may be stable, but they will plausibly weaken in the face of efforts to expand commitments. This assumption may lead us to ask what the bilateral and systemic implications are when states seek to avoid the challenges inherent in the commitment problem.

Russia and China's shared outlook on the international order does not indicate unity of action. Both sides have expressed support for a multilateral order and criticism of the United States and its partners during the war. China, however, has routinely called for an end to the war without direct criticizing Russia and has avoided direct support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In short, the absence of deep commitments means the resulting words and deeds under a system of alliance like NATO are different than the conceptual arrangement between Russia and China. It will not be easy to parse the differences between commitment and noncommitment because all interactions will involve words and deeds that may resemble each other. To move toward significant commitment, Russia or China would incur significant security costs and risks for the other. Currently, they avoid the commitment problem and its side effects.

The Russo-Ukrainian War: Challenges and Opportunities for China

Russia's escalation of the conflict in Ukraine has generated challenges and opportunities for China. Understanding these dynamics is crucial because they reveal areas of convergence and divergence in Sino-Russian relations and prevent the simplistic perception that Beijing has effectively sided with Moscow.

24. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1979), 127.

These dynamics are particularly important given the joint statement released on February 4, 2022, at the start of the Beijing Winter Olympics, declaring the friendship between the two states has “no limits,” which implies this alignment has been solidified.²⁵ Russia’s actions, however, have created problems for China’s other policy priorities, though evidence suggests Beijing is also strategically exploiting the crisis for its benefit. In other words, it is less about China taking sides than it is about China navigating the geopolitical effects of the conflict in ways that secure its interests.

Challenges

The biggest direct challenge posed by Russian aggression in Ukraine is to the cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy: the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.²⁶ Although not always explicitly mentioned, these principles, embedded in key foreign policy statements by Chinese officials, have been used to generate international support. For example, Xi Jinping’s 2013 speeches announcing the Silk Road Economic Belt in Astana, Kazakhstan, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in Jakarta, Indonesia, highlighted the importance of sovereignty and noninterference.²⁷ His 2017 United Nations speech outlining his vision for a “Community of Shared Future for Mankind” also refers to these principles.²⁸ These principles serve as the basis for presenting China as a nonhegemonic international actor and also allow Beijing to critique implicitly the approach of the United States and its partners to foreign policy.²⁹ Furthermore, they serve as the basis for Chinese solidarity with the Global South.³⁰ Thus, it is in China’s interest to be seen as a supporter of these principles since they have been shown to provide policy benefits.

Russia’s aggression in Ukraine exposes the inherent tension between China’s strategic partnership with Russia, which it sees as necessary in a multipolar international order, and its image as a protector of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in the face of American hegemony. Consequently, Beijing’s messaging appears contradictory since it simultaneously voices support for the

25. “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” President of Russia, February 4, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

26. These refer to (1) mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, (2) mutual nonaggression, (3) noninterference in each other’s internal affairs, (4) equality and mutual benefit, and (5) peaceful coexistence.

27. See “Promote Friendship between Our People and Work Together to Build a Bright Future,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Kingdom of Belgium (website), September 7, 2013, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cebel/eng/zxxx/t1078088.htm>; and “Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament,” ASEAN-China Centre (website), October 3, 2013, http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm.

28. “Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Iraq, January 18, 2017, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceiq/eng/zygx/t1432869.htm>.

29. Zenel Garcia, *China’s Western Frontier and Eurasia: The Politics of State and Region-Building* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 7.

30. Garcia, *China’s Western Frontier*, 190.

sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, while amplifying Moscow's talking points on NATO and refusing to refer to its actions as an invasion.³¹ While this may be interpreted as hypocrisy on Beijing's part, these statements reveal it is trying to walk a tightrope in the context of the geopolitical crisis Russia's invasion has set off. Because Beijing places a lot of weight on Moscow's role as a pole in the emerging multipolar order, it cannot situate itself squarely against Moscow in ways that would seriously damage its ability to play that role.

Furthermore, China shares a long border with Russia, and the latter continues to play an important security role in Central Asia, which has important implications for the stability of China's western frontiers.³² Russia's assistance in putting down anti-government protests in Kazakhstan in January 2022 highlights this point.³³ The fact that the Russian military has fared poorly in Ukraine only reinforces the need for China to walk that tightrope. Beijing cannot overtly support Russia without undercutting China's reputation as champion of sovereignty and risking secondary sanctions from the United States. Simultaneously, Beijing cannot pressure Moscow and undermine its strategic partnership.

Additionally, China relies on Russian strength to secure Central Asia, an area it has invested heavily in and considers vital to the stability of its interior.³⁴ Another concern for Beijing is that a weakened Russia, further isolated by China, may choose to play a destabilizing role along its frontiers—much like the USSR did at the height of the Sino-Soviet split.³⁵ Beijing is operating in a fundamentally different strategic environment than Washington.

Opportunities

A United Nations General Assembly vote on March 2, 2022, calling for the war's end and the withdrawal of Russian troops, indicated broad support in the Global South.³⁶ Even in Africa, where the number of abstentions was the highest, over half the countries voted in favor of ending the conflict.³⁷ Hence, Beijing's

31. See "State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (website), March 7, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220308_10649559.html; and "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (website), April 11, 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202204/t20220411_10666750.html.

32. Jakob Hedenskog, Erika Holmquist, and Johan Norberg, *Security in Central Asia: Russian Policy and Military Posture* (Stockholm: FOI Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2019), 1–96, <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--4756--SE>.

33. Nastassia Astrasheuskaya, "Russian Troops to Withdraw, Says Kazakhstan's President," *Financial Times* (website), January 11, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/d550169b-d50d-4188-86d7-91227810a43d>.

34. Garcia, *China's Western Frontier*, 53.

35. Garcia, *China's Western Frontier*, 53.

36. See "A/RES/ED-11/1 Aggression against Ukraine: Resolution/Adopted by the General Assembly," United Nations (website), March 2, 2022, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3965290?ln=en>; and "Aggression against Ukraine: Resolution/Adopted by the General Assembly Vote," United Nations (website), March 2, 2022, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3959039>.

37. "A/RES/ED-11/1."

efforts to develop a compelling counternarrative to its perceived support for Russia proved difficult early on, given the challenge of reconciling the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, by late March, Beijing began to generate a coherent narrative on its position, which allowed it to exploit emerging opportunities. This narrative focuses on the United States' reaction to the invasion rather than the invasion itself and makes three key points aimed at developing countries in the Global South.

The first area focused on presenting China's position as "objective and fair, and on the right side of history."³⁸ In this context, Beijing's narrative contends that its position is balanced and more conducive to promoting a peaceful settlement of the disputes than the United States and its partners, which are operating in a "Cold War mentality."³⁹ As Foreign Minister Wang Yi indicated, "an enduring solution is to reject the Cold War mentality, refrain from bloc confrontation, and truly build a balanced, effective and sustainable security architecture for the region, so that long-term stability and security in the European continent can be achieved."⁴⁰ This framing allows Chinese officials to present the United States and its partners as the actual impediment to the resolution of the conflict, rather than its unwillingness to pressure Moscow.

The second component of the narrative builds on the first, critiquing Washington's efforts to build a broader coalition of support in the Global South against Russian aggression. Wang Yi has framed this move as a form of coercion and argues "all countries have the right to independently decide their external policies."⁴¹ He contends, "when dealing with complex issues and divergent views, one should not opt for the simplistic approach of "friend or foe" and "black or white," adding that "it is particularly important to resist Cold War mentality."⁴² This statement again reorients the focus away from Beijing's position by casting the United States as a source of instability. Furthermore, it connects directly to Beijing's long-standing narrative on sovereignty and noninterference.

The third and final component of the narrative focuses on the economic effects of the conflict and the sanctions imposed by the United States and its partners. In a meeting with African leaders in late March, Wang Yi stated the conflict in Ukraine was "spilling over to the world," adding that the "African continent

38. "Wang Yi: China's Position is Objective and Fair, and on the Right Side of History," Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland (website), March 18, 2022, http://geneva.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202203/t20220320_10653564.htm.

39. "Wang Yi: China's Position."

40. "Wang Yi: China's Position."

41. "Wang Yi: China and Other Developing Countries have Reasonable Concerns and Similar Positions on the Current Situation in Europe," Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland (website), March 20, 2022, http://geneva.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202203/t20220320_10653593.htm.

42. "Wang Yi: China and Other Developing Countries."

in particular should not be forgotten and should no longer be marginalized.”⁴³ While these meetings were scheduled before the invasion of Ukraine, Wang Yi capitalized on the economic uncertainty caused by the conflict among developing countries to promote the Belt and Road Initiative and other development programs in the African continent.⁴⁴ In the process, he cast China as a responsible actor taking an interest in the economic plight of these countries in the Global South. Furthermore, Wang Yi argued unilateral sanctions were fracturing global industrial and supply chains in the context of the ongoing pandemic.⁴⁵ This fracturing, he claimed, would negatively affect the livelihood of people around the world “who bear no responsibility for the conflict, but who are effectively paying for geopolitical conflicts and major-country competition.”⁴⁶

Beyond expanding its foothold in the Global South, Beijing will reap the benefits of Moscow’s self-inflicted wounds as it has in the past. For example, despite the instability the collapse of the Soviet Union caused China, it allowed Beijing to establish a foothold in Central Asia to secure its western frontier. Furthermore, Moscow’s interference in the domestic affairs of Central Asia has prompted these republics to pursue multivector policies, which facilitated Chinese engagement in the region and allowed it to gain access to hydrocarbon and mineral resources.⁴⁷ These actions eventually led to the construction of the Central Asia Pipeline, which accounts for about 20 percent of China’s gas consumption.⁴⁸

Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 provided another opportunity for China. The resulting Western sanctions left Moscow with few options except to turn to Beijing for investment. Consequently, Chinese investments in critical Russian economic sectors that had stalled due to the latter’s informal barriers were approved.⁴⁹ The outcome of the Power of Siberia Pipeline benefited from this delay,

43. “Wang Yi: The More Turbulent the International Situation is, the More Support and Assistance to Africa Should be Increased,” Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland (website), March 20, 2022, http://geneva.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202203/t20220320_10653589.htm.

44. See “Wang Yi Hold Video Talks with Tanzanian Minister for Foreign Affairs Liberata Mulamula,” Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland (website), March 20, 2022, http://geneva.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202203/t20220321_10653739.htm; and “Wang Yi Hold Talks with Algerian Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra,” Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland (website), March 20, 2022, http://ee.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202203/t20220321_10653737.htm.

45. “Wang Yi: China and Other Developing Countries Have Reasonable Concerns and Similar Positions on the Current Situation in Europe,” Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland (website), March 20, 2022, http://geneva.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202203/t20220320_10653593.htm.

46. “Wang Yi: China and Other Developing Countries.”

47. Garcia, *China’s Western Frontier*.

48. “Flow of Natural Gas from Central Asia,” China National Petroleum Corporation (website), 2016, www.cnpc.com.cn/en/FlowofnaturalgasfromCentralAsia/FlowofnaturalgasfromCentralAsia2.shtml.

49. Alexander Gabuev, “Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese Relations after the Ukraine Crisis,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (website), 2016, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CEIP_CP278_Gabuev_revised_FINAL.pdf.

given the crisis allowed China to negotiate a lower price for gas purchases.⁵⁰ The sanctions also facilitated China's involvement in the Yamal liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects in northern Russia. As a Carnegie Endowment report suggests, "due to the impact of Western sanctions," China's share in the Yamal LNG project increased to 30 percent.⁵¹ This Chinese investment endeavor allowed Russian resources to commit to liquefied natural gas and the pipeline project. When China capitalizes on Russian isolation and economic challenges, it also faces financial risks from costly projects. Due to the war in Ukraine, Russia is likely to become more reliant on Chinese investments. In time, China may face diminishing returns and the choices it currently faces on Belt and Road Initiative partnerships.

Facing unprecedented sanctions, Moscow has narrower options than in 2014. Chinese investment may be able to offer some respite; however, many Chinese firms may be reticent and unable to fill the gap due to the fear of secondary sanctions. Beijing has been adept at working informal channels for capitalizing in strategic sectors, as it proved in Iran while it was under sanctions.⁵² For now, informal channels may not be necessary given Beijing can pursue three formal options to assist Moscow.

The first option is to continue providing Russia access to the nearly \$81 billion in reserves it has denominated in renminbi (RMB), allowing it to continue trading with China.⁵³ The second option could involve increasing access to the existing RMB swap line since most Sino-Russian trade occurs in dollars and euros. The third tool Beijing could use is giving Moscow access to China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS). In theory, access to this system would provide a closed trading loop based on renminbi. These three measures could allow for trade expansion into investment sectors China has long sought to increase (such as minerals, agriculture, and water) and provide Russia with some economic relief. All three options come with significant limitations given the imbalanced nature of the Sino-Russian bilateral trade, the nascent status of CIPS and RMB internationalization, and the risk of financial exposure

50. Anastasia Kapetas, "Can China Prop Up Russia's Failing Economy?" Strategist (website), Australian Strategic Policy Institute, March 23, 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/can-china-prop-up-russias-failing-economy/>.

51. Vita Spivak and Alexander Gabuev, "The Ice Age: Russia and China's Energy Cooperation in the Arctic," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (website), December 31, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/commentary/86100>.

52. Garcia, *China's Western Frontier*, 105–6.

53. Logan Wright, Reva Goujon, Jordan Schneider, and Lauren Dudley, "Beijing's Russia Reckoning," Rhodium Group (website), March 4, 2022, <https://rhg.com/research/beijings-russia-reckoning/>.

to Russia's deteriorating economy.⁵⁴ Despite the potential limitations, it is clear Beijing stands to benefit from Moscow's increased isolation.

Conclusion and Implications

The arguments laid out above have important implications for US interests and policy. Of crucial importance is the need to recognize that the Sino-Russian relationship is a partnership predicated on a narrow set of interests (specifically, accelerating the emergence of a multipolar order). China and Russia frame their efforts as anti-hegemonic and implicitly aimed at eroding US influence. These efforts are presented as a public good, promoting state sovereignty and therefore "greater democracy in international relations."⁵⁵ Furthermore, Beijing and Moscow see each other as key poles in a multipolar order. Thus, Beijing is reticent to push Moscow in ways that undermine its capacity to play the role. This fact is especially important given the security implications for China's western frontier. In essence, the areas of convergence involve an active effort by Beijing to avoid serious commitments to Moscow beyond the narrow scope of their mutual promotion of a multipolar order and not to push Moscow into a position that would undermine its capacity to be a pole in the international system.

Additionally, there are apparent tensions regarding which actors China and Russia perceive as legitimate poles in a multipolar order. Another point of contestation is that a multipolar order does not necessarily produce an equal distribution of power as expected, given the general lack of parity across the measures of power. An isolated Russia will be in an increasingly asymmetric relationship with China—a situation Beijing may see as beneficial, but Moscow would not.

It is also important to understand how Russia's war in Ukraine has impacted China and how it has adapted to the effects of the conflict. The initial challenges Beijing faced have given way to some opportunities. Beijing found its footing by late March as it began a comprehensive effort to shift the narrative to its benefit. While its messaging may fall on deaf ears in much of the Global North, it has found a receptive audience in the Global South. That the United States has struggled to rally support from the Global South based on a clear example of Russian aggression against Ukraine indicates its approach to these countries lacks strategic empathy. In other words, there is a lack of recognition that these countries are navigating complex strategic environments. For example, while Washington has been flexible in its approach to Europe's reliance on Russian

54. See Natasha Turak, "How Much Can—and Will—China Help Russia as Its Economy Crumbles?" *CNBC* (website), March 16, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/03/16/how-much-can-and-will-china-help-russia-as-its-economy-crumbles.html>; and Wright, Goujon, Schneider, and Dudley, "Beijing's Russia Reckoning."

55. "Wang Yi Hold Talks."

energy, it has not extended this flexibility to developing countries in the Global South. Conversely, Beijing has recognized and exploited this opening to shift the narrative in these spaces. Consequently, while these countries may oppose Russian aggression, China's narrative allows them greater flexibility in their response.

Overall, US officials need to track and understand the Sino-Russian relationship in its proper context and its scope and limitations. The partnership challenges America's position in the international system, especially in the Global South, where emerging economies seek political and economic flexibility. However, the context, scopes, and limitations of the Sino-Russian relations indicate the United States and its partners can shape this relationship and its systemic impacts. This indication is especially prescient in the context of Sino-American relations, which are expected to be the most important bilateral relationship in the twenty-first century. Assumptions that Beijing has cast its lot with Moscow are a fundamental misinterpretation of the relationship and lead to erroneous policy efforts, which can severely impact already-strained Sino-American relations. As evidence suggests, China has taken its own side rather than siding with Russia.

The implications of these findings for US policy are threefold. The first is that the Sino-Russian partnership is narrow and exhibits clear signs of a commitment problem. Thus, there is space for US officials to shape China's behavior vis-à-vis Russia, particularly in the context of Ukraine. While Chinese leaders view Russia as an important pole in the emerging multipolar order, a neighbor with which it shares a long border, and a country that continues to possess capabilities impacting Chinese security, Beijing's primary concern remains political and economic stability. Fear of secondary sanctions is illustrative of this concern. Furthermore, despite the deterioration of Sino-American relations, evidence shows the United States has played a key role in shaping Chinese domestic and foreign policy in the past decades.⁵⁶ While US officials are unlikely to reorient Chinese policy fundamentally to meet their preferences, the narrow scope of the Sino-Russia relation and the importance Chinese leaders place on stability indicates there is room for shaping it.

Second, while China gained footing in its narrative on the war, Russia's act of aggression raises legitimate questions about its commitment to the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and noninterference. This situation provides an important opportunity to shape China's approach to Ukraine, and more importantly, to gain the initiative in the Global South, given the key reason the United States attained its present position in the international system was its ability to bring its most likely competitors into the fold. Most of these actors

56. Tiffany Barron et al., "Engagement Revisited: Progress Made and Lessons Learned from the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue," National Committee on American Foreign Policy (website), September 2021, https://www.ncafp.org/2016/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/NCAFP_China_Engagement_final_Sept-2021.pdf.

now face relative decline, whereas several actors in the Global South are becoming increasingly pivotal to the international order. While the United States needs its current partners and allies to maintain its position, it will need to bring these emerging powers into the fold.

The third point stems from this need to win over emerging powers. China's success is predicated on deep economic engagement and the mobilization of discursive power in ways that appeal to the countries in the Global South. Therefore, American officials must understand the currencies in these spaces are investment and trade coupled with a flexible strategic policy. In other words, they need to recognize these countries are navigating complex strategic environments that make clear alignments undesirable. Relying on political binaries and focusing on security partnerships will likely yield limited returns.

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