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**COLOSSUS OF CLOSER COOPERATION:
CHINA AND RUSSIA FORGE FRIENDSHIP**

by

Jordan T. Merritts

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Thesis Advisor:
Second Reader:

Anne L. Clunan
Michael A. Glosny

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**COLOSSUS OF CLOSER COOPERATION: CHINA AND RUSSIA FORGE
FRIENDSHIP**

Jordan T. Merritts
Major, United States Marine Corps
BSOE, Wayland Baptist University, 2006
BA, University of Arizona, 2009
MA, University of Arizona, 2012

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requirements for the degree of

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**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
June 2023**

Approved by: Anne L. Clunan
Advisor

Michael A. Glosny
Second Reader

Afshon P. Ostovar
Associate Chair for Research
Department of National Security Affairs

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, the unprecedented degree of cooperation between China and Russia has prompted national security and foreign policy experts to question the exact nature and trajectory of the relationship. Within the contexts of the coronavirus pandemic, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and India's geopolitical ascendance, this thesis examines the degree to which material interests, ideological alignment, and friendship between Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin explain the deepening of Sino-Russian relations. The research finds the promise of mutual benefit inspires closer cooperation in areas of trade and defense and demonstrates how ideological similarities serve to reinforce one another's demands for a more inclusive international system that is both more stable and less vulnerable to the West's financial and military intrusions. Though Xi and Putin's personal relationship is not the cause for strengthening partnership, it is a significant feature because it serves as the enabling mechanism for closer state-to-state collaboration. Lastly, the research suggests that despite the benefit of economic, military, and political-diplomatic cooperation, China's and Russia's pursuit of national interests is a potentially significant limitation. Given the context of state actions within the study, it appears that forfeiting national interests for the sake of sustaining the partnership is a risk neither China nor Russia is willing to accept.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	[The combined economies of] Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease of 2019
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent decades, the unprecedented degree of cooperation between China and Russia has prompted national security and foreign policy experts to question the exact nature and trajectory of the relationship. Since normalizing strained relations at the end of the Cold War, the pair has steadily worked toward establishing an unprecedented degree of economic, military, and political cooperation in the face of Western competition. As the two countries expand economic integration, reinforce security cooperation, and continue opposing the U.S.-led international order, this thesis seeks to identify the causes for a deepening Sino-Russian partnership.

The research examines China-Russia dynamics in three separate contexts. The first case study considers the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the partnership. The second case study evaluates the impact of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Beijing-Moscow dynamics. The third case places China-Russia relations squarely within the context of a geopolitically ascendant India. To understand the forces driving the strengthening of relations, the research studies the material and ideological interests of China and Russia within each of the contexts, as well as the role of Xi Jinping's and Vladimir Putin's friendship.

The research finds that material interests incentivize China and Russia to strengthen bilateral relations. In trade, their economies complement one another because Russia's export-oriented economy profits as much as China's consumption-led model. Meanwhile, Russia's crippled and isolated economy needs a bottomless market for its commodities; China's expansive industry needs a bottomless supply of fossil fuels and commodities to feed production and help stabilize the commercial order. Incentives for strong military defenses are equally as strong for the partners. For China, security cooperation with Russia is a valuable add because its armed forces are experienced, operationally active, and equipped with a sizeable arsenal of nuclear and conventional warfighting technology. Meanwhile, the Russian state has realized it can effectively tolerate the weight of U.S. and NATO-borne pressure as long as China remains at least vaguely supportive of its national and military interests.

Ideological compatibilities also inspire China and Russia to strengthen bilateral relations because both partners desire a less Western-centric, and more inclusive global power system. Beijing and Moscow share similar worldviews that encourage the partners to challenge the features of an international system that tend to deny them the prestige and influence they seek on the international stage. And although mistrust of a Western-led international order unites Beijing and Moscow, the motives amount to more than just philosophical competition with the West. China and Russia seek the mechanics of a polycentric world order that both deemphasize U.S. institutions and extend power-sharing opportunities to Eurasian centers of influence.

The personal relationship between Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin enables the strengthening of China's and Russia's strategic partnership. Based on available evidence, the presidential peers trust one another on a personal level. As such, their firm friendship functions as a springboard for furthering defense cooperation efforts, economic integration, and unified opposition to the current international order.

Finally, the research suggests that the partnership is not boundless. It is restrained by the limits of China's and Russia's national interests. Beijing and Moscow are compelled to cooperate most in areas where mutual benefit is greatest, or most convenient. Complementary economic models, common interests in defending their perceived spheres of influence, and jointly opposing the U.S.-led world order afford such opportunities. But when it comes to forfeiting national interests for the sake of sustaining the partnership, it is likely neither China nor Russia is willing to accept such a risk.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

Over the course of the past three decades, a renewed partnership between Russia and China has prompted a community of national security and foreign policy experts to question the exact nature and trajectory of the relationship. Since normalizing strained relations at the end of the Cold War, the pair has steadily worked towards establishing an unprecedented degree of economic, military, and political cooperation in the face of Western competition. Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping share increasingly overlapping interests and seek to extend influence into critical regions of the world, challenging U.S. and partnered interests abroad. As the two countries expand economic integration and reinforce security cooperation in the years ahead, national security and foreign policy professionals will closely track this trend, especially as China expands in global economic influence and Russia sustains military operations in its near abroad. This thesis addresses the following question: *What explains the deepening partnership between China and Russia?*

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

During the past decade, an increasingly influential China and decidedly disruptive Russia have driven the United States to acknowledge the realities of a dynamic and highly competitive international order.¹ Russia and China continue challenging global values and norms, casting aside respect for state sovereignty, regard for human dignity, and commitments to the principles of equality and inclusion for citizenry. As a consequence, one international relations expert explains envisioning “an all-encompassing [great power] contest that will occur in perpetuity, broaching virtually every geographical theatre and functional domain.”²

Against this background, it is a fact that the Russian and Chinese states pursue leadership status on the world stage. When considering how this pursuit of global

¹ U.S. strategic guidance documents including recent National Defense Strategy (NDS) and National Security Strategy (NSS) sharply focus on the aggressive posture of both Russia and the People’s Republic of China and Russia and label their international roles as *strategic competitors*.

² Ali Wyne, *America’s Great-Power Opportunity: Revitalizing U.S. Foreign Policy to Meet the Challenges of Strategic Competition* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2022), xii.

leadership affects the international order, there are several factors of consequence. First, the partnership's effects will depend greatly on how well Russia and China manage diplomatic tensions in advancing towards shared goals. The second is how the international community perceives the partnership's expanding role in geopolitics. Lastly, *and most importantly*, how the United States, its allies, and partners choose to respond to the shift in power balance will affect the trajectory of global politics for the remainder of the twenty-first century. Co-leadership in global affairs may not be to the detriment of allied Western democracies, nor must it necessarily advance in the direction of escalating tensions.

What is certain, however, is that if the nature of the Sino-Russian partnership is misunderstood, frictions could lead to cascading instability in the global economy and additional strains on the security environment. This research therefore intends to make sense of Russian and Chinese ambitions and explore underlying causes of a deepening relationship. Understanding not only the nature, but interests in strategic cooperation, will bring American policymakers closer to developing sensible, clear, and effective strategies to deal with the forces in question.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an abundance of literature that examines the growing role of a Sino-Russian partnership in geopolitical dynamics. Discourse is driven by a variety of academics disciplines, expanded by think tank research, and further refined by national security experts. Absent any one dominant theme, literature tends to focus on the chief impacts of the relationship on global politics, and further narrowed into studies of economic relevance, effects on a security environment, or ideological commonality. What remains however, is anything but a dominant theme, broad consensus, or singular theory that approaches understanding the cause for China and Russia deepening its strategic partnership.

This selective literature review draws from sources including peer-reviewed journals, historical narratives, and public policy research from respected think tanks. Multiple academic disciplines and an extensive community of international security experts provide the meaningful research necessary to understand the fundamental nature of Chinese and Russian partnership. The volumes of available literature on the diplomatic,

economic, and security dimensions of the partnership will nonetheless present clues as to what thrusts Beijing and Moscow into stronger union.

1. Material Advantage

Much of the available literature approaches the material advantages the relationship affords. Grounded in realism, these studies examine how material strengths support the partnership as an instrumental challenge to the United States or network of Western allies. As common markers of shifting global power, this body of literature considers the promise of economic, industrial, and military collaboration as a key component of diplomatic strengthening.³

Much of the research points to economic and industrial promise of a strengthened partnership. A great number of international relations experts identify economic integration as the foundational element for this expanding geostrategic partnership.⁴ Paul Bolt and Sharyl Cross argue that energy trade will remain the most important component of economic ties.⁵ Voskressenski argues for a broader political-economic base for the relationship. He theorizes that the total restructuring of a shared economic domain via Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) with Chinese transregional “Belt and Road” (BRI)

³ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014): 87; Hans Joaquin Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1972): 5; Waltz, Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1979).

⁴ Jean-Christophe Defraigne, “The Eurasian Economic Union and the challenge of the BRI: a comparison of their respective impacts on economic development and Russia’s regional leadership,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 62, no. 5–6 (2021): 660. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2021.1939086>; Glenn Diesen, “Europe as the Western Peninsula of Greater Eurasia,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 12, no. 1 (January 2021): 19–27; Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, “Chained to Globalization,” *Foreign Affairs* (January 2020): 70–80.ProQuest; Ann-Sophi Gast, “The Eurasian Economic Union – Keeping up with the EU and China,” *Post-Communist Economies* 33, no. 2 (June 2020): 175–199, DOI: 10.1080/14631377.2020.1827200; Ivaylo Gatev, “Playing the Game or Changing the Rules of the Game: Chinese and European Approaches to Energy Cooperation in Central Eurasia,” *East Asian Community Review* 1, no. 3–4 (2018): 165–183, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42215-019-00012-6>; Alexander Lukin, *China and Russia: The New Rapprochement* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018); Andrew Radin et al., *China-Russia Cooperation: Determining Factors, Future Trajectories, Implication for the United States* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2021), www.Rand.org/t/RR3067

⁵ Paul Bolt and Sharyl Cross, *China, Russia, and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), vii.

projects are simply responses to the antagonistic expansion of Western economic and political interests across Eurasia following the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁶

Economists explain that although China disproportionately benefits, mutual investment, exchange flow, trans-Eurasian infrastructural projects, and even nuclear commerce incentivize closer Beijing-Moscow relations because their cooperation is an instrumental challenge to a Western-dominated economic world order.⁷ Marcin Kaczmarek acknowledges but dismisses the importance of a relative power imbalance, noting that as long as China needs energy trade and arms sales, the partners still benefit from a mutually advantageous base of exchange.⁸ The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute notes that Russia and China are key stakeholders in an Arctic project that creates a more cost- and time-efficient sea-lane for the transport of energy resources for Russia and China, respectively one of the world's largest exporters and consumers.⁹ This offers another area of mutual gain.

Leading academics are very much at odds when calculating the utility of the economic partnership in strengthening the Sino-Russian positions. Glenn Diesen argues Russia's and China's geoeconomic architecture has produced a Eurasian region that decouples Europe from America's economic control and more suitably integrates it into a new region defined by efficient interconnectivity and strategic industry.¹⁰ Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman agree, explaining that the United States' attempts to weaponize

⁶ Alexei Voskressenski, "China's Relations with Russia." In *China and the World*, edited by David Shambaugh (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020): 234.

⁷ Alicia Garcia Herrero and Jianwei Xu, "How Does China Fare on the Russian Market?: Implications for the European Union," *Bruegel*, November 18, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28516>; Jane Nakano, *The Changing Geopolitics of Nuclear Energy: A look at the United States, Russia, and China* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24239>; Campos E. Silva, "Possible Legal Cooperation for a BRICS Perspective on International and Transnational Economic Law," *BRICS Law Journal* 8, no 4 (2021):31-37. <https://doi.org/10.21684/2412-2343-2021-8-4-31-37>

⁸ Marcin Kaczmarek, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order* (New York: Routledge, 2015): 4.

⁹ Camilla Sorensen and Ekaterina Klimenko, *Emerging Chinese—Russian Cooperation in the Arctic: Possibilities and Constraints* (Stockholm, Sweden: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2017), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24511>

¹⁰ Diesen, "Europe as the Western Peninsula of Greater Eurasia," 19.

financial networks has actually incentivized the states of “Greater Eurasia” to defect to networks beyond Washington’s control.¹¹ The authors rationalize that by creating strictly Eurasian networks not only expand economic connectivity with Russia, but prevent Moscow from becoming overly dependent on China.¹² Shiping Tang and Ann-Sophie Gast argue a Eurasian Economic Union does not challenge the global order, it merely seeks to modify the existing economic system under the watchful eyes of a greatly influential network of Western partners.¹³ Others, such as prominent national security analyst Graham Allison and Sino-European expert Iyaylo Gatev, are more pessimistic. Allison posits the strength of China’s economic base—with whichever states it chooses to assemble its network-- provides the substructure for the kind of power necessary to reshape global affairs.¹⁴ Gatev theorizes that China is concerned with pursuing a potentially exploitative geographic corridor under the aegis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to establish a Chinese monopoly over Eurasian energy trade.¹⁵

The second most popular theme regarding material advantages of heightened Sino-Russian relations concerns security and defense. Discussion of the military aspects of the Russian-Chinese partnership focuses on increased interoperability, continued arms transfer, and possession of advanced nuclear arsenals. As Jo Bekkevold and Bobo Lo summarize, since 2012, Beijing and Moscow have intensified military-to-military contacts, engaged in ever more ambitious bilateral military exercises, and purposefully increased the volume of arms exchange.¹⁶ Others echo, explaining regular joint military exercises

¹¹ Farrell and Abraham Newman, “Chained to Globalization,” 75–7.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Gast, “The Eurasian Economic Union – Keeping up with the EU and China;” Shiping Tang, “China and the Future International Order(s),” *Ethics & International Affairs* 32, no. 1 (Spring, 2018): 31–43, ProQuest.

¹⁴ Graham Allison, *Destined for War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015), 19.

¹⁵ Gatev, “Playing the Game or Changing the Rules of the Game: Chinese and European Approaches to Energy Cooperation in Central Eurasia.”

¹⁶ Jo Inge Bekkevold and Bobo Lo, *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 30.

improves interoperability between the two countries.¹⁷ Some, including Admiral Chris Grady, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and scholar Alexander Korolev, emphasize the persistent threat of conventional military weapons such as ballistic hypersonic missiles and a trans-Eurasian integrated early attack warning system.¹⁸

Building military strength through cooperation in non-traditional areas of defense and security extend well into this ongoing dialogue. Authors tend to agree that China and Russia are increasingly drawn to improving coordination in gray zone operations—otherwise understood as the ill-defined non-military space between contentious statesmanship and open warfare. European defense analyst Oscar Jonsson explains a complacent West falsely believes its network of democratic alliances to be in a period of peace, failing to grasp how modern warfare has evolved into a conflict that blurs the boundaries of war and peace.¹⁹ Kathleen Hicks believes that although the likelihood of conflict between the United States and either China or Russia is not great, the risks of such conflicts are profound considering their joint (and independent) capabilities in unconventional warfare including cyber and militia proxies.²⁰ National Security strategy expert Dmitry Adamsky emphasizes the effectiveness of Russian and Chinese “cross-domain coercion strategies,” an approach that allows adversaries to link nuclear, conventional, and informational (cyber) tools of influence into one powerfully-integrated

¹⁷ Andrea Kendall-Taylor, *Hearing on ‘An Emerging China-Russia Axis?: Implications for the United States in an Era of Strategic Competition* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2019), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28744>, Bolt and Cross, *China, Russia, and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, Colin Clark, “Chinese Execute ‘Huge’ Theater Level Exercise; Russia & PRC Start Joint Exercise.” *Breaking Defense*. August 5, 2021. <https://breakingdefense.com/2021/08/chinese-execute-huge-theater-level-exercise-russia-prc-start-joint-exercise/>

¹⁸ John Grady, “Panel Warns Of Economic And Military Impacts From Russia’s Plans For Arctic,” *USNI News*, May 11, 2021. <https://news.usni.org/2021/05/11/panel-warns-of-economic-and-military-impacts-from-russias-plans-for-arctic>; Alexander Korolev, “On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation,” *Asian Security* 15, no. 3 (April 2019): 233–252 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2018.1463991>

¹⁹ Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2019), 159.

²⁰ Kathleen Hicks, *The Risk of Nation-State Conflict: China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2014), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep37679>

mechanism.²¹ Lora Saalman suggests Russia and China will expand gray zone operations via indirectly confrontational means such as artificial intelligence military applications.²²

2. Ideological Alignment

The magnetic force of shared ideology dominates another category of Sino-Russian studies. Grounded in constructivist assessment, a variety of studies conclude that the Sino-Russian partnership fundamentally serves as a strategic counterbalance to a globally dominant ideology of militarism, interventionism, and forcible imposition of U.S. values worldwide.²³ The Center for Strategic and International Studies, Center for a New American Security, the Heritage Foundation, and the Atlantic Council all agree that the potential strength to reorder the political landscape lies in the partners' shared interests in weakening the cohesion of transatlantic allies in a campaign to delegitimize a Western brand of democracy.²⁴ Alexander Lukin argues that China's and Russia's strategic partnership forms the lead element of a growing system of cooperation in a non-Western world, centered in an emerging political community of Greater Eurasia.²⁵

Other such as David Sobek and Joe Clare maintain that neither Russia nor China can be regarded as independent threats, but rather as one single force that boldly defies Western hegemony in the broadest sense of its influence.²⁶ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and

²¹ Dmitry Adamsky, "From Moscow with Coercion: Russian Deterrence Theory and Strategic Culture" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 1–2 (2018): 34.

²² Lora Saalman, *The Impact of AI on Nuclear Deterrence: China, Russia, and the United States*. Honolulu, HI: East-West Center, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24996>

²³ Bolt and Cross, *China, Russia, and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, 3; Radin et al., *China-Russia Cooperation: Determining Factors, Future Trajectories, Implication for the United States*, 267.

²⁴ Daniel Kliman et al., *Dangerous Synergies: Countering Chinese and Russian Digital Influence Operations* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2020), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25314>; Bobo Lo, *Ten Questions of Russian Foreign Policy* (London, UK: Chatham House, 2012), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/260312summary.pdf>; Alexis Mrachek, *Russia 2022: Assessing Threats to U.S. Vital Interests* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2022), <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/assessing-threats-us-vital-interests/russia>; Lauren Speranza, "A Strategic Concept for Countering Russian and Chinese Hybrid Threats," *Atlantic Council*, July 1, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26038>

²⁵ Alexander Lukin, *China and Russia: The New Rapprochement* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018), 1–2.

²⁶ David Sobek and Joe Clare, "Me, Myself, and Allies: Understanding the External Sources of Power," *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 4 (July 2013): 469–478.

David Shullman insist in *Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Alliance* that the two work in tandem to crowd out Western influence by means of a combination of diplomatic and political efforts in regions that are already at odds with the U.S. and its allies.²⁷ Bekkevold and Lo agree the partners are a singular threat, but add that China—as the senior partner, will determine how the depth of collaboration as well as how the partners behave and advance in the face of strategic rivalry.²⁸ Alexander Korolev refines what he considers an oversimplified debate, explaining despite perceived imbalances, China insists on coequal status in order to bolster perceptions of the union’s geopolitical influence.²⁹ Others like Jonathan Holslag insist that China’s and Russia’s “hard hedging” and values of total sovereignty and autonomy compound into a synergistic opposition to what the partners consider a dysfunctional West.³⁰ Roland Paris agrees, reasoning China’s and Russia’s position on “extra-legal” and “organic” forms of sovereignty” is once again gaining traction in competition with the West’s preference for Westphalian conceptions of the sovereign equality of all states.³¹

3. Presidential Friendship

The strengthening of a Sino-Russian relationship based on Xi’s and Putin’s personal ties is hotly debated. A number of writers insist strong friendship between the top Chinese and Russian leaders is one of the most important factors for deepened relations. Bobo Lo theorizes that Putin’s repeated allusions to Roosevelt’s, Stalin’s, and Churchill’s summit in Yalta confirms his political strategy is founded in the belief that history is shaped

²⁷ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, *Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2021), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28653>

²⁸ Bekkevold and Lo, *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century*, 316.

²⁹ Alexander Korolev, *China-Russia Strategic Alignment in International Politics*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 193.

³⁰ Jonathan Holslag, “Hedging the hard way: Russia’s response to world disorder,” *Global Affairs* 2, no. 2 (2016): 165–176, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2016.1166329>

³¹ Roland Paris, “The Right to Dominate: How Old Ideas about Sovereignty Pose New Challenges for World Order,” *International Organization* 74, no. 3 (2020): 453–489, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000077>

by personal deal-making between leaders.³² One RAND study argues that historically, the quality of the personal relationship between the leaders of China and Russia has “always correlated with closer periods in the two countries’ relationship.”³³ Other authors agree, emphasizing the important role of close personal relations between Chinese and Russian heads of state in advancing national agendas.³⁴

Many others note the ostensibly positive and genuine relationship between Putin and Xi, citing numerous examples of unofficial and leisurely activities embedded within official summit agendas.³⁵ One assessment of twenty-first century Sino-Russian relations concluded there existed no warmer a political relationship in recent times than of Putin and Xi Jinping, not just by virtue of visit frequency but because they supplement warm affirmations of friendship with meaningful cooperation.³⁶

Given these warm relations, many are certain the strength of China-Russia relations is owed to the human connection between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. Some foreign policy expert reason that Putin was unable to make any meaningful personal connections with a top-level Chinese official until Xi Jinping assumed the Presidency, noting the professional nature of exchange with Presidents Jiang Zemin (1993-2003) and Hu Jintao (2003-2013) during the inking of agreements.³⁷ Ali Wyne attributes the deepening

³² Bobo Lo, *Global Order in the Shadow of the Coronavirus: China, Russia, and the West* (Sydney, Australia: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2020), 14.

³³ Radin et al., *China-Russia Cooperation: Determining Factors, Future Trajectories, Implication for the United States*, 147.

³⁴ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 23.

³⁵ Olga Alexeeva, Frédéric Lasserre, and Elizabeth Guill. “The Evolution of Sino-Russian Relations as Seen from Moscow.” *China Perspectives* 114, no. 3 (2018): 69–78; Michael Cox, “Not Just ‘Convenient’: China and Russia’s New Strategic Partnership in the Age of Geopolitics.” *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 1, no. 4 (2016): 317–334; Timothy Frye, *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin’s Russia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), James Kynge, “Bridge-building a pillar of Sino-Russian detente” *Financial Times*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/949d3f30-806c-11e8-af48-190d103e32a4>

³⁶ Bekkevold and Lo, *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century*, 1.

³⁷ Peter Ferdinand, “Sunset, Sunrise: China and Russia Construct a New Relationship.” *International Affairs* 83, no. 5 (2007): 841–867, Vassilly Kashin, “Russian perspectives on the third Offset Strategy and its Implications for Russian-Chinese Defense Technological Cooperation,” in *The Gathering Pacific Storm: Emerging US-China Strategic Competition in Defense Technological and Industrial Development*, edited by T. M. Cheung & T. G. Mahnken (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2018), 229–230.

relations to the Putin-Xi dynamic, offering that after Xi leaves office, Beijing may dispense of the flattery reserved for Russia's President as either China will economically outgrow Russia, or Putin will overstep a certain boundary.³⁸ Alexander Lukin too believes that the state of relations will deteriorate once Xi departs, speculating the post-Xi generation of Chinese elite could well "develop superiority complex towards Russia and refuse to treat its great neighbor as an equal partner."³⁹

Other authors believe neither historical antecedent nor personal friendship at the top level are relevant to the deepening of Sino-Russian relations. Some argue the friendship between Presidents Putin and Xi has no historical parallels, arguing that in the context of the today's global politics, the Xi-Putin bonhomie is a new phenomenon in international politics.⁴⁰ East Asian studies expert Yu Bin is unconvinced, declaring the personal touch in the Putin-Xi relationship does not guarantee a harmonious political relationship between the two countries; he views an inherently unstable friendship given the potential for controversy and contention in some overlapping areas of interest.⁴¹ More commonly, academics believe the friendship is a matter of pragmatism, explaining the personal ties are far less incentivizing for closer diplomacy than the promise of commercially profitable infrastructure and energy projects, or close collaboration in the name of collective defense.⁴²

D. CONCLUSION

Most sources agree the Sino-Russian partnership is a legitimate force in shaping the international landscape, but disagree on why the states choose to deepen relations.

³⁸ Wyne, *America's Great-Power Opportunity*, 130.

³⁹ Artyom Lukin, "The Russia-China Entente and Its Future," *International Politics* 58, no. 3 (June 2021): 377.

⁴⁰ Korolev, *China-Russia Strategic Alignment in International Politics*; Thomas Wilkins, "Russo-Chinese strategic partnership: A new form of security cooperation?" *Contemporary Security Policy* 29, no. 2 (2018): 367.

⁴¹ Yu Bin, "China-Russia Relations: Between the Past and Present," *Comparative Connections* 19, no. 3 (January 2018): 122.

⁴² Lo, *Axis of Convenience*; Alexander Gabuev, *Friends with benefits? Russian-Chinese Relations after the Ukraine Crisis* (Moscow, Russia: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2016) <https://carnegie.ru/2016/06/29/friends-with-benefits-russian-chinese-relations-after-ukraine-crisis-pub-63953>

Some studies emphasize Beijing and Moscow are eager to deepen relations for reasons of purely economic and military advantage. Other research theorizes China and Russia together represent a fundamentally anti-Western union that gains strength in ideological alignment. Although fewer in number, still others owe the deepening relationship to the trust and affection Presidents Putin and Xi Jinping maintain for one another.

The current body of literature lacks a singular study that considers systemic, state, and individual levels of analysis of China and Russia's relationship. It stands to reason that since the relationship between these near-peers is not one-dimensional, the assessments of the partnership should not be either. Therefore, this research assesses this partnership in all three categories. It seeks to explain the extent to which material gain, ideological unity, or personal ties motivate closer Beijing-Moscow cooperation.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study asserts the U.S., China, and Russia are the principal competitors with the United States for global influence and sets out to understand the source of partnered strength between Beijing and Moscow. To identify the partnership's core strengths is to approach understanding the depth, authenticity, and durability of the partnership. Therefore, the research design is oriented on determining if the Sino-Russian partnership is fundamentally based on measures of material gains, ideological alignment, or personalistic ties.

With consideration for the current state of global affairs as well as the existing body of research on the matter, this project sets forth three propositions. First, the Sino-Russian partnership is an instrumental challenge to U.S. global dominance, but is prone to revision if either China or Russia sense threat to material interests. If this is the basis for the relationship, realist research contends that adversarial wedge strategies directed against the partnership's vulnerabilities may lessen its prospects to meaningfully influence the existing world order.⁴³ The second proposition holds that the Sino-Russian partnership is rooted in

⁴³ Timothy Crawford, "How to Distance Russia from China," *Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2021): 175–194; Mikael Wigell, "Hybrid Interference as a Wedge Strategy: A Theory of External Interferences in Liberal Democracy," *International Affairs* 95, no. 2 (2021): 255–275.

their shared resistance to Western liberalism and amplified by similar brands of authoritarian rule. This assertion therefore contends the partnership is ideologically driven, supported by a wide base of ruling elites, and aimed at profoundly changing the existing international order. If this is the basis for the relationship, like-minded democracies must strengthen existing alliances and partnerships to forge the unified front necessary to counter China's and Russia's strategy to actively resist. Third, the partnership is personalistic, and depends heavily on the friendship of their respective presidents. If President Xi or Putin vacate positions of national leadership, the partnership is neither likely to endure in its current form nor profoundly reshape the world order.

Each of the propositions is applied to three case studies: the ongoing military conflict in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the mounting importance of India in geopolitics. The selected case studies provide the variation necessary to evaluate all three propositions—each of which is compared in several categorically different contexts. To answer to the research question, the author will primarily analyze Chinese and Russian policy statements, press reports, scholarly sources, and think tank analyses to identify evidence of conditions that either enhance or degrade the partnership. For instance, more frequent diplomatic engagements, qualitatively positive rhetoric, increased trade, sustained defense cooperation, or other occasions of strengthened alignment signal a deepening partnership. Meanwhile, decreased bilateral engagements, qualitatively ambivalent rhetoric, or loosening of economic and military cooperation point to evidence of a weakening union. The author then evaluates the evidence to identify patterns or consistency of conditions in each of the cases to determine possible system, state, or individual level factors encouraging stronger cooperation.

F. CASE SELECTION

In response to military operations in Ukraine, Xi has personally defended Putin's protection of "Russian core interests," increased bilateral trade, and echoed Russia in casting blame on the West for creating the Eastern European security dilemma in the first place. With regard to the material dimensions of the partnership, the Ukraine example provides interesting evidence useful for examining why China has circumvented broad

international sanctions and increased trade, yet refused to materially provision the Russian military. Additionally, the situation in Ukraine at once showcases China's firm position on labeling U.S.-led NATO as culpable *and* reveals to what degree Xi is personally willing to support Putin's actions with rhetoric.

Russian and Chinese responses to the COVID-19 pandemic provide an equally promising case for assessing each of the propositions. Speaking to the partnership's instrumental role in challenging U.S. global dominance, both partners focused on the practice of so-called vaccine diplomacy and engaged in strategies to decouple from the West. Furthermore, the circumstances of the epidemic provide evidence concerning how China and Russia at once capitalized on promoting their respective government's management of the virus and criticizing the United States for failing to contain it as the alleged country of origin. Lastly, the context of the pandemic provides unmatched insight on presidential friendship as Xi executed his first post-COVID international meeting—*mask free*, and specifically with Putin, while refusing to meet eleven other heads of state for reason of "COVID precaution."⁴⁴

China's and Russia's response to India's recent ascension to the world stage serves as the third and final case for evaluating the international, domestic, and personal forces that shape the partnership. All three are members of the BRICS group of emerging economies that touts a development agenda for non-Western countries and openly calls for a geopolitical rebalancing towards multipolarity.⁴⁵ India's effect on the partnership as a case study proves valuable not only because of Delhi's rising international position, but because Presidents Putin and Xi maintain contrasting perspectives on the subcontinent. India is an integral member of the China and Russia-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as well as a principal member of the U.S.-led Quad alliance.⁴⁶ India

⁴⁴ Rebecca Wilkins and Phillip Glamann, "Xi Removes Mask for Putin but Doesn't Mingle Outside China's COVID Cocoon," *Bloomberg*, September 15, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-16/xi-goes-maskless-but-won-t-mingle-outside-china-s-covid-cocoon#xj4y7vzkg>

⁴⁵ Oliver Slow, "Brics ministers call for rebalancing of global order away from the West," BBC, June 2, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65784030>

⁴⁶ India maintains active membership in a variety of additional intergovernmental organizations to include BRICS, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the East Asia Summit.

is the largest, non-aligned democracy across the globe, and Presidents Putin and Xi have bilaterally engaged Prime Minister Modi more times than any other national leader outside of their own partnership.⁴⁷ However, Moscow sees Delhi as an important military partner and a key market for its oil and military weapons while Beijing has long held India in contempt as a regional adversary and source of recurring conflict on its border.

While other high-profile cases provide useful evidence for evaluating the deepening Sino-Russian relationship, the lack of adequate evidence prevents evaluation of the propositions in at least one significant way. For instance, actions of partnered Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic illustrates a challenge to U.S. global dominance, but fails to produce the same volume of rhetoric useful for evaluating either the weight of Putin and Xi's personal bond or the role of ideological identity in the matter. In circumstances of China's assertion of sovereignty in the South China Sea, the volume of rhetoric is present but the lack of substantive action on Moscow's behalf inhibits exploring the partnership as an instrumental challenge to America's global dominance.

There are several limitations to the study. The first limitation concerns the reality of defining variables and corresponding metrics that are at once useful *and* acceptable for their use in research, provided the inherent subjectivity of the terms. For example, previous studies have concluded that the concept of diplomacy is “monstrously imprecise” and that there are “no straightforward indicators” regarding strength of personal ties between leaders.⁴⁸ Great consideration is thus applied to supplementary sources such as public relations photographs and independent media commentaries that provide insight on environmental conditions and social context in which Presidents Xi and Putin display their relationship. A second limitation relates to the extensive use of Western sources and the subtlety of biases those sources reflect. While the bulk of supporting documents are sourced from neither Russian nor Chinese authors, an effort is made to examine rhetoric drawn from official Chinese and Russian communiqués, joint-issued statements from

⁴⁷ *China-Russia Relations* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023), <https://chinapower.csis.org/series-china-russia-relations/>

⁴⁸ Jacquelin Hicks, *Defining and Measuring Diplomatic Influence* (Brighton UK: Institute of Development Studies, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.19088/K4D.2021.032>; Peter Marshall, *The Dynamics of Diplomacy* (London: The Diplomatic Academy of London, 1990), 7.

Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, as well as Russian and Chinese foreign policy perspectives available in published translations to the fullest extent possible. Lastly—and of a lesser consequence, this research is limited to open source (i.e., *unclassified*) documents. In addressing the broad effects of the Sino-Russian partnership, the major research question can be sensibly addressed without additional aid of classified source documents.

G. THESIS OVERVIEW AND DRAFT CHAPTER OUTLINE

This thesis is organized into five chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. Chapters II, III, and IV each present a case study (the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the rise of India, respectively). In each chapter, the author briefly summarizes each case within the context of the Sino-Russian partnership and structures analysis of the evidence at the system, state, and individual levels.

The final chapter pieces together conclusions from each case study and discusses the implications of the main findings to understand the fundamental factors strengthening the Sino-Russian relationship. It approaches the ultimate objectives for the three global competitors expressed in both objective description and subjective language. Concluding thoughts address implications for U.S. foreign policy and present options for future research.

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II. CHINA, RUSSIA, AND THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Russia and China have formed a model of a new type of interstate relations that meets the fundamental national interests of the two countries and aspirations of their peoples, which also plays an important role in promoting a multipolar world order and ensuring international and regional security and stability. Twenty years of experience of dynamic and comprehensive development of the Russian-Chinese cooperation show that the Treaty successfully reflects the realities of the international environment that is undergoing unprecedented change.

—China-Russia Joint Statement, June 28, 2021 ⁴⁹

A. INTRODUCTION

It is not immediately obvious whether the net effects of the coronavirus pandemic strengthened or weakened the Sino-Russian partnership. Experts like Ka-Ho Wong and Lawrence Ka-Ki Ho believe the pandemic created “a new era” of *weakened* relations since Moscow doubted the efficacy of Chinese vaccines and Beijing balked at providing unconditional support to Moscow at the expense of its own national interests.⁵⁰ Maria Papageorgiou and Alena Viera assert the global health crisis forged a more comprehensive strategic partnership, but argue the strengthening is of little consequence since it failed to achieve the intensity needed to collectively balance against the U.S.⁵¹ From a third perspective, Mao Suzuki and Shiming Yang contend the pandemic did not meaningfully alter the dynamism of the partnership. They argue that China and Russia pursued individual strategies that aligned with their relative advantages in development, manufacturing, and delivery of vaccines, and thus, are in no better position than before to jointly challenge the

⁴⁹ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the Twentieth Anniversary of the Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China.” Moscow: Office of the President of Russia, June 28, 2021. <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/en/Bo3RF3JzGDvMAPjHBQAuSemVPWTEvb3c.pdf>

⁵⁰ Ka-ho Wong and Lawrence Ka-ki Ho, “China’s Strategic Partnership with Russia amid the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *China Review* 22, no. 2 (2022): 285–313, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48671507>

⁵¹ Maria Papageorgiou and Alena Vieira, “A Friend in Need? The Sino-Russian Relationship Under the Coronavirus Crisis in Twitter: A Russian Perspective,” *East Asia* 38 (2021):225-247.

existing international order.⁵² Just as Alexander Gabuev and Temur Umarov argue, this chapter too finds that the pandemic has in fact strengthened various visible features of the Sino-Russian relationship.⁵³

During the first weeks of 2020, the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) altered economic, political, and societal relations on a global scale. Origins of the virus heightened geopolitical tensions, exposed weaknesses in global supply networks, and crippled trade at every level of exchange. For many states, the pandemic forced governments to reconsider priorities, prompting shifts in domestic agendas and international relations. Some governments focused inward, striving to guarantee healthcare, food security and general economic recovery as quickly as possible. Russia and China too encountered domestic challenges, but their national leaders also discovered opportunity to forge a stronger relationship.

The pandemic adversely affected China and Russia in many of the same ways. Severe disruptions in global supply chains for China, declining oil prices for Russia, and rising inflation translated into economic downturn for both. Although China's 'zero COVID' measures reputedly ranked among the world's most stringent policies, lockdowns, travel restrictions, and social distancing requirements affected daily life and limited public interaction for Russian citizens as well. Meanwhile, both partners were under fire for perceived mishandling of the pandemic, accusations of disinformation campaigns, and ongoing strategic competition with the United States.

This chapter analyzes how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the Sino-Russian relationship in the two years following the outbreak. The analysis considers actions representing the general state of bilateral relations from January 2020 through January 2022, and examines the patterns and character of their diplomatic activity and associated

⁵² Mao Suzuki and Shiming Yang, "Political economy of vaccine diplomacy: explaining varying strategies of China, India, and Russia's COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy," *Review of International Political Economy* (2022, ahead-of-print): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2022.2074514>

⁵³ Alexander Gabuev and Temur Umarov, *Will the Pandemic Increase Russia's Economic Dependence on China?* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020). <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/07/08/will-pandemic-increase-russia-s-economic-dependence-on-china-pub-81893>

rhetoric. Evidence presented throughout the chapter will ultimately serve as measures of motive across the categories of material gain, common ideology, and personal friendship regarding Beijing and Moscow’s strategic partnership.

B. ECONOMIC

The pandemic prompted an overall increase in trade volume between China and Russia. Despite sizeable decreases in trade during the first months of 2020, both China and Russia reversed course by the end of the third quarter and increased bilateral trade volumes.⁵⁴ By the close of 2020, the value of China’s trade with Russia had increased by 2.2%, reaching over \$100 billion in total value.⁵⁵ While the increase is modest, it reflected a considerable improvement over trends for declining trade in previous years—including a 3.4% decline in 2019.⁵⁶

While Russia benefited from this the uptrend in trade, China’s economic experience during the pandemic was objectively more positive than that of Russia. As one of the few major economies to achieve economic growth during 2020, China’s gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 2.2% that year and elevated to 8.1% in 2021.⁵⁷ In 2020, China’s industrial production grew by 2.4% and maintained the momentum for 9.6% growth in 2021.⁵⁸ In Russia meanwhile, its 2020 economy posted a negative 2.2% and negative 7.7% in GDP and industrial production, respectively.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ *Russia/China* (Cambridge, MA: Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2022), <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/rus/partner/chn?subnationalTimeSelector=timeQuarter>

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ *GDP growth (annual) China*. Washington, DC: The World Bank. 2023. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=CN&most_recent_year_desc=true

⁵⁸ Steven Textor, “Development of China’s industrial production from 2012 to 2022,” *Statista*, January 24, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/276443/development-of-the-industrial-production-in-china/>

⁵⁹ *GDP growth (annual) Russia*, 2023. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=RU>; *Russia Industrial Production Index Growth: 2014–2023*. New York: CEIC Data. 2023. <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/russia/industrial-production-index-growth#:~:text=The%20data%20reached%20an%20all,%2D7.7%20%25%20in%20May%202020.>

With national interests in mind, Presidents Xi and Putin pulled one another in close during the pandemic to boost exchange between two conveniently complementary economies. Well-matched continental partners, Russia is one of the world's largest producers of oil and natural gas and China is a major importer of such commodities. In 2020, China imported some \$27.3 billion in oil products from Russia, an increase of more than 7% from 2019.⁶⁰ China imported no less than 6.9 billion cubic meters (BCM) of natural gas that same year, and amidst the depths of COVID difficulties—had by mid-year continued official dialogue on the Power of Siberia-2 pipeline intended to secure China 50 BCM of natural gas ad annum.⁶¹ Though engineering concerns over the pipelines and repairs to the supporting infrastructure interrupted continuous transfer, Russian gas exports to China had still more than doubled to 16.6 BCM to China by the close of 2021.⁶²

China and Russia expanded other areas of trade during the pandemic too, though mostly in China's favor. In 2020, China and Russia traded some nearly \$25 billion in machinery and equipment and almost \$32 billion in consumer goods, totaling an increase of approximately 11% from the previous year.⁶³ Acknowledging China's food shortages, Russia's food product exports including fish and soybean to China increased by 50% and 23% from 2019 to 2020, respectively.⁶⁴ That same year, China and Russia traded \$7.4

⁶⁰ *Russia/China, Historical Data: Bilateral Trade by Products* (Cambridge, MA: Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2020), <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/rus#bi-trade-products>.

⁶¹ Erica Downs, "China Could Be a Lifeline for Russian Energy," *Barron's*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.barrons.com/articles/china-could-be-a-lifeline-for-russian-energy-51648238894>; Gabuev and Umarov, *Will the Pandemic Increase Russia's Economic Dependence on China?*

⁶² Erica Downs, *Q&A China-Russia Energy Relations: Will New Oil and Natural Gas Deals Help Russia Weather Economic Sanctions?* (New York: Center on Global Energy Policy, 2022), https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/publications/qa-china-russia-energy-relations-will-new-oil-and-natural-gas-deals-help-russia-weather-economic/#_edn19

⁶³ *Russia/China, Bilateral Trade by Products*. Cambridge, MA: Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2019. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/rus?dynamicBilateralTradeSelector=year2019&subnationalTimeSelector=timeYear>

⁶⁴ Aleksandre Melkadze, "Value of Russian Trade in Goods with China from 2007 to 2021," *Statista*, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1003171/russia-value-of-trade-in-goods-with-china/>

billion in high-tech equipment including \$130 million worth of Chinese-furnished semi-conductors that Moscow badly needed for its defense industry.⁶⁵

China and Russia formalized commitments on economic cooperation following the COVID-19 pandemic by means of broad trade initiatives as well. In the wake of the outbreak, they implemented a joint program to boost trade and investment cooperation in key areas including communications and transportation infrastructure, as well as partnership in advanced technologies. China's Huawei extended its corporate tendrils into Russia's 5G network, while Russia's most successful telecommunication service providers welcomed both Huawei and ZTE—a second Chinese firm for production of its hardware.⁶⁶ In the industrial transportation sector, Russian Railways had modified its annual investment agenda by mid-year 2020, reallocating substantial funding for material improvements to trans-Eurasian lines responsible for transporting Russian coal and metals to China.⁶⁷ The program aimed to not only deepen economic ties, but strengthen and stabilize their economies amidst the pandemic and global economic downturn. The program reduced barriers to trade and investment, facilitated cross-border transactions, and included measures to encourage the use of local currencies in trade settlements, which effectively reduced their dependence on the U.S. dollar.⁶⁸

These trade initiatives once again, strongly favored Chinese interests. Beijing negotiated to denominate some areas of trade in renminbi currency (RMB) and persuaded the Russian central bank to increase foreign currency reserves from less than 1% to more than 13% by late 2020.⁶⁹ During that same year, Russia's top provider of cloud computing

⁶⁵Maria Shagina and Emily Kilcrease, "Can Russia Rebuild Its Tech Sector with China's Help?" *War on the Rocks*, June 2, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/06/can-russia-rebuild-its-tech-sector-with-chinas-help/>; *Russia/China, Bilateral Trade by Products*. Cambridge, MA: Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2019. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/rus?dynamicBilateralTradeSelector=year2019&subnationalTimeSelector=timeYear>;

⁶⁶ Gabuev and Umarov, Will the Pandemic Increase Russia's Economic Dependence on China?

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Rebecca Nelson and Karen Sutter, *De-Dollarization Efforts in China and Russia*, CRS Report No. IF11885 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2021), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11885>

⁶⁹ Nelson and Sutter, *De-Dollarization Efforts in China and Russia*.

services *Sberbank*, settled for a durable network contract with Huawei.⁷⁰ And when the Russian state proposed the conditional use of Russian-fabricated hardware in its national 5G network, a Chinese working group co-engineering the project proceeded to block the motion in its entirety.⁷¹

The post-pandemic period provides further potential for future economic expansion. Even though material progress has lagged in post-COVID recovery, the partners continued discussions concerning integration of the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The BRI aims to boost multi-continental economic development through the construction of infrastructure projects connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa. Meanwhile, the EAEU seeks to boost economic cooperation across Eurasia. China signed its free trade agreement with Russia in 2018 and has since agreed to double annual trade via networks such as the EAEU by 2024.⁷² While conceptually broad, integrating their economies through such initiatives is intended to stabilize regional economies and generally serve to increase resilience to external economic shocks.⁷³

C. POLITICAL-DIPLOMATIC

During the pandemic, state relations between Beijing and Moscow improved while the partners' extensive efforts in vaccine diplomacy strengthened perceptions of their geopolitical strength in some regions. In an advertised joint effort to contain and defeat the virus during the early months of the outbreak, China and Russia provided one another with medical supplies and exchanged medical experts to collaborate on projects to contain the

⁷⁰ Gabuev and Umarov, Will the Pandemic Increase Russia's Economic Dependence on China?

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Chris Devonshire-Ellis, "Eurasian Economic Union Plans For More Free Trade Agreements," *Russia Briefing*, May 28, 2021, <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/eurasian-economic-union-plans-for-more-free-trade-agreements.html/#:~:text=An%20FTA%20with%20China%20has,S%24200%20billion%20per%20annum>

⁷³ Jean-Christophe Defraigne, "The Eurasian Economic Union and the challenge of the BRI: a comparison of their respective impacts on economic development and Russia's regional leadership," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 62, no. 5–6 (2021): 660. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2021.1939086>

virus.⁷⁴ The two countries shared information and expertise on how to combat the virus, including a joint initiative to develop and distribute vaccines across Eurasia.⁷⁵ The two countries demonstrated solidarity and mutual support in international forums as well. On diverse occasions at United Nations functions, representatives echoed each other's calls for greater international cooperation in the fight against the virus.⁷⁶ Likewise, Chinese and Russian officials also praised their respective efforts to control the pandemic while criticizing attempts by other countries to politicize the virus.⁷⁷ During Putin's October 2020 speech at the 17th annual Valdai Discussion Club, he applauded his friend Xi's reliability and avowed China-Russia cooperation as a "stabilizing factor" in the international arena.⁷⁸ Two weeks later, Xi's opening remarks at the 20th annual SCO summit thanked Putin for organizing the meeting, and in front of council of eight heads of state, complemented Russia's "performance of duty" in the face of COVID-19.⁷⁹

In the twelve months following the outbreak, Presidents Xi and Putin coordinated regularly. During the first six months alone, the leaders personally communicated on four occasions. In March and April, state news agencies including Xinhua announced to domestic and international audiences that the leaders coordinated at length by phone on the

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Wishnick, "China and Russia: Vaccine Competitors or Partners," *The Diplomat*, February 23, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/china-and-russia-vaccine-competitors-or-partners/>; Karen Sutter, Andres Schwarzenberg, and Michael Sutherland, "COVID-19: China Medical Supply Chains and Broader Trade Issues," Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, Report No. R46304, 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46304>

⁷⁵ Amy Mackinnon and Robbie Gramer, "Russia Scores Pandemic Propaganda Triumph with Medical Delivery to U.S.," *Foreign Policy*, April 1, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/01/russia-scores-pandemic-propaganda-triumph-with-medical-delivery-to-u-s-trump-disinformation-china-moscow-kremlin-coronavirus/>

⁷⁶ Edith Lederer, "At UN, China, Russia and U.S. clash over pandemic responses," *AP News*, September 24, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-wang-yi-united-states-antonio-guterres-russia-38dc347cba1f35723757d666df118e79>

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ "Putin says ready to strengthen Russia-China cooperation." *Xinhua*. October 23, 2020. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-10/23/c_139460082.htm. Note: The Valdai think tank organization is a soft power effort by the Kremlin to gain goodwill among Western intellectuals and was engineered to create networking opportunities between Russian and Western elites.

⁷⁹ "Full Text: Remarks by Chinese President Xi Jinping at 20th meeting of SCO Council Heads of State." Xinhua, November 10, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-11/10/c_139506835.htm

subject of “safeguarding global public health.”⁸⁰ In statements released to the press, Putin disapproved of “attempts to smear China on the origin of the coronavirus” while Xi carped that politicization of the pandemic was “detrimental to international cooperation.”⁸¹ Between May and July, Xi and Putin spoke directly by telephone twice more over joint development of vaccines and medicine, reaffirming the common goal of “consolidating the efforts of the international community.”⁸² By the year’s end, Xi and Putin exchanged new year’s greetings by phone and informed news outlets China and Russia had congratulated one another for “safeguarding international fairness” and had now “taken the lead in international cooperation against COVID-19.”⁸³

Coordination between other top-level diplomats during the period increased as well. In the twelve months following the outbreak, Beijing sent more high-level Chinese delegations to Russia than any other country.⁸⁴ Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Sergei Lavrov personally engaged on ten occasions throughout 2020, including publicly during the BRICS forum where they advanced a joint medical research proposal and coordination of an emergency response fund for underdeveloped nations.⁸⁵ By March of 2021, Ministers Yi and Lavrov coordinated a collaborative response to a rash of new Western sanctions

⁸⁰ “Xi, Putin discuss strengthening cooperation on fighting COVID-19 by phone.” Xinhua March, 20, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/20/c_138897626.htm

⁸¹ “Xi holds phone talks with Putin on COVID-19 Pandemic,” Xinhua, April 17, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/17/c_138983035.htm?mc_cid=2faf5a380c&mc_eid=ac44ba7568; “Xi Holds phone talks with Putin on COVID-19 pandemic,” *The Business Standard*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.tbsnews.net/coronavirus-chronicle/xi-holds-phone-talks-putin-covid-19-pandemic-70360>

⁸² “Telephone Conversation with President of China Xi Jinping,” May 8, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63326/print>; “Xi talks with Putin Over Phone,” *Xinhua*, July 8, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-07/08/c_139197633.htm

⁸³ “Xi eyes unwavering development of China-Russia partnership,” *Xinhua*, December 29, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-12/29/c_139624821.htm, Vladimir Putin, “Telephone Conversation with President of China Xi Jinping,” Moscow: Office of the President of Russia, December 28, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/by-date/24.12.2020>

⁸⁴ Eleanor Albert, “China and Russia Show Solidarity at Meeting of Foreign Ministers,” *The Diplomat*, March 24, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/china-and-russia-show-solidarity-at-meeting-of-foreign-ministers/>

⁸⁵ “BRICS Foreign Ministers meet via video conferencing,” *International Affairs Review*, April 28, 2020, <http://internationalaffairsreview.com/2020/04/28/brics-foreign-ministers-meet-via-video-conferencing/>; Albert, “China and Russia Show Solidarity at Meeting of Foreign Ministers

over human rights violations in both China and Russia.⁸⁶ In response to the injunctions, the ministers presented a joint statement to the UN General Secretary, objecting that American and European “interference in a sovereign nation’s internal affairs under the excuse of advancing democracy is unacceptable.”⁸⁷

2021 also marked the year that China and Russia renewed the decades-long Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation. The treaty again fell short of a formal political or military alliance, but did reinforce the 2001 document that set out to establish an enduring friendship. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained the pact represented a blueprint for pragmatic cooperation that would improve the quality of their friendship so that the two could safeguard “true multilateralism, international fairness, and justice.”⁸⁸ In reference to the pandemic, Xi noted that during a period of turbulence and change, China and Russia would continue to “inject positive energy into the international community,” to set an example of “a new type of international relations.”⁸⁹

As COVID-19 control measures normalized throughout 2021 and 2022, Xi and Putin maintained consistency of interaction and displayed an unusual degree of interpersonal trust. In June 2021, Xi and Putin held a virtual summit via teleconference to discuss mutual interests in energy and trade, the potential for increased joint military cooperation, as well as the “very aggressive rhetoric from both the U.S. and NATO.”⁹⁰ In February 2022, Putin attended the opening ceremony of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics posing unmasked, side-by-side with Xi on multiple occasions at the Bird’s Nest stadium

⁸⁶ Albert, “China and Russia Show Solidarity at Meeting of Foreign Ministers.”

⁸⁷ United Nations General Assembly. Letter dated 31 March 2021 from the Permanent Representatives of China and the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General. S/2021/324. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3908034?ln=en>

⁸⁸ “Ji Jinping Holds a Video Meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin.” Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. June 28, 2021. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/kjgzbdffyq/202106/t20210629_9171091.html

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Colm Quinn, “Xi and Putin Hold Virtual Summit,” *Foreign Policy*, December 15, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/15/xi-and-putin-hold-virtual-summit/>

and Diaoyutai State Guesthouse.⁹¹ International outlets later captured Xi and Putin seated maskless, across from one another at a negotiating table among more than a dozen staff bearing protective masks.⁹² By September of that year, the leaders would again meet and engage in face-to-face dialogue during Xi Jinping's first international trip in more than two years. Having first declined to dine with eleven other heads of state attending the SCO security summit for reason of "COVID precaution," Xi later motioned to meet with Putin in a maskless one-on-one.⁹³

Separate from bilateral engagement during the pandemic, a broader diplomatic strategy during the coronavirus pandemic enabled China and Russia in some ways, to improve global perceptions of their partnership. While the U.S. initially faltered in response to the coronavirus—at one point even accepting a cargo plane of Russian-sourced medical supplies, China and Russia were proactively shaping a narrative that emphasized their leadership in the global fight against the pandemic.⁹⁴ Chinese and Russian state media communicated to domestic and foreign audiences that the U.S. had created the coronavirus in Ukraine-based biolaboratories, propagated disinformation about the death rates of Europeans injected with Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, and criticized the United States for failing to adequately respond.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Ed Pulford, "Ukraine and the Limits of China-Russia Friendship," *Current History* 121, no. 836 (2022): 243, <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2022.121.836.243>

⁹² Chen Aizhu and Gabriel Crossley, "Putin Arrives in Beijing for Winter Olympics with gas supply deal for China," *Reuters*, February 4, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/russian-president-putin-arrives-beijing-winter-olympics-state-tv-2022-02-04/>

⁹³ Olzhas Auyezov, "China's Xi skips dinner with SCO allies as COVID precaution," *Reuters*, September 15, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-xi-skips-dinner-with-putin-allies-covid-precaution-source-2022-09-16/>

⁹⁴ Rachel Seligman, "Russia sends plan with medical supplies to U.S. for coronavirus response," *Politico*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/01/russia-sends-medical-supplies-coronavirus-159009>

⁹⁵ Robin Ermott, "Russia, China Sow Disinformation To Undermine Trust In Western Vaccines: EU," *Reuters*, April 28, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/russia-china-sow-disinformation-undermine-trust-western-vaccines-eu-report-says-2021-04-28/>; Clint Watts, *Are Russia and China Teaming Up Against America in a Global Information War? Yes and No*, January 13, 2020, Washington, DC: Alliance for Securing Democracy. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/are-russia-and-china-teaming-up-against-america-in-a-global-information-war-yes-and-no/>

In tandem with disinformation, China and Russia further improved their individual reputations through vaccine diplomacy. China's so-called "donation diplomacy" sent aircraft provisioned with billions of dollars in pandemic supplies to some twenty countries across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe during the early months of the pandemic.⁹⁶ Alongside shipments of ventilators, testing kits, and masks, China sent delegations of doctors and health experts in a "17 + 1" grouping of Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC) including Italy and France to help combat the spread of the virus.⁹⁷ President Putin touted the development of Russia's Sputnik V as "a vaccine for all humankind," and later had delivered more than 600 million doses to 35 countries across Latin America, Africa, Europe, and Asia.⁹⁸

In part, polling data suggests some correlation between China and Russia's vaccine diplomacy during the pandemic and improved global perceptions. A 2022 Pew Research study found 66% of poll-takers believed China's influence on the world stage had grown during the previous years, particularly among educated adults.⁹⁹ And although positive views of Russia remained low after Moscow's practice of vaccine diplomacy, a 2020 end-of-year Pew Research study revealed incrementally improved perceptions of Russia from a 2018 survey in France, Spain, and Italy (by 5%, 7%, and 11%, respectively).¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Bonny Lin et al., *China is Exploiting the Pandemic to Advance Its Interests* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-exploiting-pandemic-advance-its-interests-mixed-results>

⁹⁷ Edward Wong and Paul Mozur, "China's 'Donation Diplomacy' Raises Tensions with U.S." *New York Times*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/14/us/politics/coronavirus-china-trump-donation.html>; Raj Verma, "China's 'mask diplomacy' to change the COVID-19 narrative in Europe," *National Library of Medicine* 18, no. 2 (2020): 205–209, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-020-00576-1>; Lin et al., *China is Exploiting the Pandemic to Advance Its Interests*.

⁹⁸ "Number of doses of the COVID-19 vaccine Sputnik V order from Russia or agreed to be produced abroad as of January 2022, by country," *Statista*, July 27, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1123927/sputnik-v-exports-from-russia-by-country/>; Andrew Kramer, "Russia Trumpets Vaccine Exports, While Quietly Importing Doses," *New York Times*, March 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/28/world/europe/sputnik-vaccine-russia.html>

⁹⁹ Laura Silver, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, "Across 19 countries, more people see the U.S. than China favorably, but more see China's influence growing," *Pew Research Center*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/06/29/across-19-countries-more-people-see-the-u-s-than-china-favorably-but-more-see-chinas-influence-growing/>

¹⁰⁰ Huang, Christine. "Views of Russia and Putin remain negative across 14 nations." *Pew Research Center*. December 16, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/12/16/views-of-russia-and-putin-remain-negative-across-14-nations/>

The net effect of the pandemic, however, did not yield entirely favorable results on global perceptions of the partnership. Chinese-Russian collaboration and politics of generosity in the pandemic response was frequently viewed with suspicion or considered a geopolitical power play. Because Chinese and Russian vaccine manufacturers kept clinical trial data private, the lack of transparency prompted widespread doubt in their advertised rates of effectiveness. While China was initially a global source for the manufacturing of personal protective equipment, countries like the Netherlands, Spain, and Turkey rejected 340,000 defective testing kits and 600,000 flawed face masks.¹⁰¹ Russia came under similar scrutiny after many of its ventilators were found to be faulty and one state official declared 80% of the supplies in Moscow's emergency aid package to Italy were "totally useless or of little use."¹⁰² Moreover, China and Russia were accused of using their vaccine exports and medical equipment donations as a tool of geopolitical influence after some countries expressed concerns over potential political strings attached upon accepting the provisions.¹⁰³

D. CONCLUSION

Despite the economic slump, social disruption, and increased geopolitical tension, the pandemic created an opportunity for China and Russia to strengthen their strategic partnership. Together, they showcased an ability to work together to contain the virus and develop vaccines. They exchanged medical experts and provisioned one another with medical and protective equipment. They distributed proprietary vaccines and medical supplies across Africa, Latin America, Europe, and Asia. Despite obstacles borne of the pandemic, China and Russia even found room to strengthen economic and diplomatic ties.

¹⁰¹ "Coronavirus: Countries reject Chinese-made equipment." *BBC*. March 30, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52092395>

¹⁰² Isabel Togoh, "From Russia with Love? Putin's Medical Supplies Gift To Coronavirus-Hit Italy Raises Questions," *Forbes*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/isabeltogoh/2020/03/26/from-russia-with-love-putins-medical-supplies-gift-to-coronavirus-hit-italy-raises-questions/?sh=9ba56814a475>; Daniel Cassady, "The U.S. Has Thrown Out Faulty Ventilators Russia Sent As Pandemic Aid," *Forbes*, October 19, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danielcassady/2020/10/19/the-us-has-thrown-out-faulty-ventilators-russia-sent-as-pandemic-aid/?sh=7a54cbfd1cc6>

¹⁰³ Elisabeth Braw, "Beware of Bad Samaritans," *Foreign Policy*, March 30, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/30/russia-china-coronavirus-geopolitics/>

Events during the twenty-four-month narrative express varying degrees of material, ideological, and personal motives for deepening the relationship.

The pandemic invited China and Russia to strengthen their partnership through material gains. The pandemic enhanced trade relations between the two countries, with China being Russia's largest trading partner. Cheap Russian energy helped dampen inflation in China, where the economy avoided recession throughout nation-wide COVID-19 lockdowns. The period following the outbreak appears to have fortified China's ties with Russia in energy trade for mutual benefit, especially in an era when Russia grappled with the enduring effect of Western sanctions. The joint programs they launched further drew their economies closer by means of reducing trade and investment barriers, streamlining cross-border transactions, and substituting exchanges in local currencies rather than the U.S. dollar. Although material progress on BRI and EAEU infrastructural integration lagged during the pandemic, talks persisted nonetheless, suggesting a latent potential for major economic cooperation in the coming decades.

The pandemic provided an opportunity to project perceptions of closeness and increasing economic integration, but global conditions also encouraged a transactive relationship that usefully aligned with Xi and Putin's economic postures. For example, since Putin has pursued a more export-led approach to economic growth that focuses on resource extraction, the sharp drop in demand for fossil fuels resulted in a corresponding rise in shipments of oil and gas to China to offset shocks to the Russian economy.¹⁰⁴ Also, since Xi pursues a more consumption-led model with greater emphasis on technological innovation and industrial improvement, his joint program with Putin to cooperate in advanced technologies and expand transportation infrastructure served China equally as well. The program integrated Huawei into Russia's 5G network, supported ZTE's tech innovation, and upgraded the Russian rail system to expedite the transport of Russian coal and metals into China.¹⁰⁵ So while promotion to the global public and personal dynamics advanced dialogue on economic cooperation, China and Russia also drew one another

¹⁰⁴ Gabuev and Umarov, Will the Pandemic Increase Russia's Economic Dependence on China?

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

closer for reasons of national interest and what could best accommodate their economic orientation.

There are yet other considerations for the strengthening of the partners' economic relations as well. One consideration is that China and Russia have inflated trade data. Because economic growth is a matter of national dignity and international prestige, there is a measure of political pressure to report growth. Economic analysts assert that in recent years "Beijing [stood] accused of inflating overall numbers...to keep the domestic markets believing that growth is roughly close to 7%."¹⁰⁶ Former Premier Li Keqiang described GDP data in a leaked 2007 document as "man-made" and unreliable.¹⁰⁷ Russia, too has reasons to distort figures. Authorities on the matter assert the Russian data "cannot be trusted" because the manipulation of such figures is at the heart of the Kremlin's strategy to convince audiences that Western sanctions are ineffective.¹⁰⁸

China and Russia also capitalized on the reinforcing strength of political ideology during the two years of uncertainty that followed the outbreak. Though distinct in management approaches, Beijing and Moscow's political-diplomatic responses to the outbreak not only sought to demonstrate the utility of authoritarianism as an alternative to the Western order, but assert a capacity to lead during times of profound uncertainty. While the international community doubted the scientific legitimacy of China and Russia's vaccine development and questioned the motives of parading vaccine diplomacy, the partners focused on coordinating in ways that maximized international visibility of their calm, confident cooperation amidst the chaos of crisis. Directly referencing the turbulence of the global pandemic, China and Russia issued three major joint statements aimed at reassuring domestic and global audiences of the partnership's stabilizing presence and leading roles in international affairs. The first statement to the United Nations pushed back on a Western economic model that routinely included destabilizing sanctions. A second

¹⁰⁶ Andreas Illmer, "China's growth data – can you trust it?" *BBC*, January 19, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-35341869>

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Agathe Demarais, "Don't Trust Russia's Numbers," *Foreign Policy*, March 13, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/13/russia-economy-sanctions-gdp-war-ukraine-disinformation-statistics/>

joint statement renewed a twenty-year-old treaty that expanded cooperation in key strategic areas. The third joint statement made a direct bid to jointly lead a new and more inclusive world order.

The friendship between Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin too played a role in strengthening the strategic partnership during the pandemic. In the immediate aftermath of the outbreak, top-level diplomatic engagements occurred more frequently, and between the two Presidents—took place in a distinctively more personal manner. In his first international trip in more than two years, Xi first declined a meeting with other SCO heads of state, then chose to meet with Putin without a mask. The engagement stands in stark contrast to either Presidents' conventions, hitherto dialing in remotely for high-profile conferences or requiring their own staffs to don facial coverings in their presence.

Their personal relationship opened the door for stronger relations in other ways too. Xi and Putin drew confidence from one another's ambitions for global leadership, paving the way to closer bilateral relations through organized engagements of mutual support and detailed coordination to combat the spread of the virus, develop a cure, and distribute the vaccines to countries in need around the globe. Xi and Putin's international medical relief efforts indicate a measure of more favorable opinions and perceptions of their increased global influence. While perceptions varied considerably (notably among Western countries), polling in regions where populations benefited yielded the most positive opinions and perceptions of China and Russia (i.e., Africa, South America, and beneficiary states in Eurasia).

The chapter that follows addresses the effect of Russia's military aggression in Ukraine on the state of Sino-Russian relations. As the chaos from the global pandemic waned, China and Russia were about to enter yet another episode of uncertainty. Through the economic and political-diplomatic context of the conflict, it brings to light the sources of the partnerships strengths and weaknesses.

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III. CHINA, RUSSIA, AND THE CRISIS IN UKRAINE

China recognizes the complex and special historical context of the Ukraine issue and understands Russia's legitimate security concerns. China maintains that the Cold War mentality should be completely abandoned and a balanced, effective and sustainable European security mechanism should be finally established through dialogue and negotiation.

—Chinese Foreign Ministry¹⁰⁹

A. INTRODUCTION

On February 24, 2022—behind the impact of sequenced artillery impacts across Kyiv, Kherson, Kharkiv, and Donetsk—Russian forces poured across the border under President Putin's "special military operation" to "demilitarize" its neighbor.¹¹⁰ Within days of the assault, verifiable accounts capture the unimaginable violence of summary executions, murder, and rape against civilian women and children by uniformed Russian soldiers.¹¹¹ As Russia executed a military operation that delivered Europe to yet another era of exhausting violence and mass atrocities, the international community watched in disbelief. Alongside an outraged international community, the United States immediately condemned Russia's military aggression as "unprovoked and unjustified," while the U.N. General Assembly voted to demand Russia "immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw" from Ukraine.¹¹² With a final vote of 143–5, the General Assembly declared that Russia's actions had "no validity under international law."¹¹³ Amidst the restless

¹⁰⁹ Wang Wenbin, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on February 28, 2022," (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202202/t20220228_10646378.html

¹¹⁰ Vassily Nebenzia, "Russian Federation Announces a 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine as Security Council Meets in Eleven-Hour Effort to Avoid Full-Scale Conflict," United Nations Meetings Coverage, February 23, 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14803.doc.htm>

¹¹¹ *Apparent War Crimes in Russia-Controlled Areas: Summary Executions Other Grave Abuses by Russian Forces* (New York: Human Rights Watch, April 23, 2022), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/03/ukraine-apparent-war-crimes-russia-controlled-areas>

¹¹² Cory Welt, *Russia's War Against Ukraine: Overview of U.S. Sanctions and Other Responses*, CRS Report No. IN118869, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11869>

¹¹³ Territorial integrity of Ukraine : Defending the Principles of the Charter of the United Nations, UN Resolution ES 11–4, General Chamber, 2022. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3990400>

clamor of some 30 nations banding together with sanctions against Russia, China remained discreetly engaged, offering but a few calculated comments.

At first glance, it is not clear whether the Russian military's actions in Ukraine have strengthened or weakened the Sino-Russian partnership. Some leading experts believe Russia's aggression in Ukraine will neither strengthen nor weaken the state of their union. Elizabeth Wishnick insists that because China and Russia cooperate in so many areas and regions elsewhere, their futures will remain inextricably "bound together."¹¹⁴ Tom Mitchell, Edward White, and Polina Ivanova offer that despite Putin's missteps in Ukraine, humanitarian tragedies, food and energy shortages, and global inflation are not enough to represent a "significant new fracture" in Sino-Russian relations. Meanwhile, others believe the conflict may even strengthen the bilateral bonds. David Shullman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor explain that because China and Russia fundamentally seek to erode U.S. power and influence, the conflict provides an occasion in which the partners can defy the will of a U.S.-led network of Western partners and allies.¹¹⁵ Tong Zhao and Bonnie Glaser agree, offering that both Beijing and Moscow view the ongoing aggression as an opportunity to stiffen rhetoric against hegemonic Western powers whose economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation in their view left President Putin with no other options but to invade.¹¹⁶ Others yet—like Ed Pulford, contend that deploying troops to Ukraine who once occupied military districts of the Chinese borderlands has replaced historical tension with a renewed diplomatic era of "peaceful emptiness."¹¹⁷

A number of experts contend Russia's actions in Ukraine will result in elevating China's geopolitical position. Zhou Bo maintains that because China is the only power

¹¹⁴ Elizabeth Wishnick, *The China-Russia 'No Limits' Partnership is Still Going Strong* (Arlington, VA: The Center for Naval Analyses, 2022).

¹¹⁵ David Shullman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, *Best and Bosom Friends: Why China-Russia Ties will Deepen after Russia's War on Ukraine* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009), 1.

¹¹⁶ Bonnie Glaser, "Putin's War Further Strains U.S. – China Ties," *Comparative Connections* 24, no. 1: 29–170. <https://cc.pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Vol-24-Issue-01.06.02.pdf>; Tong Zhao, *Implications for Russia's Nuclear Signaling During the Ukraine War for China's Nuclear Policy* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022), 4.

¹¹⁷ Ed Pulford, "Ukraine and the Limits of China-Russia Friendship," *Current History* 121, no. 836: 243–245. <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2022.121.836.243>

Russia would conceivably consider as a broker for peace in Ukraine, the circumstance advanced Beijing's image as a peaceful global authority.¹¹⁸ Gilbert Rozman believes Putin's invasion of Ukraine is an attempt to limit China's dominance over Russia and reset the balance in an increasingly asymmetric Sino-Russian relationship.¹¹⁹ He argues the failed operation has indeed backfired, lessening the Kremlin's power relative to that of Beijing.¹²⁰ Alexander Gabuev thinks Russia's reduced rank means the Putin administration is now apt to accept less favorable political, diplomatic, and commercial propositions if Moscow is to preserve its partnership with Beijing.¹²¹ In the end, Gabuev believes the asymmetric relationship of a dependent Kremlin on China will make Russian concessions "a useful instrument in a larger game" with Beijing's geopolitical rivals in Washington.¹²²

This chapter examines the effect of Russian military operations in Ukraine since on Sino-Russian relations. Carefully orchestrated one-on-one meetings, significant multilateral engagements, as well as public statements concerning of the hostilities in Ukraine provide insight on the current condition of the relationship. Actions and official statements function as the basis for analysis and offer clues as to whether the partnership is fundamentally based on measures of material gains, ideological alignment, or personalistic ties between the two heads of state.

B. ECONOMIC

The economic background surrounding Russia's prior aggression against Ukraine communicates a potential source of material strength in Chinese-Russian relations. Apart

¹¹⁸ Zhou Bo, "Caught between Russia and the west, China is treading a tightrope on Ukraine," *Financial Times*, March 2, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/c012270e-f89c-4ca8-8533-357204dc432f>

¹¹⁹ Gilbert Rozman, "The Ukraine War in the Context of Russian Thinking about China," The Asan Forum, November 30, 2022, <https://the.asanforum.org/the-ukraine-war-in-the-context-of-russian-thinking-about-china>

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Alexander Gabuev, "China's New Vassal: How the War in Ukraine Turned Moscow Into Beijing's Junior Partner," *Foreign Affairs*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/node/1129127>

¹²² Ibid.

from some exceptions in energy trade, the West largely responded to the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 with broad sanctions. In the interim, China seized opportunities for closer economic cooperation. According to Beijing and Moscow's trade statistics, China's share of Russia's external trade surged between 2014 and 2022, nearly doubling in the eight years between military operations in Ukraine, incrementally mounting from 10 percent to slightly over 20 percent at the close of 2021.¹²³

While the Chinese state has eagerly moved to benefit from discounted Russian oil, China has neither outright violated international sanctions nor demonstrated interest in undertaking assets global energy industries have divested in Russia.”¹²⁴ In fact, Chinese companies and certain financial enterprises withdrew from new initiatives in Russia following the invasion, and by mid-summer, had abandoned ongoing initiatives throughout the Russian market to avoid triggering Western sanctions.¹²⁵ Having never adopted sanctions against Moscow, China has surpassed Germany as the single largest consumer of Russian energy, and at events like the June 2022 BRICS summit, Xi has insisted on exploring opportunities for yet stronger economic exchange with Putin.¹²⁶ China has exercised similar restraint in provisioning direct material support to the Russian military for use in Ukraine. With the exception of non-lethal, dual-purpose technology and equipment like hunting rifles, drones, navigation equipment, aviation parts, and electronic

¹²³ Melkadze, Aleksandre. 2022. “Value of Russian Trade in Goods with China from 2007 to 2021.” *Statista*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1003171/russia-value-of-trade-in-goods-with-china/>; Sutter, Karen and Michael Sutherland. *China's Economic and Trade Ties with Russia*. CRS Report No. IF12120. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2024. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12120>

¹²⁴ Craig Mellow, “China's Xi to Putin: Our Friendship Has Limits,” *Barron's*, September 16, 2022., <https://www.barrons.com/articles/china-xi-russia-putin-oil-prices-51663317400>. BP, Shell, and Total Energies have rid themselves of corporate commitments within Russia.

¹²⁵ Shullman and Kendall-Taylor, *Best and Bosom Friends*, 1.

¹²⁶ François Chimits and Antonia Hmaidi, “China Moves to Fill the Void Left by Russia Sanctions—On Its Own Terms,” *The Diplomat*. August 20, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/china-moves-to-fill-the-void-left-by-russia-sanctions-on-its-own-terms/>. During his conference with President Putin at BRICS, their main economic forum, Xi explicitly called for increased trade in the energy sector, as well as in other industries including space and agri-food.

components that can be used in military radar systems, Beijing has thus far hesitated in providing overt materially support for Russia's military exploits.¹²⁷

Instead of outright condoning Russia's violations of Ukrainian sovereignty in 2014 and 2022, Chinese officials carried out a calculated, disciplined response to their strategic partner's actions. Beijing ensured Chinese firms simultaneously abide by U.S. and European sanctions *and* profit from sub-market prices on Russian energy deals to fuel its own domestic industry.¹²⁸ If Chinese and Russian-provided statistics are to be trusted, trade between the partners surged during the months following the initial salvos into Ukraine. In the seven months that followed the 2022 invasion, the governments reported that bilateral trade increased 31% and China imported some \$10 billion in goods from Russia—an increase of 49% from the previous year.¹²⁹ In subsequent months, Chinese spending continued climbing as its own shipments to Russia increased by 26%, eventually cresting \$115 billion in total bilateral trade, exceeding the 2021 exchange by 80%.¹³⁰ To date, there are no indications bilateral exchange between these industries is slowing. January 2023 data shows that for Russia, liquified gas sales via rail to China have continued on a trajectory that has more than doubled during the past year, while its gas and oil

¹²⁷ Paul Haenle, Alexander Gabuev, Li Mingjiang, *Is China Providing Russia with Military Support?* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/02/21/is-china-providing-russia-with-military-support-pub-89075>; “Ukraine war: What support is China giving Russia?” *BBC*, March 20, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/60571253>; Liana Fix and Michael Kimmage, “How China Could Save Putin’s War in Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/how-china-could-save-putins-war-ukraine>

¹²⁸ Serene Cheong, “Russian Oil Going About 10% Cheaper in China as Flows Upended,” *Bloomberg*, July 19, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-07-19/russian-oil-going-about-10-cheaper-in-china-as-flows-upended?leadSource=verify%20wall>; Alex Kimani, “China and India are Buying Russian Crude at 40% Discount,” *OilPrice.com*, November 29, 2022, <https://oilprice.com/Energy/General/China-And-India-Are-Buying-Russian-Crude-At-A-40-Discount.html>. While estimates vary, China has been purchasing Russian oil at discounted rates fluctuating from 10% to as much as the current discounts of 40% below market.

¹²⁹ Mark Green, *In the Months Since Russia’s Brutal Invasion of Ukraine, Its Trade with China has Surged* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2022). China relies on Russia for oil imports, of which 48% of total Russian imports to China are crude petroleum. Correspondingly, Russia depends on Chinese electronics including broadcasting equipment and computers, which make up about one-fifth of Chinese imports to Russia.

¹³⁰ Laura He, “Three Ways China and Russia are Forging Much Closer Economic Ties,” *CNN*, September 15, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/15/economy/china-russia-closer-ties-sco-summit-intl-hnk/index.html>

transported by pipeline continues on a trajectory that has increased by 50% (machinery, metals, and wheat exports have appreciably increased as well).¹³¹

But all may not be as well as advertised. While the data illustrates rapid expansion of trade between China and Russia, it is important to recognize such growth is predicated on the figures Beijing and Moscow have provided. Experts have made the case that China has politicized its statistics and intentionally modified trade values to promote optimism and encourage domestic markets.¹³² Similarly, economists reason that Russia has consistently concealed accurate trade figures or generated false numbers to support narratives integral to a larger “information war against the West.”¹³³ Moreover, China’s appetite for Russian commodities is still not enough to compensate for loss of the European markets.¹³⁴ Moscow had for decades restructured to enhance and accommodate Western European markets and had depended on such a model the West collectively began implementing waves of sanctions in 2014. Russia’s exports to Chinese and Indian markets helped offset losses from Europe’s embargo on oil and G7’s sanctions on parts needed for military-industrial production, but Moscow still sustained a net loss of \$17 billion in exports in the twelve months that followed the invasion (\$44 billion in February 2022 to less than \$27 billion in February 2023).¹³⁵ And though Beijing’s and Delhi’s consumption softened the blow to Moscow’s economy, the combined effects could not counteract the

¹³¹ Kim Coghill, “China’s 2022 Trade with Russia Hit Record \$190 bln – Customs,” *Reuters*, January 12, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-customs-says-trade-with-russia-hit-new-high-2022-2023-01-13/>; Sutter and Sutherland, *China’s Economic and Trade Ties with Russia*, 1.

¹³² Andreas Illmer, “China’s growth data – can you trust it?” *BBC*, January 19, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-35341869>; Michael Martin, *What’s the Difference? –Comparing U.S. and Chinese Trade Data* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2018), 5–6, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RS22640.pdf>

¹³³ Yulia Starostina, *Secret Economy: What Hiding the Stats Does for Russia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022), <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87432>; Agathe Demarais, “Don’t Trust Russia’s Numbers,” *Foreign Policy*, March 13, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/13/russia-economy-sanctions-gdp-war-ukraine-disinformation-statistics/>

¹³⁴ Jeffrey Schott, Russia’s higher energy sales to China and India in late 2022 did not make up for falling exports to Europe (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2023), <https://www.piie.com/research/piie-charts/russias-higher-energy-sales-china-and-india-late-2022-did-not-make-falling>

¹³⁵ Zsolt Darvas, Catarine Martins, and Conor McCaffrey, “Russian foreign trade tracker,” *Bruegel*, April 25, 2023, <https://www.bruegel.org/dataset/russian-foreign-trade-tracker>

\$15 billion in lost export revenues to the European Union (exports plunge from \$25.9 billion in February 2022 to \$10.8 billion a year later).¹³⁶

C. MILITARY

Since Moscow launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the frequency, scope, and complexity of Chinese-Russian joint military exercises have increased. China and Russia have conducted joint naval patrols in the Pacific and have coordinated multifaceted exercises, presumably intended to signal the nature of their strengthening partnership. In September 2022, Beijing for the first time committed three military branches to a single Russian exercise.¹³⁷ In fact, China dispatched sizeable formations of some 2,000 Chinese personnel, including three of its naval warships, 300 army vehicles, and 21 fixed and rotary wing air force assets.¹³⁸ In November, the partners' air forces conducted bomber patrols and sortied out of each other's runway facilities for another first in military-to-military collaboration.¹³⁹ One month later, the two navies carried out a live fire exercise in the East China Sea, deploying eight total surface ships, at least one submarine, and a formation of Chinese fighter jets.¹⁴⁰ Though the partners have conducted Exercise Joint Sea annually since 2012, it has evolved into a sophisticated, multilayered drill that in 2022 included anti-submarine warfare, surface-to-air engagement, and fighter jet maneuvers in support of maritime operations.¹⁴¹

In apparent resolve to assert military prowess, the partners have intensified high-visibility activities that dispute what they perceive to be their subordinated geopolitical

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Joseph Webster, "China-Russia Relations: 4 Takeaways From 2022," *The Diplomat*, January 4, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/china-russia-relations-4-takeaways-from-2022/>

¹³⁸ Dzirhan Mahadzir, "Chinese, Russian Warships Hold Live Fire Drills off Japan as Part of Vostok 2022," *U.S. Naval Institute*, September 5, 2022, <https://news.usni.org/2022/09/05/chinese-russian-warships-hold-live-fire-drills-off-japan-as-part-of-vostok-2022>

¹³⁹ Joseph Webster, "China-Russia Relations: 4 Takeaways From 2022."

¹⁴⁰ Dzirhan Mahadzir, "Russian, Chinese Naval Exercise Wraps in East China Sea," *U.S. Naval Institute*, December 28, 2022, <https://news.usni.org/2022/12/28/russian-chinese-naval-exercise-wraps-in-east-china-sea>

¹⁴¹ Dzirhan Mahadzir, "Russian, Chinese Naval Exercise Wraps in East China Sea."

status relative the United States. The Chinese and Russian air forces boldly conducted joint patrols through both Japanese and South Korean air defense zones during President Biden's trip to Asia in May 2022.¹⁴² Too, the partners maintain a slowing, but active relationship of mutual support through exchange of warfighting hardware. Beijing's decades of increased defense spending and industrial modernization efforts greatly improved China's means of production, but still relies on Russia for rotary wing aircraft and key aviation components like jet engines.¹⁴³ Likewise, Russia counts on China for support—even if by transfer of non-lethal equipment and intelligence support.¹⁴⁴ As previously mentioned, China has furnished Russia drones and navigation equipment ostensibly for use in Ukraine, but state-owned defense firms and other entities are known to have provided Russia geospatial intelligence, as well as delivered jamming technology, jet-fighter parts, semiconductors, and other components repurposed for use in air defense weapon systems and main battle tanks.¹⁴⁵

Other notable symbolic displays of unity further demonstrate closer cooperation in security and defense. In the days following the September 2022 SCO summit, China and Russia met in Beijing to discuss the heightening of military operations in Ukraine. The head of Russia's Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, met China's top diplomat, Yang Jiechi, to reaffirm their mutual commitments in continuing military cooperation.¹⁴⁶ Yang

¹⁴² Shullman and Kendall-Taylor, *Best and Bosom Friends*, 2.

¹⁴³ China procured 13% less arms imports from Russia between 2007 and 2022, a notable drop from previous periods. China is now close to replacing key aviation components like engines as well—orders for Mi-17 transport helicopters dropped 85% since 2019, see: Hart, Brian, Bonny Lin, Matthew Funaiole, Samantha Lu, Hanna Price, and Gavril Torrijos, *How Deep Are China-Russia Military Ties?* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023), <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-russia-military-cooperation-arms-sales-exercises/>

¹⁴⁴ Alberto Nardelli, Natalia Drozdak, Jennifer Jacobs, "US Urges EU to Sanction Chinese Satellite Firm Over Russia Aid," *Bloomberg*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-29/us-urges-eu-to-sanction-chinese-satellite-firm-over-russia-aid#xj4y7vzkg>

¹⁴⁵ Paul Haenle, Alexander Gabuev, Li Mingjiang, *Is China Providing Russia with Military Support?* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/02/21/is-china-providing-russia-with-military-support-pub-89075>; "Ukraine war: What support is China giving Russia?" *BBC*, March 20, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/60571253>, Nardelli et al., "US Urges EU to Sanction Chinese Satellite Firm over Russia Aid."

¹⁴⁶ Kawala Xie, "China and Russia Want Fair World Order," September 19, 2022, *South China Morning Post*, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3193037/china-and-russia-want-fair-world-order-wont-bend-external?module=inline&pgtype=article>

reiterated Beijing's support in clear language to international reporters, stating that during the present era of Presidents Xi and Putin, China-Russian relations "always maintained the momentum of vigorous development."¹⁴⁷ *Two days* after these renewed pledges, President Putin mobilized some 300,000 troops for his operation in Ukraine and reminded the West of Russia's nuclear arsenal.¹⁴⁸ Blaming the West for turning Ukrainian citizens into "cannon fodder," Putin once again referenced his military's nuclear triad in the September 2022 televised mobilization decree, restating Russia "has various means of destruction, for separate components, and more modern [means] than those of NATO countries."¹⁴⁹ Putin advertised that "when the territorial integrity of [his] country is threatened, to protect Russia and our people, [Russians] will certainly use all the means at our disposal....It's not a bluff."¹⁵⁰

During the final days of 2022, Presidents Xi and Putin held a virtual conference to discuss continued support. On 30 December 2022, as Ukrainian forces prepared for the possibility of a winter offensive, Presidents Putin and Xi discussed the state of bilateral relations amidst the crisis in Ukraine.¹⁵¹ Putin stated relations between China and Russia were "best in history" despite "unprecedented pressure and provocation from the West."¹⁵² Xi reportedly acknowledged the events in Ukraine indirectly, remarking

¹⁴⁷ Yang Jiechi, "Yang Jiechi Chairs the 17th Round of China-Russia Strategic in Fujian, China, on September 19, 2022," (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202209/t20220920_10768229.html

¹⁴⁸ Vladimir Putin, "Mobilization Decree," Transcript of speech delivered at Moscow, trans. Zoya Sheftalovich. *Politico*, September 21, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/text-vladimir-putin-mobilization-decree-war-ukraine-russia/>

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Andrew Kramer, "Ukraine Says Russia is Training Soldiers for a Possible New Offensive," *New York Times*, December 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/18/world/europe/ukraine-russia-war-winter.html>. Some analysts considered the final months of 2022 a strategic stalemate, while others considered the slowed operational tempo an indication of Russia's preparations for a winter 2023 offensive.

¹⁵² David Pierson and Anton Troianovski, "Xi and Putin Meet Again, Two Strongmen in a Weak Moment," *New York Times*, December 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/30/world/asia/xi-putin-china-russia.html>

such affairs were “complicated” before reaffirming his commitment to improving “strategic collaboration” with Russia.¹⁵³

Putin appeared to take the Xi’s pledges to improve strategic collaboration as a vote of confidence. Putin invited Xi to revisit Moscow in the spring, then swiftly conducted a televised speech that paraded Russia’s aims to “strengthen military cooperation with China.”¹⁵⁴ One week later, Putin had elevated hostilities from Zaporizhia on the Dnipro River to Soledar, Avdiivka, and Bakhmut on the steppe 180 miles to the East.¹⁵⁵ The increased shelling in the Zaporizhia, redeployment of airborne forces in Donetsk, and capturing of three Ukrainian strongholds in Luhansk validated suspicions that an offensive was underway.¹⁵⁶

D. POLITICAL-DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

On February 4, 2022, Presidents Xi and Putin met for the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics. It had been their 38th meeting since Xi had taken office and—and due to COVID, two years of self-seclusion since Xi had agreed to meet any other world leader in person. As one of the few world leaders to attend the ceremony, Putin and Xi’s mask-free reunion did not disappoint correspondents eagerly awaiting to report the occasion.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Eduardo Baptista, “Xi tells Putin that road to peace talks on Ukraine will not be smooth,” *Reuters*, December 30, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/xi-tells-putin-that-road-peace-talks-ukraine-will-not-be-smooth-2022-12-30/>

¹⁵⁵ Andrew Meldrum, “Almost no life left as Russia escalates Bakhmut attack.” January 10, 2023. *PBS Newshour*. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/almost-no-life-left-as-russia-escalates-bakhmut-attack-zelenskyy-says>

¹⁵⁶ Karolina Hird, George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Layne Philipson, and Frederick Kagan, *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 23, 2023* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2023).

¹⁵⁷ Bonnie Glaser, “Putin’s War Further Strains U.S. – China Ties,” 30; Wang Yi, “Chinese FM, U.S. Secretary of State Hold Phone Conversation,” (Washington, DC: The Embassy of the People’s Republic of China, January 27, 2022). http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zmgx/zxxx/202201/t20220127_10635363.htm. One week prior to the opening ceremonies of the 2022 Winter Olympics, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken phoned Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Informed of the U.S. decision to diplomatically boycott the games, Wang demanded Americans stop interfering with the Olympics. According to the official readout, Wang Yi challenged the U.S. to “stop interfering with the Olympic Winter Games Beijing 2022, stop playing with fire on the Taiwan issue, and stop creating various anti-China small cliques.”

On what would turn out to be the eve of President Putin’s “special military operation,” China and Russia presented a bold declaration of friendship to the international community. In the carefully crafted joint statement, Beijing and Moscow first trumpeted enduring Sino-Russian friendship, then swiftly turned to disparaging NATO—demanding the Western alliance “abandon [its] Cold War approach.”¹⁵⁸ With world’s eyes fixed upon the leaders, Presidents Xi and Putin declared opposition to “further enlargement of NATO...[and any NATO-like]...closed bloc structures and opposing camps in the Asia-Pacific region.”¹⁵⁹ Too, they outlined an alternate global perspective in which the international community should expect leadership that embraced peace instead of “undermining security and stability.”¹⁶⁰ Illustrating a shared vision for a world moving “towards redistribution of power,” the partners expressed intention to fill that demand by providing alternative global leadership for any countries unhappy with the status quo.¹⁶¹

Most significantly, the February 2022 joint statement directly addressed the Chinese and Russian perspective on Ukraine. Although never explicitly citing Ukraine, the document presented a shared vision to “counter interference by outside forces in the internal affairs of sovereign countries under any pretext, oppose color revolutions, and increase cooperation in the aforementioned area” (i.e., common adjacent regions).¹⁶² The statement then pronounced China was “sympathetic to and supports the proposals put forward by the Russian Federation to create long-term legally binding security guarantees in Europe.”¹⁶³ In clear language, China then repeatedly called for the transformation of the world order into an arrangement more *polycentric*, *law-based*, and *stable*.¹⁶⁴ In

¹⁵⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “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,” (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, February 4, 2022), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202202/t20220204_10638923.html

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

heralding the joint statement, Putin pronounced that “Russia sees in China the most important strategic partner and a like-minded friend, and hails the Russia-China relationship as an example for international relations in the 21st century.”¹⁶⁵

In the weeks following the joint statement—and as nearly 200,000 Russian troops amassed along the Russia-Ukraine border, Chinese officials cast blame on the United States and presented Beijing as an otherwise neutral party. On February 24, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying publicly upbraided the U.S. as the “culprit of current tensions surrounding Ukraine,” reasoning that Americans had “started the fire and fanned the flames.”¹⁶⁶ In her assessment, Hua added that because the U.S. provided Ukraine weapons, the United States was solely responsible for “heightening tensions, creating panic and even hyping up the possibility of warfare.”¹⁶⁷ Concluding with additional criticism, Hua lectured that “sanctions are never a fundamentally effective means to solve problems.”¹⁶⁸ The following morning, China abstained from voting on an ultimately failed UN Security Council resolution to end the crisis. Beijing’s representative offered to the Council that convening members should act to “defuse and not add fuel to the fire.”¹⁶⁹

Early March 2022 bore witness to a flurry of diplomatic exchanges and official statements over the crisis in Ukraine. During the first week of March, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken phoned Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in which Wang described the issue of Ukraine as “complicated,” and “closely related to the security interests of

¹⁶⁵ Xi Jinping, “Talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin,” Transcript of discussion at Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, Beijing (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China, February 4, 2022), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202202/t20220204_10638923.html

¹⁶⁶ Hua Chunying, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on February 24, 2022,” Transcript (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202202/t20220224_10645282.html

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ “Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution on Ending Ukraine Crisis, as Russian Federation Wields Veto,” United Nations Meetings Coverage, February 25, 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14808.doc.htm>

various parties.”¹⁷⁰ In diplomatic decorum, Wang insisted the crisis be resolved according to the UN Charter, to include defense of every country’s territorial integrity with special consideration for “the negative impact of NATO’s continuous expansion on Russia’s security.”¹⁷¹ In a seven hour meeting the following week, China’s top diplomat, Yang Jiechi informed U.S. national security advisor Jake Sullivan that China had considered mediating a peaceful resolution in Ukraine, and that China would continue providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine.¹⁷² The readout reported that Yang stated China backed peace talks between Russia and Ukraine, called for all parties to exercise maximum restraint, and believed that the legitimate concerns of all parties should be addressed.¹⁷³

Subsequent to the February invasion, the Chinese state remained largely detached—neither approving nor condemning the offensive in Ukraine. When the United Nations Security Council engineered a resolution intended to end the Russian assault, China abstained.¹⁷⁴ Beijing accused the West for causing the crisis, then opted to abstain from a second United Nations resolution condemning Moscow’s invasion.¹⁷⁵ When pressed on its position over Ukraine, Chinese officials skillfully countered with deflection, redirecting press focus to the destabilizing nature of U.S. security alliances that seek to

¹⁷⁰ Antony Blinken and Wang Yi, “Secretary Blinken’s Call with People’s Republic of China State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi,” Official readout of conversation on December 22, 2022 (Washington, DC: United States Department of State), <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-peoples-republic-of-china-prc-state-councilor-and-foreign-minister-wang-yi-4/>; Wang Yi, “Wang Yi Speaks with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken Washington,” (DC: The Embassy of the People’s Republic of China, March 5, 2022). http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202203/t20220306_10648426.htm. The U.S. Department of State’s release provides scant details, presenting a mere two sentences that offers Secretary Blinken’s “concerns about Russia’s war and the threat it poses to global security and economic stability.”

¹⁷¹ Yi, “Wang Yi Speaks with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken.”

¹⁷² “China Refusing to Condemn Russia’s Actions in Ukraine,” March 16, 2022, CNN, video, 2:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBkp06Gmyqs>

¹⁷³ Sullivan and Jiechi, “National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan’s Meeting with Politburo Member Yang Jiechi.”

¹⁷⁴ Draft Resolution S/2022/155, 8979th Meeting of the United Nations Security Council, 2022. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/269/25/PDF/N2226925.pdf?OpenElement>

¹⁷⁵ Draft Resolution S/2014/189, 7138th Meeting of the United Nations Security Council, 2014; China too abstained from the 2014 Security Council resolution that condemned the illegal referendum.

defend America's presence as a global hegemon.¹⁷⁶ When more than two dozen nations imposed harsh and sweeping sanctions on Russia, state officials communicated China would not include itself in the effort.¹⁷⁷ When the United States and allies froze assets of Russia's central bank, removed Russian banks from SWIFT, and assigned export restrictions to incapacitate the Russian economy, China's Commerce Ministry proclaimed they would continue normal trade relations for reasons of "mutual benefit and mutual respect."¹⁷⁸

From this point onward, China and Russia reinforced one another's actions in framing the U.S. as the source of conflict in Ukraine. On March 11, the Russian ambassador to the United Nations convened a special meeting to accuse the United States of funding biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine.¹⁷⁹ Chinese state media amplified such baseless indictments during the following weeks, flooding audiences of the *People's Daily* with commentaries on how the United States manipulates NATO to extend its hegemonic reach.¹⁸⁰ For the following months, the same daily published a six-part series on the "despicable role by the United States and the West in the Ukrainian crisis," further expanding the false narrative concerning the Pentagon's development of bioweapons in

¹⁷⁶ Shullman and Kendall-Taylor, *Best and Bosom Friends*. The authors explain that Presidents Putin and Xi criticized U.S. support for democracies in areas they considered within their respective spheres of influence as an effort to extend influence and ultimately overthrow their regimes. Throughout the article, it is explained how the leaders came to view specific U.S. alliance networks such as NATO and the Quad as direct challenges to their security and regime stability.

¹⁷⁷ Bonnie Glaser, "Putin's War Further Strains U.S. – China Ties."

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Jonathan Landy, Humeysa Pamuk, and Simon Lewis, "U.N. Says No Evidence to Back Russian Claim of Ukraine Biological Weapons Program," *Reuters*, March 11, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/un-says-not-aware-any-biological-weapons-program-ukraine-2022-03-11/>. The indictment created baseless associations of bioweaponry development and American health officials' ongoing collaboration with Ukrainian public health laboratories that function to monitor, detect, and respond to infectious disease outbreaks in Ukraine.

¹⁸⁰ Bonnie Glaser, "Putin's War Further Strains U.S. – China Ties." As the author explains, the largely domestically-oriented outlet issued dozens of commentaries under the authoritative pen name *Zhong Sheng* (the *voice of China*), to convince audiences of America's manipulative hold on the Western security alliance.

Ukraine.¹⁸¹ During March, the Chinese Communist Party’s official newspaper paralleled Russian conspiracies, publishing a number of articles presenting false evidence to support allegations of the laboratories.¹⁸² *The People’s Daily Online* further reported that the U.S. strategy to undermine Russia included the creation of installations in Ukraine for the purposes of arming weapons of mass destruction with deadly pathogens for implied use against Russia.¹⁸³ Although mostly limited to domestic audiences, Chinese state media also propagated storylines of Russian soldiers’ valiantly fighting to dislodge the Nazi regime in Ukraine—a government supposedly connected to the American plot to undermine Russian authority in the region.¹⁸⁴ As Russian forces ramped up the aggression, the PRC then turned to disseminating U.S.-Taiwan centered media, rationalizing that the Americans would abandon Taiwan as it had abandoned Ukraine.¹⁸⁵ Weeks later—and in reference to a host of diplomatic visits by senior American politicians, China’s foreign ministry spokesperson posited that it was “futile for the U.S. to send anyone to demonstrate its so-called support for Taiwan.”¹⁸⁶

In the background of sweeping international events, China and Russian have sustained efforts to stoke anti-American sentiment during their most important multilateral engagements. Xi Jinping led such a diplomatic show of force during the June 2022 BRICS

¹⁸¹ Jun Mai, “China Hammers Home its Message of U.S. Blame for Ukraine War to Domestic Audience,” *South China Morning Post*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3172228/china-hammers-home-its-message-us-blame-ukraine-war-domestic>. The People’s Daily emphatically focused on the U.S. strategy to expand its Western influence eastward, largely by means of NATO enlargement.

¹⁸² “China Joins Russia in Alarming New Bioweapon Propaganda Campaign,” March 11, 2022, MSNBC, video, 7:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAg6aecdgMg>.

¹⁸³ MSNBC, “China Joins Russia in Alarming New Bioweapon Propaganda Campaign.”

¹⁸⁴ “War in Ukraine: Whose Side is China On?” March 10, 2022, *The Economist*, video, 9:29. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnR1vZpdTfk>

¹⁸⁵ Bonnie Glaser, “Putin’s War Further Strains U.S. – China Ties.”

¹⁸⁶ John Feng, “After Russia Invades Ukraine, China Says U.S. Support for Taiwan ‘Futile,’” *Newsweek*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/after-russia-invades-ukraine-china-says-us-support-taiwan-futile-1683563>. Translations on Wenbin’s quote vary. Some sources translate American envoys to Taiwan as “futile, pointless,” or “bound to fail.”

summit.¹⁸⁷ During the opening remarks of his keynote speech, Xi explained the “world today is overshadowed by the dark clouds of Cold War mentality,” and that the Ukrainian crisis served as a wakeup call because “some countries attempt to expand military alliances to seek absolute security [and] stoke bloc-based confrontation.”¹⁸⁸ In addressing the virtual assembly of state leaders and international press, he deprecated the West for “weaponizing the global economy” and called for closer economic cooperation among member states.¹⁸⁹ Beyond the diplomatic flair of the June 2022 BRICS conference, Xi and Putin prioritized the international publicity of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in October 2022.¹⁹⁰ Despite major setback in Northeast Ukraine during October 2022, President Putin presided over the SCO gathering alongside President Xi. More than a dozen countries attended the latter, including India, Iran, Mongolia, Turkey, and eight other Eurasian states.¹⁹¹

During a series of phone calls in the following weeks, the top Chinese officials continued a similar, redirecting theme of rhetoric. During a March 18 phone call purportedly concerning Ukraine, President Xi expressed to Joe Biden that it was “very dangerous” that “some people in the U.S. have sent a wrong signal to ‘Taiwan independence’ forces” and warned that mishandling of the Taiwan question “will have a disruptive impact on the bilateral ties.”¹⁹² During a second phone call a month later, U.S. Secretary Austin spoke with Chinese Defense Minister General Wei Fenghe for nearly an hour, in which the Pentagon stated the topics of PRC defense relations, regional security

¹⁸⁷ Xi Jinping, “Full Text: Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the BRICS Business Forum,” *China Daily*, June 23, 2022, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202206/22/WS62b32744a310fd2b29e67f12.html>. The member countries of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa are collectively known as BRICS.

¹⁸⁸ Jinping, “Full Text: Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the BRICS Business Forum

¹⁸⁹ Reid Standish, “How Much is China Helping Russia Finance its War in Ukraine?” *Radio Free Europe*, June 26, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-russia-ukraine-war-sanctions-analysis/31915619.html>

¹⁹⁰ Colm Quinn, “India’s BRICS Balancing Act,” *Foreign Policy*, June 23, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/23/india-brics-russia-china/>. BRICS had convened for the first time in more than five years, and for only the third time since its inception.

¹⁹¹ Zoya Mateen, “Modi at SCO: India-China Ties under Spotlight at Key Security Summit,” *BBC*, September 15, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-62886142>

¹⁹² Bonnie Glaser, “Putin’s War Further Strains U.S. – China Ties.”

issues, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine were discussed.¹⁹³ While the Department of State's readout offers little detail, Secretary Austin did caution Beijing not to provide material support to Russia's military or economy.¹⁹⁴ China's readout of the call was much lengthier, and focused in part on his messages regarding Taiwan. General Wei stressed that "if the Taiwan question is not handled properly, it will have a subversive effect on the China-US relations."¹⁹⁵ During a third phone call in mid-May, the Chinese Director of the Foreign Affairs Commission spoke with National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan over the military operations in Ukraine. As a follow up to their March meeting in Rome, Yang Jiechi reportedly instead addressed "specific issues in U.S.-China relations," including a tangential discussion on Taiwan.¹⁹⁶

As Western leaders strengthened collective opposition to the Russian assault on Ukraine, Xi restated his support for Russian security interests in a mid-June dialogue with to Putin. On June 15—as French, Italian, and German leaders traveled to Ukraine and NATO defense ministers convened in Brussels to discuss support for Ukraine, President Xi phoned Putin for the first time since Russian forces invaded Ukraine.¹⁹⁷ The official readout circulated that Xi "independently assessed" the ongoing operation in Ukraine, and that China "China will work with Russia to fulfill their responsibilities as major countries

¹⁹³ Wei Fenghe, "Chinese Defense Minister Holds Phone Talk with U.S. Counterpart," (Beijing: Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, April 20, 2022), http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2022-04/20/content_4909446.htm

¹⁹⁴ Department of Defense. Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III Call with the People's Republic of China Minister of National Defense General Wei Fenghe (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2022). <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3004550/readout-of-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-call-with-the-peoples-repub/>; Robert Burns, "US Pentagon Chief Speaks for First Time to Chinese Counterpart," AP News. April 20, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-china-beijing-lloyd-austin-245b7d20813f854092d7bbf0326deca4>

¹⁹⁵ Bonnie Glaser, "Putin's War Further Strains U.S. – China Ties."

¹⁹⁶ Jake Sullivan and Yang Jiechi, "National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's Phone Call with Politburo Member Yang Jiechi," Official readout (Washington, DC: White House, May 18, 2022), <https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/readout-of-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-phones-call-with-politburo-member-yang-jiechi/>

¹⁹⁷ Max Seddon, Roman Olearchyk, and Victor Mallet, "Xi renews support for Putin in call between leaders," *Financial Times*, June 15, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/66139ca9-dcf2-4809-b051-0e888949a6dd>

and play a leading role in injecting stability into a world of change and disorder.”¹⁹⁸ According to the Foreign Ministry, Xi restated his previous calls for all involved parties to bring an end to the war, but circulated China was “willing to continue mutual support with Russia on issues related to sovereignty, security and issues of major concern.”¹⁹⁹ The Kremlin’s account differs, remarking that Xi acknowledged “the legitimacy of the actions taken by Russia to defend its core national interests in the face of challenges to its security created by external forces.”²⁰⁰

On September 7, China’s head of the National People’s Congress travelled to Vladivostok to communicate the State’s support for Russia in Ukraine. In attendance of Russia’s Eastern Economic Forum, the Russian Duma quoted Li Zhanshu saying “We fully understand the necessity of all the measures taken by Russia aimed at protecting its key interests, we are providing our assistance.”²⁰¹ The third ranking official stated “the political trust, strategic coordination and pragmatic cooperation between [Russia and China] had reached new heights” and that “China fully understands and supports Russia’s need to secure its core interests, including Russia’s actions in Ukraine.”²⁰² According to the Duma, the senior legislator held Americans responsible for all of the conflict’s consequences, from humanitarian tragedies to food and energy shortages and global inflation.²⁰³

¹⁹⁸ Xi Jinping, “Xi Talks with Putin over Phone,” (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, June 15, 2022). https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202206/t20220615_10703804.html

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, “Telephone Conversation with President of China Xi Jinping,” (Moscow: Office of the President of Russia, June 15, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68658>

²⁰¹ Vyacheslav Volodin and Li Zhanshu, “Leaders of the State Duma Factions Met with Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress,” (Moscow: Duma, September 9, 2022), <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/55208/>

²⁰² Jack Lau, “China’s Top Lawmaker Praises Resilience of Russia’s Sanctions-Hit Economy,” *South China Morning Post*, September 7, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3191719/chinas-top-lawmaker-praises-resilience-russias-sanctions-hit>.

²⁰³ Li Zhanshu and Vladimir Putin, Meeting with Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress of China Li Zhanshu during Eastern Economic Congress at Russky Island, Primorye Territory on September 7, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/69305/print>It is important to note that the video is not carried by any of China’s official state media.

Chinese and Russian officials maintained these themes during the diplomatically significant SCO security summit in September 2022. Convening in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, Presidents Xi and Putin conducted their first tête-à-tête since the two declared their “no limits partnership” in February. Putin told Xi that he blamed “the provocations of the United States and its satellites” for the escalating tensions over Taiwan, and noted China’s “questions and concerns” over Ukraine.²⁰⁴ Following Putin’s remarks that Russians “highly appreciate [d] the balanced position of our Chinese friends in connection with the Ukrainian crisis,” he reminded the Chinese delegation of his appreciation for a “strategic, comprehensive partnership” with expectations to deepen bilateral and international commitments.²⁰⁵

Xi responded with pointedly more cautious statements. Xi mentioned neither Ukraine nor Taiwan, and instead spoke directly to China’s warm relations and its increasing agricultural ties.²⁰⁶ Emphatic about deepening economic cooperation, Xi specified that China and Russia would continue cooperating closely and that he personally wished to see progress in areas such as trade, agriculture and connectivity.”²⁰⁷ While Xi included references support for one another’s “core interests,” he exacted that such support “proceed [ed] from their national interests in any deal, which is the only way to go.”²⁰⁸ In his concluding remarks, Xi expressed that regime security remained a top priority for Xi, explaining his security concerns oriented on preventing “color revolutions.”²⁰⁹

China’s political and diplomatic support of Russia’s actions in Ukraine are not unconditional, however. Within hours of Putin’s September 2022 threats of nuclear warfare, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin urged a ceasefire. Without

²⁰⁴ Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, “Meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping,” Official Transcript of Meeting at SCO Summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan (Moscow: Kremlin, September 15, 2022). <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69356>. China had just executed a number of unprecedented military exercises in vicinity of Taiwan following U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taipei.

²⁰⁵ Green, *In the Months Since Russia’s Brutal Invasion of Ukraine*; Putin and Jinping, “Meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping.”

²⁰⁶ Putin and Jinping, “Meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping.”

²⁰⁷ Wishnick, The China-Russia ‘No Limits’ Partnership is Still Going Strong.

²⁰⁸ Putin and Jinping, “Meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping.”

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

delay, Wang called on the international community during a press conference to create the conditions necessary to “achieve a ceasefire through dialogue and negotiation and find a way to accommodate the legitimate security concerns of all parties concerned as soon as possible.”²¹⁰ Then, within two weeks, President Xi restated China’s position, reinforcing Wang’s remarks and explaining the international community must “jointly oppose the use of, or threats to use, nuclear weapons.”²¹¹ And by March 2023, China had advanced a peace plan to end Russia’s war in Ukraine. Though the plan once again criticized the United States and ridiculed NATO’s expansionist trends, the twelve-point outline also conflicted with some of Russia’s interests and behaviors. It asserted “the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries must be effectively upheld,” and urged an end to attacks on civilians.²¹²

E. CONCLUSION

When considering sources of strength for the China-Russia partnership, the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine is telling. With some important exceptions, consistency of language, high-profile multilateral events, and bilateral engagements seem to suggest the crisis in Ukraine has strengthened relations in a number of areas. Since the Russian military invaded Ukraine in February 2022, evidence indicates material interests, ideological similarities, and Xi and Putin’s personal relationship factor in to the making of a stronger strategic partnership. On the face of it, trade relations have improved, military cooperation has increased, and a shared vision for an alternate world order between presidential pals have drawn two of the world’s largest countries into a firmer partnership.

²¹⁰ Wang Wenbin, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on September 21, 2022,” (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202209/t20220921_10769255.html

²¹¹ Stuart Lau, “China’s Xi warns Putin not to use nuclear arms in Ukraine,” *Politico*, November 4, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-xi-jinping-warns-vladimir-putin-not-to-use-nuclear-arms-in-ukraine-olaf-scholz-germany-peace-talks/>

²¹² “China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis.” Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. February 24, 2023. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html

The events in Ukraine seem to demonstrate that a number of interests inspire deepened relations between China and Russia—not the least of which is mutual support expressed in material dimensions. President Xi’s administration has tailored language and demonstrated actions that communicate a tolerance for President Putin’s military adventurism if it means advancing China’s national interests in at least a couple of key areas. In the economic sphere for example, Western sanctions on Russia have presented Beijing with a partner that is more financially and technologically needy, yet capable of delivering the raw materials and steeply discounted hydrocarbons China needs to fuel its massive industrial economy. Amidst lingering food shortages, soaring inflation, and disruptions to supply chains, President Xi is motivated to support the Russian economy short of triggering sanctions against his own national enterprises.

As for Xi’s military, he seeks not a formal alliance, but the opportunity for high-visibility joint patrols that tighten defense cooperation as a means for Beijing to openly defy the West, particularly in its perceived sphere of influence. Since February 2022, China has continued embracing Russia as a military partner, encouraged to at once neutralize the threat of a historical adversary *and* gain an operationally active partner. As a bonus, Xi gains a partner armed with a formidable arsenal of nuclear and conventional warfighting technology for use on land, in air, and at sea. Moreover, China profits from Russia’s active resistance to NATO’s eastward encroachment not only because the circumstances reinforce its narrative of Western incursion into its own perceived spheres of influence, but because support for “Russia’s Ukraine” could further serve to justify parallel arguments reserved for Taiwan.

While the evidence seems to suggest Beijing has the most to gain from supporting Russia throughout the crisis, Russia too profits significantly from China’s continued support. Russia’s crippled and isolated economy has secured a matchless market with bottomless demand for its natural resources and foodstuffs. In areas of defense and security, the Russian military has netted a partner garrisoned with the world’s largest standing army and a rapidly modernizing infrastructure.

As it relates to ideological overlap, China and Russia exploit mutually reinforcing demands for a more inclusive international system that is more financially stable, and less

vulnerable to Western intrusions. Chinese rhetoric has balanced a caution to circumvent the West's punitive sanctions on Moscow while prioritizing the stabilization and expansion of its domestic industry through increased trade with Russia (short of triggering secondary sanctions through overt provision of military hardware). Above all, if any one aspect of the relationship seems to have drawn China and Russia into closer cooperation, it is that Beijing and Moscow have embraced the crisis in Ukraine as an opportunity to frame the West as responsible and to justify their demands for a reimagined, polycentric international order.

China and Russia appear to have fortified relations during the conflict in Ukraine by way of the personal relationship between Presidents Xi and Putin. Amidst harsh diplomatic isolation and debilitating Western sanctions, Putin has perhaps turned to Xi not only because Russia's economy nosedived into recession, but because Xi Jinping is one of the few world leaders of consequence willing to do business with him. Without Xi's tacit approval and friendship as a starting point, China's enormous market for Russia's cheap commodities may have otherwise been off limits. And though Beijing has thus far denied it, Putin may still be counting on Xi's continued amicability for the eventual direct military and logistical support his armed forces so desperately need to sustain the offensive in Ukraine.

The friendship between Presidents Xi and Putin serves to strengthen the partnership in other dimensions too, given the context of the Ukraine conflict. President Putin appears to depend on Xi's encouragement to buoy his military offensive in Ukraine. To date, Putin has thrice sought Xi's pledges to continued support before conspicuously escalating military violence in Ukraine. Within three weeks of the first proclamation in February 2022, the 200,000 Russian troops massed on Ukraine's border launched a full-scale invasion. Within two days of Xi's second pledge at the September 2022 SCO summit, Putin mobilized some 300,000 troops to augment the campaign. Within one week of Xi reaffirming his commitment to improving strategic collaboration with Russia during December 2022's virtual conference, Putin had launched a winter offensive spanning the Zaporizhia Oblast, Donetsk, Luhansk Oblasts in eastern Ukraine. President Putin's words and actions ostensibly prove he seeks validation from an internationally powerful peer in

defying the West and its hegemonic control over global affairs. The events in Ukraine have assured President Putin that he has earned the approval and the encouragement he desperately seeks from a leader whom he deeply respects.

As the episode of the coronavirus pandemic brought to light, Russia's war in Ukraine also suggests reasons to doubt the partnership is as strong as advertised. First, the trend continued whereby Moscow gradually gained less material substance from its economic and military commitments with Beijing. China is known to support the Russian armed forces with some intelligence and dual-use technologies, but Beijing did not provide Putin's military with the kind of lethal military aid it needed—or *likely expected*, from a partnership previously touting limitless potential.²¹³ Also, with China's defense industry more able to manufacture its own military equipment for maritime, air, and ground operations, Russia is on the losing end of the transaction with China. Such losses are also likely to compound with the Kremlin's discomfort over the dwindling military sales to a partner known to have abused licensing agreements for the purposes of reverse-engineering high-end, Russian-made military equipment.²¹⁴ Moreover, it is unlikely that the physical withdrawal of certain Chinese firms from Russia to avoid third party sanctions pleased the Kremlin, particularly since the abandonment occurred within the first few months of the invasion.

Second, there is once again the real possibility that economic growth between China and Russia was not as sizeable as chronicled. Not unlike the reporting during the COVID-19 crisis, the partners may have politicized trade statistics. A few reasons motivate China and Russia and to distort figures. Russia wants to support narratives of sanction-defying economic success while China seeks to stabilize and encourage domestic markets with

²¹³ "Ukraine war: What support is China giving Russia?," Fix and Kimmage, "How China Could Save Putin's War in Ukraine," Nardelli et al., "US Urges EU to Sanction Chinese Satellite Firm over Russia Aid;"

²¹⁴ Paul Schwartz, *The Changing Nature and Implications of Russian Military Transfers to China* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/changing-nature-and-implications-russian-military-transfers-china>

optimism-inspiring reports.²¹⁵ Meanwhile, both benefit from creating the illusion that their combined trade eclipses the revenues lost between Russia and the European Union.

Third, China's ambitions for global prominence conflict with its boundless commitment to Russia as a partner. Though Russia desires international prominence as much as China, each envision a different foreign policy path to achieve such a status. Russia practices methods of confrontation with the West and actively applies military force to expand its perceived sphere of influence. Meanwhile, Xi's China seeks to exploit economic and diplomatic methods to their fullest extent as a means to establish something of a role in global peacemaking. Not only did China broker an agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023, but has advanced a peace plan to end Russia's war in Ukraine.²¹⁶ In place of the limitless partnership Russia expected throughout the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin finds a counterpart who gains from public bids for mediation and stops short of providing the kind of support it really needs from a loyal partner.

²¹⁵ Demarais, "Don't Trust Russia's Numbers;" Illmer, "China's growth data – can you trust it?"

²¹⁶ Saeid Golkar and Kasra Aarabi, "The Real Motivation Behind Iran's Deal With Saudi Arabia," *Foreign Policy*, April 6, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/06/iran-saudi-arabia-deal-agreement-china-meeting-beijing/>

IV. CHINA, RUSSIA, AND INDIA'S ASCENDANCE

A. INTRODUCTION

Concurrent to the cascading effects of the coronavirus pandemic and invasion of Ukraine, India's globally-scaled ascendancy provides an equally insightful dynamic to examine the strengths of the China-Russia partnership. New Delhi's current and historical relationships with Beijing have eroded from decades of economic, military, and political tension. Xi and Modi have not formally engaged bilaterally since 2019, and relations remain tense amid recurring military skirmishes along the border of disputed territory. At the same time, India enjoys long-standing economic and defense relationships with Russia that have been both characteristically symbiotic and absent any diplomatic friction. Modi has met head-to-head with Putin as recently as September 2022 and publicly pursues continuation of their countries' "special and privileged strategic partnership."²¹⁷

India really matters a great deal for both countries. It is not an option for either China or Russia to consider New Delhi's role in global affairs irrelevant for reasons of trade, security, and to some degree, ideological interests, particularly after India joined the United States, Australia, and Japan in forming the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad). The United States plays a leading role in the Quad, a diplomatic network to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific region. China plays a leading role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), an organization that seeks to promote economic development and encourage cooperation amongst member states throughout much of the Indo-Pacific region. Not only does India have an active membership in both organizations, it has a promising economic forecast, sizeable military, and the largest population in the world. India's support or abandonment of either coalition-like network is an important factor in a China-Russia calculus for international restructuring. The weight of India's influence is vital in this context.

²¹⁷ "India-Russia Joint Statement following the visit of the President of the Russian Federation," Government of India Ministry of External Affairs, December 6, 2021, https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34606/India_Russia_Joint_Statement_following_the_visit_of_the_President_of_the_Russian_Federation

Available literature concerning the triangular dynamics between China, Russia, and India illustrates an unstable and a potentially disruptive effect on the Sino-Russian partnership. One panel of global affairs experts concludes that although Russia's relations with China and India are strong for the moment, a great prospect lingers as Beijing extends its influence toward Central Asia and further elevates tensions with New Delhi.²¹⁸ Alexander Gabuev believes that because Moscow depends on China for its survival, Putin's regime will not only need to support China during international forums, but eventually concede to abandoning close diplomatic and defense ties with India.²¹⁹ A recent assessment concerning the Eurasian security environment stressed the volatility of Chinese-Indian relations, suggesting India presents a twenty-first century threat to China.²²⁰ The authors conclude India challenges both China's regional dominance directly, but also indirectly by virtue of its close partnership with Russia.²²¹ Neil Melvin imagines a Russia-India relationship in which both partners seek to limit the prospect of Sino-centric political and economic orders.²²² To balance against Beijing, Melvin believes New Delhi will continue an economic courtship that draws Russia away from a dependence on China, and into a broader commercial union spanning the Indo-Pacific region.²²³

Other studies minimize the significance of India's influence on Sino-Russian relations. One study diminishes the significance of Russia's relationship with India, insisting the potential for continued conflict rests solely with China and India.²²⁴ The

²¹⁸ Dina Smeltz, Brendan Helm, and Arik Burakovsky, "US Experts Consider China a Shifting and India a Stable Friend to Russia: They Predict Less Tense Russian Relations with the United States and the European Union," (Chicago, Illinois: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, October 1, 2020), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26632>

²¹⁹ Alexander Gabuev, "How the War in Ukraine Turned Moscow Into Beijing's Junior Partner," *Foreign Affairs*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/node/1129127>

²²⁰ Yafeng Xia, "Introduction to the Special Issue on China's Relations with Its Neighbors: Historical Perspectives on Contemporary Issues," *Asian Perspective* 42, no. 4 (October-December 2018): 485–500.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Neil Melvin, *Russia and the Indo-Pacific Security Concept* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2021), 22.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ijaz Latif Muhammad and Sehar Sabir, "Great Power Perspective towards Afghanistan: India China Creeping Competition in the Heart of Asia," *Journal of Political Studies* 26, no. 2 (2019): 187–202.

authors insist that because Beijing and New Delhi share competing interest in areas of regional influence, aspirations for a greater role in the global arena has little to do with their respective relations with Russia.²²⁵ Bobo Lo believes the Russo-Indian partnership is only one aspect of a more comprehensive Russian strategy to reorient foreign policy to the East and forgo former Western centric approaches.²²⁶ Lo maintains that under Putin's leadership, Russia wishes to reinvent itself as a global actor strengthened by a strategic flexibility that includes partnerships with a broad set of Asia-Pacific partners including not only India and China, but Japan, Vietnam, North and South Korea, and other ASEAN countries.²²⁷

Many of India's qualities potentially *weaken* China's and Russia's solidarity and influence. India's cozy relationship with the U.S. as well as its status as the world's most populous democracy stand in stark contrast to the so-called "autocratic alliance" that seeks to challenge America's global hegemony.²²⁸ Additionally, Prime Minister Modi's economic growth initiatives established India as the second largest economy on the Asian continent and thrust India into competition with China for resources, investments, and market access.²²⁹

India's stable relations with Russia—but not China, could also serve to *strengthen* the Sino-Russian partnership. Strained affairs between India and China potentially encourages Beijing to more firmly embrace its transcontinental partner in Moscow as a strategic hedge against New Delhi. Moreover, India's non-alignment and promotion of

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Bobo Lo, *Once more with feeling: Russia and the Asia-Pacific* (Sydney Australia: Lowy Institute, 2019).

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Despite the absence of any formal alliance, the term "alliance of autocracies" coined by Western policymakers has gained popularity across the media and think tank publications. See David Leonhardt, "A New Axis: China and Russia have formed an 'alliance of autocracies,'" *New York Times*, February 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/briefing/china-russia-alliance.html> and Kadri Liik, *It's Complicated: Russia's tricky relationship with China* (Berlin, Germany: European Council for Foreign Affairs, 2021), <https://ecfr.eu/publication/its-complicated-russias-tricky-relationship-with-china/>

²²⁹ India experienced more than 8% growth rate in 2021 and 2022 and expected to maintain a similar rate of growth during 2023. See *GDP Growth: Annual Percentage*, World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/IN>.

multipolarity within the global order could serve to advance China's and Russia's ideological vision (despite India's democratic brand of government). And while India is a member of the UN and Quad, it also has a meaningful membership in the BRICS Forum and remains an active promoter of SCO interests.

This chapter analyzes how India's presence as an emerging major power affects China and Russia's partnership. India's bilateral relations with China and Russia are first examined independently before considering the complex effects those relations have on the state of the Sino-Russian partnership. Economic, military, and political-diplomatic activity involving the three states in question serve as the basis for understanding how and where the China-Russia partnership draws on material benefit, ideological alignment, and/or personal friendship between presidents as sources of strength.

B. ECONOMIC

From the moment Prime Minister Modi took office in 2014, he demonstrated a readiness to preserve India's and Russia's record of favorable economic relations. The same year that Russia invaded Southern Ukraine and annexed Crimea, Modi welcomed Putin for a head-to-head meeting in New Delhi, reassuring Putin that India would not support Western sanctions.²³⁰ Ever since, India and Russia have steadily worked to further strengthen economic ties. In the months following Putin and Modi's most December 2021 summit in New Delhi, Russia's largest oil company Rosneft, formally agreed to supply India Oil Company, one of India's biggest oil and gas enterprises, with two million tons of product within the following year.²³¹ In fact, the purchase from Rosneft amidst the full-scale invasion of Ukraine signaled the largest increase of Russian oil by any one global consumer.²³² By June 2022—merely four months after the West imposed its

²³⁰ Tanvi Madan, *Mr. Putin Goes to India: Five Reasons the Russian President will be Welcomed There* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2014), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2014/12/09/mr-putin-goes-to-india-five-reasons-the-russian-president-will-be-welcomed-there/>

²³¹ Olga Yagova, Gleb Gorodyankin, and Nidhi Verma, "Russia's Rosneft and India Oil Sign Crude Supply Deal," December 6, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russias-rosneft-indian-oil-sign-2022-supply-deal-2021-12-06/>

²³² "How China and India Help Russia's Economy by Buying Oil," *Wall Street Journal*, September 14, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Ta6iOqmYhs>

harshest sanctions on Moscow, India had increased the purchase of steeply discounted Russian oil *25 fold*.²³³

During that same 2021 summit, Modi and Putin formalized agreements that further expanded economic integration. Marking the twenty-first Indian-Russian summit of its kind, the government in New Delhi presented the meeting as a necessary forum to create new drivers of growth for long term, predictable and sustained economic cooperation.²³⁴ Eventually culminating in a joint statement, India and Russia arranged for tripling of trade from less than \$10 billion annually to \$30 billion by 2025 (*India and Russia exceeded this benchmark by 2022 with a total of \$38.4 billion, a figure nearly five times greater than the \$8.1 billion in bilateral trade in 2019*).²³⁵ While Russia secured an encouraging and reliable trading partner, the pact correspondingly yielded a significant return for India, expanding Russian-supplied steel and hydrocarbons (mainly coal) to nourish India's quickly growing economy.²³⁶

In contrast to India's comfortable trade relations with Russia, economic affairs with China are noticeably more strained. There is no single barrier to future progress between Beijing and New Delhi, rather a whole host of economic *and* non-economic factors straining relations. For example, since 2018, New Delhi has repeatedly declined to endorse or participate in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), citing reasons of Chinese incursions into Indian territory as well as inherent commercial disadvantages the initiative

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ "21st India-Russia Annual Summit," (New Delhi: Government of India, Press Information Bureau, December 6, 2021), <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleseDetail.aspx?PRID=1778665>

²³⁵ Olesy Astakhova, "Russia's Rosneft signs deal to boost oil supplies to India," *Reuters*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russias-rosneft-signs-deal-boost-oil-supplies-india-2023-03-29/>; Overview: *Brief on India-Russian Economic Relations* (Moscow: Embassy of India, 2023), <https://www.indianembassy-moscow.gov.in/overview.php#:~:text=2.,Russia%20amounted%20USD%205.48%20billion....>

²³⁶ "Cabinet Approves Pact with Russia on Cooperation for Coking Coal," *Economic Times*, July 14, 2021. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/cabinet-approves-pact-with-russia-on-cooperation-for-coking-coal/articleshow/84412286.cms>; Moscow puts India at risk of sanctions from the United States under the *Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act* (2017) which aimed to deter countries from buying Russian military hardware.

implies for the Indian economy.²³⁷ In another instance in 2020, New Delhi banned over 100 popular Chinese cellular phone and commercial software applications to protect the sovereignty of Indian cyberspace.²³⁸ While India reasoned it acted to safeguard the security of its citizens, China regarded the move as a means to block internet giants like Tencent and Ant Financial from the promise of financial benefit derived from videogames and applications like WeChat, Baidu, and Aliplay.²³⁹ Later that same year, India's Ministry of External Affairs stiffened visa standards for Chinese citizens over vaguely stated security concerns, requiring a security clearance grant for all Chinese business professionals and industry experts.²⁴⁰

In a separate but related matter, India's accelerated economic development too has served to compound existing tensions with China. India's growth over the past five years has occurred—in some measure at the expense of Chinese manufacturing. Since 2020, India has not only doubled spending on capital investments needed to support an expanding manufacturing sector, but countries like the U.S. and South Korea have financed high-tech manufacturing initiatives to alleviate fears of future commercial disruptions in China and to sidestep total dependence on its supply chains.²⁴¹ One 2023 corporate survey revealed that 70% of respondents considered lockdowns in China the biggest global event impacting business in 2022, while another 60% expected COVID-related effects (such as worker

²³⁷ Abhignan Rej, "Is China's Belt and Road Initiative Strategic? Perhaps Not," *The Diplomat*, August 26, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/is-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-strategic-perhaps-not/>; *Economic Times*. "At SCO Meeting, India Refuses to Endorse China's Ambitious BRI." November 1, 2022. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/at-sco-meeting-india-refuses-to-endorse-chinas-ambitious-bri/articleshow/95237272.cms>

²³⁸ Sameer Yasir and Hari Kumar, "India Bans 118 Chinese Apps as Indian Soldier is Killed on Disputed Border," *New York Times*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/02/world/asia/india-bans-china-apps.htm>

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Sudhi Ranjan Sen, "India Slaps New Curbs on Visas, Schools to Stem China Influence," *Bloomberg*, August 21, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-21/india-slaps-new-curbs-on-visas-schools-to-stem-china-influence>

²⁴¹ Chris Anstey, "India's Economic Ascendancy May Happen This Time," *Bloomberg*, November 26, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2022-11-26/india-s-economic-ascendancy-might-just-happen-this-time-new-economy-saturday>

strikes) would adversely impact production in 2023.²⁴² Thus, to diversify investments away from China and increase sourcing alternatives, India has much to benefit from the so-called “China Plus One” strategy—a scheme by which enterprises diversify investments and avoid excessive dependence on China.²⁴³

In addition to increased investments in Indian manufacturing, a considerable number of reputedly strong enterprises consider moving elsewhere in Asia a more favorable option than remaining in China. For reasons that include geopolitical tension, high tariff costs, and global supply chain disruptions, dozens of major high-end tech and popular consumer goods industries have withdrawn or plan to withdraw in the next five years in search of more favorable commerce.²⁴⁴ With China experiences its slowest economic growth in decades, financial experts predict further braking, estimating up to one-third of supply chain leaders will have moved out of China by 2023.²⁴⁵ As early as 2018, companies like Amazon, Dell, and Hasbro announced plans to cut or reduce manufacturing in China and instead shift production to neighboring markets, including India’s.²⁴⁶ Tech giant Apple is expected to roll back manufacturing in China and transform

²⁴² Aaron Raj, “India and Vietnam becoming attractive alternates for China Plus One Strategy,” *Techwire Asia*, January 12, 2023, <https://techwireasia.com/2023/01/india-and-vietnam-becoming-attractive-alternatives-for-china-plus-one-strategy/>

²⁴³ Anstey, “India’s Economic Ascendancy May Happen This Time.”

²⁴⁴ Daisuke Wakabayashi and Tripp Mickle, “Tech Companies Slowly Shift Production Away from China,” *New York Times*, September 1, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/01/business/tech-companies-china.html>

²⁴⁵ “Gartner Survey Reveals 33% of Supply Chain Leaders Moved Business out of China or Plan to by 2023,” (Stamford, Connecticut: Gartner, June 24, 2020), <https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2020-06-24-gartner-survey-reveals-33-percent-of-supply-chain-leaders-moved-business-out-of-china-or-plan-to-by-2023>

²⁴⁶ Tim Bajarin, “Shifting Tech Manufacturing Out of China—A Critical Imperative for Tech,” *Forbes*, August 30, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/timbajarin/2022/08/30/shifting-tech-manufacturing-out-of-china-a-critical-imperative-for-tech/?sh=197dbd9f1052>; and Bhargav Acharya and Sayanti Chakraborty, “HP, Dell, Other Tech Firms Plan to Shift Production out of China,” *Reuters*, July 3, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-strategy-tech/hp-dell-other-tech-firms-plan-to-shift-production-out-of-china-nikkei-idUSKCN1TY14G>; Dominic Pino, “More Business Shifts from China to India as the Rift between the Countries Widens,” *National Review*, September 27, 2022, <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/more-business-shifts-from-china-to-india-as-the-rift-between-the-countries-widens/>; Wakabayashi and Mickle, “Tech Companies Slowly Shift Production Away from China.”

India into the primary site of iPhone manufacturing by 2025.²⁴⁷ America's top retail company Walmart has expanded Indian-sourced products on its online marketplace, and has announced a plan to import \$10 billion in Indian goods annually by 2027.²⁴⁸ Thus, enterprises looking for cheaper and more stable means of production have consistently turned to India as one of the most sensible manufacturing alternatives to a less reliable, more costly Chinese producer. Though India is not expected to eclipse Chinese industry any time soon, its economy is on pace to expand at an annual rate of more than 7%, and by 2030, is predicted to emerge as the third largest economy in the world.²⁴⁹ With India firmly established as a major economic power in Eurasia, its position not only checks China's regional influence, but could eventually grant Moscow relief from an otherwise economically dependent relationship with Beijing.

India's interests conflict with matters of economic concern for China in other ways too. India has stalled progress of China's BRI, objecting to construction of the *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor* (CPEC) for reasons of territorial encroachment in known areas of disputed territories. While China envisions BRI expansion as an economically and politically significant project, India oriented away from BRI and instead focused on securing a free trade agreement (FTA) with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).²⁵⁰ Such an FTA with the EAEU would facilitate trade between Russia and India,

²⁴⁷ Doug Donahue, "Subcontract Manufacturing in China: The Risks and Alternative Options," *Forbes*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2021/06/18/subcontract-manufacturing-in-china-the-risks-and-alternative-options/?sh=325a9cef7de7>

²⁴⁸ Pino, "More Business Shifts from China to India as the Rift between the Countries Widens."

²⁴⁹ Krutika Pathi and Bhumika Saraswati, "At 75, India Seeks Way Forward in Big But Job-Scarce Economy," *AP News*, August 10, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/technology-india-economy-ca599ec7f67e2c89bd2c87b4cc3ec7dd>; Antara Ghosal Singh, "China's Evolving Strategic Discourse on India: From Doklam to Galwan and Beyond," (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, May 4, 2022), <https://www.stimson.org/2022/chinas-evolving-strategic-discourse-on-india/>

²⁵⁰ Rezaul Laskar, "India, Russia begin talks on Eurasia free trade deal," *Hindustan Times*, April 18, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-and-russia-discuss-fta-involving-eurasian-economic-union-to-address-trade-imbalance-created-by-45bn-two-way-trade-101681757779557.html>

but such deals detract from Chinese efforts to displace the EAEU and potentially serve to counter China's economic influence in the region.²⁵¹

C. MILITARY

Much like the Indian state's apparent readiness to improve trade relations with Russia, Modi has demonstrated a similar measure of eagerness to broaden military ties and amplify technical cooperation in defense. Even within the first year of Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, Modi set out to Putin directly on the matter of security and defense. In something of a transactive return for India's oil contract with Rosneft, by the close of 2014, Modi had secured from Putin an arrangement for military hardware as well as expedited warfighting technology transfer to eagerly awaiting defense firms and other Indian industries.²⁵²

By late 2021, defense ties between Russia and India developed into a complex, committed relationship. By December of that year, Putin had arrived in New Delhi, flanked by his ministers of defense and foreign affairs, to ink a joint statement that expanded cooperation in the defense industry and formalized security cooperation pledges to India through 2031.²⁵³ The deal detailed India's position on co-developing high-end military technology with Russia, and Putin's commitment to providing some 600,000 Kalashnikov assault rifles for use by Indian defense forces.²⁵⁴ At the risk of triggering U.S. sanctions, New Delhi also agreed to undertake a total of 28 shipbuilding contracts—including *two frigates for the Indian Navy*, and pledged to advance ongoing system development of

²⁵¹ Kataryna Wolczuk, Rilka Dragneva, and Jon Wallace, *What is the Eurasian Economic Union?* (London, UK: Chatham House, 2022), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/07/what-eurasian-economic-union>; Stefan Hedlund, *China courts Central Asia as Russia falters* (Vaduz, Liechtenstein: Geopolitical Intelligence Services, 2023), <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/china-central-asia-russia/>

²⁵² Saurav Jha, "Vladimir Putin's Productive India Visit," *The Diplomat*, December 12, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/12/vladimir-putins-productive-india-visit/>

²⁵³ "Overview: Brief on India-Russian Economic Relations."

²⁵⁴ "India Signs Trade and Arms Deals with Russia During Putin's Visit to New Delhi," *CNN*, December 6, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/06/india/india-russia-arms-deal-putin-modi-intl-hnk/index.html>; Alasdair Pal and Neha Arora, "India, Russia Strike Trade, Arms Deal During Putin Visit," *Reuters*, December 6, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/putin-modi-discuss-trade-humanitarian-situation-afghanistan>

S-400 air defense missile projects.²⁵⁵ Then Putin took it one step further the following summer, elevating India's status to Russia's only identified strategic partner in the July 2022 *Russian Maritime Doctrine* publication.²⁵⁶ And although India has since initiated development of its own defense industry and diversified weapons purchases from other states, Russian equipment has continued to dominate India's existing inventory and remains the top exporter of arms to India.²⁵⁷

Beyond the exchange of military hardware, India and Russia have maintained an active and practical military partnership. In August 2021, they conducted their twelfth iteration of INDRA, a joint naval exercise that included operational land and air components, and functioned to enhance interoperability between the two militaries.²⁵⁸ A year later, India participated alongside twelve other countries in Russia's Vostok 2022, a multinational exercise that included 50,000 participating troops, 140 aircraft, and 60 naval ships.²⁵⁹ India's involvement included strategic-command integration and staff drills, but excluded integrated maneuver drills with Russian and Chinese naval forces in the Sea of Japan.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁵ "India Signs Trade and Arms Deals with Russia During Putin's Visit to New Delhi," *CNN*, December 6, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/06/india/india-russia-arms-deal-putin-modi-intl-hnk/index.html>; Xavier Vavasseur, "Russia's Yantar Shipyard Launches 7th Talwar-Class Frigate for India," *Naval News*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/10/russias-yantar-shipyard-launches-7th-talwar-class-frigate-for-india/>

²⁵⁶ Anarug Bisen, *Russia's New Maritime Doctrine* (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, 2022), 9, https://www.idsa.in/system/files/issuebrief/ib-russia-maritime-doctrine-a-bisen170822_0.pdf

²⁵⁷ Pieter Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova, and Siemon Wezeman, *SIPRI Fact Sheet: Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2021* (Stockholm, Sweden: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2022), 4–6, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/fs_2203_at_2021.pdf; Menon and Rumer, "Russia and India: A New Chapter."

²⁵⁸ Franz-Stefan Gady, "India, Russia Conclude Major Military Exercise," *The Diplomat*, November 2, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/tag/indra-exercise/>; Ashish Singh, "12th Edition of India-Russia Exercise INDRA-21 Begins," *The Daily Guardian*, August 3, 2021, <https://thedailyguardian.com/12th-edition-of-india-russia-exercise-indra-21-begins/>

²⁵⁹ Borah Rupakjyoti, "Vostok 2022: India's Participation in Military Exercises," *Modern Diplomacy*, September 12, 2022, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/09/12/vostok-2022-indias-participation-in-military-exercises/>; *WION*, "Vostok 2022: India Joins Russia and China," September 1, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zwx9LDjgS4>

²⁶⁰ Prashani Dhawan, "India Refuses to Participate in Sea Military Exercises with Russia and China: Japan Factor," *World Affairs*, August 30, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RantS3EOjQU>

Despite India's closer military relations with Russia, there are a couple of complicating factors. One such factor is that India refuses to back Russia's operations in Ukraine. In what some consider "strategic ambivalence," Modi and his ministers have repeatedly called for peace, without indications of support for any specific country.²⁶¹ A second complicating factor concerns India's and China's seemingly incompatible military postures. In something of an uncomfortable pause in border confrontations, India has allocated the fifth largest defense budget in the world (more than \$70 billion total), and by measure of personnel—maintains the second biggest army on the planet.²⁶² Meanwhile, China elevated its defense spending to \$230 billion in 2022 (a 7% increase), and continued supplying enormous volumes of military hardware to Pakistan, India's staunchest rival.²⁶³ In addition to compounding apprehensions along the India-China border, China has annually supplied the Pakistani army with more than half of its defense industry's tank, artillery, and air defense missile exports.²⁶⁴

As in the economic sphere, defense and security relations are strained between China and India. More specifically, disputes over Himalayan territories are among the most consequential issues affecting Sino-Indian relations. The decades-long disagreement resulted in a previous war in 1962, has led to 21 rounds of peace talks ever since, and violence over the territory has resulted combatant deaths for both countries as recently as 2022.²⁶⁵ The patches of territories in question are ill defined, fall within the tri-border region of China, India, and Bhutan, and are commercially valuable to China for

²⁶¹ Teresa Mettela, "What's behind India's strategic neutrality on Russia's invasion of Ukraine," *ABC News*, March 29, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/india-remaining-neutral-russias-invasion-ukraine/story?id=97891228>

²⁶² Anil Chopra, *China's Growing Defence Exports—Implications & Options for India* (Uttar Pradesh, India: Chanakya Forum, 2022), <https://chanakyaforum.com/chinas-growing-defence-exports-implications-options-for-india/>

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Sumit Ganguly, "The Leaders of the World's Biggest Countries Meet—and Come Away With Little Progress," *Foreign Policy*, October 14, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/14/modi-xi-india-china-little-progress/>; Lisa Curtis and Derek Grossman, "Trouble at the Roof of the World: Why America Can't Afford to Ignore China's Border Dispute," *Foreign Affairs*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/trouble-roof-world>

construction of its BRI.²⁶⁶ In general opposition to the BRI—*particularly the section that transits the CPEC*, several hundred Indian troops confronted Chinese troops emplacing trade-route infrastructure as early as 2017 to stop further perceived violations of Indian sovereignty in the Doklam region.²⁶⁷ While India and China both agreed to withdraw troops from the region a month after the standoff, tensions in the adjacent valley of Galwan turned deadly in 2020 leaving dozens injured or killed. The most recent data shows that as of August 2022, some 60,000 to 80,000 troops remain fixed along the 2,100 miles of contested boundary known as the Line of Actual Control.²⁶⁸ Tensions have since escalated. As a result of infrastructural expansion and facilities modernization efforts as recent as February 2023, China is predicted to garrison some 120,000 troops within 60 miles of the territory in question.²⁶⁹

D. POLITICAL-DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

Russia and India have fostered particularly warm political and diplomatic relations by means of habitual engagement and complimentary rhetoric. Modi and Putin have recognized the potential for economic expansion and stronger defense through a model of respect and reciprocity, meeting with one another more than a dozen times over the course of the past nine years. Modi has labeled his Russian counterpart “a personal friend, and a friend to India,” while Putin has labeled India a “time-tested friend.”²⁷⁰ Modi has travelled to Russia five times, publicly embraced Putin with his trademark hugs of affection, strolled

²⁶⁶ Ankit Panda, “What’s Driving the India-China Standoff at Doklam?” *The Diplomat*, July 18, 2017. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/whats-driving-the-india-china-standoff-at-doklam/>

²⁶⁷ Steven Lee Barry, Ellen Myers, Max Fisher, “How India and China Have Come to the Brink Over a Remote Mountain Pass.” *New York Times*. July 26, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/26/world/asia/doklam-plateau-china-india-bhutan.html>; “The Facts and China’s Position Concerning the Indian Border Troops Crossing of the China-India Boundary in the Sikkim Sector in the Chinese Territory,” (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2017) http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/P020170802542676636134.pdf

²⁶⁸ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “China-India Relations in a State of Limbo,” *The Diplomat*, August 2, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/china-india-relations-in-a-state-of-limbo/>; Curtis and Grossman, “Trouble at the Roof of the World.”

²⁶⁹ Curtis and Grossman, “Trouble at the Roof of the World.”

²⁷⁰ Manveena Suri, “India’s Modi hails ‘old time friend’ Russia during Putin Summit,” *CNN*, May 22, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/22/asia/modi-putin-russia-india-intl/index.html>

with him along riverside and hedge-rowed garden settings, and settled official business over dinners and tea time.²⁷¹ The two leaders branded their 2021 joint statement a “Partnership for Peace, Progress, and Prosperity,” and reiterated their intention to broadly strengthen state-to-state relations in areas concerning common political, economic, and defense interests.²⁷² Final remarks of the joint statement emphasized the heads of state “appreciated the success story” of one another’s mutual investments and anticipated more of the same in the near future.²⁷³

Two months after the ‘time-tested friends’ issued their joint statement, Putin announced his invasion of Ukraine, Modi’s routine praise gave way to a remote and ringing reticence. In the first months of the conflict, Indian officials curbed public rhetoric reserved for condemning Russian actions in Ukraine while Modi distanced himself from the crisis and refrained from directly criticizing Putin. During these early stages of hostility—when United Nations representatives queued up on eleven occasions to denounce Russian aggression, India abstained each of those times.²⁷⁴ When Western leaders rebuked President Putin—one after the other, Modi chose to instead withhold censure, and limit judgments to private phone calls with Presidents Putin and Zelensky. While the Prime Minister would take no position publicly, the Indian government stated that Modi had phoned Putin on February 24 to “urge an end to violence in Ukraine.”²⁷⁵ Modi then reportedly called Zelensky, expressed his “deep anguish about the loss of life and

²⁷¹ “8 years, over 100 visits: PM Modi’s foreign tours in numbers,” *Times of India*, May 30, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/8-years-over-100-visits-pm-modis-foreign-visits-in-numbers/articleshow/91894296.cms>

²⁷² “India-Russia: Partnership for Peace, Progress and Prosperity,” (New Delhi: Consulate of India, December 6, 2021), <https://www.cgivladi.gov.in/page/joint-statements-following-the-xxi-india-russia-summit-and-quot-india-russia-partnership-for-peace-progress-and-prosperity-and-quot-december-06-2021/>; Pal and Arora, “India, Russia Strike Trade, Arms Deal During Putin Visit.”

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Deepa, Ollapally, “India Goes its Own War on Global Geopolitics,” *East Asia Forum*, September 22, 2022, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/09/22/india-goes-its-own-way-on-global-geopolitics/>

²⁷⁵ Manoj Kumar, “India’s Modi Offers Help in Peace Efforts over Ukraine Crisis,” *Reuters*, February 26, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indias-modi-offers-help-peace-efforts-over-ukraine-crisis-2022-02-26/>; “India’s Modi Urges End to Ukraine Violence in Call with Putin—Indian State Government,” *Reuters*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/indias-modi-urges-end-ukraine-violence-call-with-putin-indian-govt-statement-2022-02-24/>

property,” and subsequently offered to support peace efforts.²⁷⁶ As an active member of the Quad security dialogue, India sidestepped harsh criticism and diplomatic pressure from Japanese, Australian, and American partners, choosing to instead reserve rhetoric.²⁷⁷ Modi and his ministers entirely bypassed conversations of collective contempt for Putin’s actions and chose to instead keep loyal to its reputation for neutrality.²⁷⁸

India’s position steadily shifted, however. Six months into the Russian military’s offensive in Ukraine, the Indian government began to express disappointment in Moscow’s escalating campaign. During the September SCO summit, after much of Ukraine’s civilian infrastructure had been leveled, Modi communicated to Putin in front of video cameras that “today’s era is not of war,” further adding he had “spoken to [Putin] on the phone about this.”²⁷⁹ Hours later, Foreign Minister Jaishankar reinforced Modi’s comments on Russia’s offensive, affirming “there [could] be no justification for violation of human rights or of international law,” concluding with reflections that “nuclear issue is a particular anxiety.”²⁸⁰ The following day, India’s Parliamentary Chair of Intelligence expressed further concern, noting “the more Putin is pushed into a corner, the more he acts like a wounded animal that lashes out...the concern is that he may reach for...nuclear weapons.”²⁸¹

²⁷⁶ Kumar, “India’s Modi Offers Help in Peace Efforts over Ukraine Crisis;” “India’s Modi Urges End to Ukraine Violence in Call with Putin—Indian State Government,” *Reuters*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/indias-modi-urges-end-ukraine-violence-call-with-putin-indian-govt-statement-2022-02-24/>

²⁷⁷ Happymon Jacob, “Russia is Losing India,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 22, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/russia-losing-india>. For example, In March 2022, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, called attention to India, specifically urging Modi to consider “where you want to stand when history books are written at this moment in time.”

²⁷⁸ Dominic Giannini, “India-China Russia Rhetoric ‘Significant’,” *The Canberra Times*, September 18, 2022, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7908012/india-china-russia-rhetoric-significant/>

²⁷⁹ “U.S. Welcomes Modi Telling Putin Now is ‘Not an Era of War,’” *Reuters*, September 20, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-welcomes-modi-telling-putin-now-is-not-an-era-war-2022-09-21/>

²⁸⁰ Siladitya Ray, “India and China Finally Voicing Concerns over Russia’s Actions in Ukraine,” *Forbes*, September 23, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/siladityaray/2022/09/23/india-and-china-finally-voicing-concerns-over-russias-actions-in-ukraine/>

²⁸¹ Giannini, “India-China Russia Rhetoric ‘Significant’.”

In the remaining months of 2022, India incrementally heightened opposition to Russia's aggression in Ukraine. In November, India opted to "stick to the wording" crafted in the G20 joint communiqué that unequivocally condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine "in the strongest terms."²⁸² While Modi was ready to autograph the statement which placed the blame squarely on Putin for initiating the conflict, Russia and China reportedly "blocked proposals" that ultimately prevented world leaders from achieving consensus.²⁸³ When Putin hinted at nuclear options for use against Ukraine in a televised speech weeks later, Modi canceled the planned annual summit the following day.²⁸⁴ Though Modi never publicly explained his decision to cancel, "a senior official with knowledge of the matter" clarified the face-to-face summit was indeed abandoned for Putin's threat of nuclear weapons.²⁸⁵ In March of 2023, Modi's Foreign Minister concurred in a joint statement alongside Quad delegates that "the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible."²⁸⁶

Since, the Indian government has continued exercising caution when publicly addressing cooperative affairs with Russia, particularly within the context of the conflict in Ukraine. When India chose to participate in the Russian-led multinational exercise Vostok in 2022, Western politicians questioned New Delhi's ties with Moscow. White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre openly remarked that because India chose to participate in the 2022 Vostok exercise, "the United States [had] concerns about any country exercising with Russia while Russia [waged] an unprovoked, brutal war against

²⁸² Sarita Chaganti Singh and Christian Kraemer, "G20 fails to reach consensus on Ukraine war," *Reuters*, February 24, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/g20-fails-reach-consensus-russia-ukraine-war-sources-2023-02-25/>

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Sudhi Ranjan Sen, "Modi to Skip Annual Putin Summit Over Ukraine Nuke Threats," *Bloomberg*, December 9, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-12-09/modi-to-skip-annual-summit-with-putin-over-ukraine-nuke-threats#xj4y7vzkg>

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Kiran Sharma, "Quad slams nuclear threats as 'inadmissible' in India huddle," *Nikkei*, March 3, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Quad-slams-nuclear-threats-as-inadmissible-in-India-huddle>

Ukraine”²⁸⁷ Both Prime Minister Modi and the Spokesperson of Indian Ministry of External Affairs quickly responded. The spokesman immediately countered in a press release that “India [had always] regularly participated in multilateral exercises in Russia, along with a number of other countries,” implying India had not changed course.²⁸⁸ Modi tactfully defended Indian participation in Vostok just a week later, communicating that “India has been emphasizing the need to adopt the path of diplomacy and dialogue since the beginning of the Ukraine conflict and it supports all peaceful efforts to end the conflict.”²⁸⁹

Early in Xi’s and Modi’s elected terms, China and India made modest progress in creating conditions to normalize relations. The two met 18 times between 2014 and 2019 including in-depth personal exchanges during the 2017 G20 summit in Germany and the 2019 BRICS summit in Brazil.²⁹⁰ In 2018, China and India jointly developed a humanitarian mission in neighboring Afghanistan, improving health and education programs, and supporting efforts to establish food security.²⁹¹ In 2019, the countries carried out the eighth iteration of the joint China-India military exercise “Hand-in-Hand,” and as recently as 2022, their two militaries participated in Moscow’s joint military exercise, VOSTOK 2022.²⁹²

However, since the Galwan clash in 2020, Chinese and Indian functionaries have struggled to make diplomatic headway. While the countries have exchanged some

²⁸⁷ “Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre En Route Wilkes-Barre, PA,” (Washington, DC: White House: August 30, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2022/08/30/press-gaggle-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-en-route-wilkes-barre-pa/>

²⁸⁸ Rupakjyoti, “Vostok 2022: India’s Participation in Military Exercises.”

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ “Details of Foreign/Domestic Visits,” (New Delhi: The Office the Prime Minister of India, 2022), <https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/details-of-foreigndomestic-visits/>

²⁹¹ Dipanjan Roy and Roy Chaudhury, “India, China likely to jointly undertake projects in Afghanistan,” *Economic Times*, May 7, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-china-likely-to-jointly-undertake-projects-in-afghanistan/articleshow/64057491.cms>

²⁹² Kishore Kumar Khera, “International Military Exercises: An Indian Perspective,” *Journal of Defence Studies* 11, no. 3 (Jul-Sep 2017): 17–40, http://idsa.in/jds/jds_11_3_2017_international-military-exercises; Bhattacharyya, Rajeev, “Hand-in-Hand 2019: Indian and Chinese Armies Come Together for Joint Military Exercise,” *The Diplomat*, December 27, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/12/hand-in-hand-2019-indian-and-chinese-armies-come-together-for-joint-military-exercise>

constructive rhetoric, the countries have not meaningfully engaged in any top-level diplomacy. In fact, Xi and Modi have yet to arrange a one-on-one engagement or discuss state business since their last formal exchange in 2019. Hitherto, Xi worked with Modi to overcome a history of tension, prioritizing visits with him more than any other head of state—save Vladimir Putin. On 18 occasions spanning five years, the two exchanged elaborate gifts, arranged ceremonial receptions, and held in-depth, hours-long, one-on-one dialogues.²⁹³ Observers described Xi and Modi as “wooden” in such exchanges though, and Modi never once embraced Xi with his famed bear hug.²⁹⁴ *Even so*, the two demonstrated a willingness to communicate.

By 2020, India and China had put an end to the pageantry and instead turned to rhetorical exchange. Following Modi’s national address concerning the death of the Indian soldiers in Galwan, his Minister of Foreign Affairs declared the Chinese took “premeditated and planned action directly responsible for the resulting violence.”²⁹⁵ In response, China’s Defense Minister explained, “the Indian side has repeatedly hyped up the casualties, distorted the truth, misled international public opinion, and slandered the Chinese border troops.”²⁹⁶

While disengagement from diplomacy was a setback, in truth, the rhetoric was a sequel to insults in previous years. Following the 2017 border clashes in adjacent territory, the Chinese Foreign Ministry published a document of “facts” concerning the Indian troops illegal crossing into Chinese lands, alleging Beijing had notified India of plans for BRI

²⁹³ Ganguly, “The Leaders of the World’s Biggest Countries Meet—and Come Away With Little Progress.”

²⁹⁴ Jeffrey Gettleman, “They Run the World’s Biggest Countries. Their Talk Won’t be Easy,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/11/world/asia/narendra-modi-xi-jinping-india-china.html>

²⁹⁵ “Galwan Valley: Image Appears to Show Nail-Studded Rods Used in India-China Brawl,” BBC, June 18, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53089037>

²⁹⁶ Abhijnan Rej, “China Confirms Deaths in the Galwan Clash with India,” *The Diplomat*, February 20, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/china-confirms-deaths-in-galwan-clash-with-india/>

construction in the region.²⁹⁷ In turn, India released a point-by-point rebuttal to China's narrative, explaining construction efforts were clear violations of boundaries, and that all sides must "abide by respective understandings not to change the status quo unilaterally."²⁹⁸

China-India tensions were palpable during the most recent SCO summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. Xi and Modi both held a number of bilateral meetings (*Modi alone conducted twelve*), but when ushered onto a stage, side-by-side, for a photo opportunity, the two leaned away from one another, neither speaking nor shaking hands.²⁹⁹ During subsequent opportunities such as the G20 summit in November 2022, Xi and Modi again chose to forgo a formal engagement, although Xi and Modi did shake hands on the sidelines during a momentary exchange of pleasantries.³⁰⁰

E. CONCLUSION

When considering sources of strength for the China-Russia partnership within a broader geopolitical context, India's influence on the dynamic is significant. While New Delhi's relations with Moscow are generally strong, and its current relations with Beijing are comparatively weak, the net effect of those bilateral relations on China and Russia's association is far more complicated. Just below the surface of this triangular arrangement lay a subtle and uncertain potential for India to both strengthen *or* weaken China and Russia's commitment to one another. As a significant actor in global affairs, India has in some ways brought China and Russia closer in areas of material interest, ideological

²⁹⁷ "The Facts and China's Position Concerning the Indian Border Troops Crossing of the China-India Boundary in the Sikkim Sector in the Chinese Territory," (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2017) http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/P020170802542676636134.pdf

²⁹⁸ "Recent Developments in Doklam Area," (New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2017), https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28572/Recent_Developments_in_Doklam_Area

²⁹⁹ Raajnandini Mukherjee, "No Handshake, no Smiles: PM Modi, Chinese President Xi Jinping Share Stage at SCO Summit," *India Today*. September 16, 2022. <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/no-handshake-no-smiles-pm-modi-chinese-president-xi-jinping-share-stage-at-sco-summit-2001050-2022-09-16>

³⁰⁰ "India's Modi Meets Biden, Shakes Hands with China's Xi," *Reuters*, November 15, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indias-modi-meets-biden-g20-summit-2022-11-15/>

connection, and presidential friendship, but has potentially divided the partners' interests in other areas.

India's involvement with the partners encourages a strengthening of Russo-Chinese commitment in areas of trade and defense. With one of the largest standing militaries in the world, India's active participation in Russia's bilateral and multinational exercises alongside China and other Eurasian states adds depth and credibility to Russia's joint military exercises. Likewise, as the world's fastest growing economy, India's membership in SCO and BRICS adds relevance as well as greater consequence to these forums' activities and agenda. Its active involvement in the SCO and BRICS amplifies those forums' extra-regional presence *and* helps advance organizationally-borne goals favoring Beijing's and Moscow's interests (i.e., economic development and regional security). Although counterintuitive, India encourages stronger China-Russia trade relations in a third way too. As India has become increasingly competitive for resources, investments, and market access in key industries, China is perhaps motivated to expand trade relations with Russia as a matter of counterbalancing India's influence.

In some aspects, however, India's world view challenges that of China and Russia. Structurally, the government of India differs from the partners in that New Delhi's political system is predicated on democratic principles, and its system of production and trade is not state-led, rather modeled on a free-market economy (although the finance and agricultural industries in India operate under protectionist policies). While China and Russia are authoritarian regimes, India is largest democracy in the world that functions under legitimate democratic institutions—that include for instance, an independent judiciary. India's government manages foreign policy differently too. While India seeks to strengthen its global presence like China and Russia, Modi's government does not regard military audacity and active confrontation abroad as practical tools in foreign policy.

There are significant political ideological differences that separate India from China and Russia too. For example, New Delhi's position on multipolarity and promotion of democratic principles differ greatly from Beijing and Moscow's views. China and Russia do advocate for polycentrism, but India's vision does not necessarily align with the

partners' ambitions to deny the United States its position as a center of influence.³⁰¹ As a great power itself, India may abandon or support the Western-led international order based entirely on whether initiatives in such an arrangement advance its national interests or not. Either way, India will forge its own path with the current liberal order or without it.³⁰² In the meantime—as Beijing and Moscow labor to restrain Washington's global hegemony, India's forging of closer cooperation with America only serves to undermine the desired effects of the partnership's efforts. And though India's status as the world's most populous democracy does not challenge China and Russia's anti-American agenda and model for centralized government per se, its economic successes and general inclination for self-governing values demonstrate the viability of the same liberal international order the partners seek to invalidate. In this way, New Delhi's position contrasts sharply with the autocratically-modeled partnership determined to turn the international current against the West.

In other aspects, Modi's leadership reinforces Xi's and Putin's worldviews. Like both Presidents, Modi is a nationalist who prioritizes the interests of his country and stresses the importance of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Because he too wants his country to project power and influence on the global stage, Modi's perspective embraces multipolarity that extends opportunity for centers of power in Eurasia. And though Modi is not anti-American, he's not in favor of the United States as a singularly dominant global power either; he envisions the coexistence of multiple major powers.³⁰³ India under Modi's leadership today signals geopolitical ascendance requires neither endorsement from the United States nor complete alignment with Western partners. So as Modi continues to call for inclusivity, China and Russia are better positioned in a world order

³⁰¹ Sachin Parashar, "India and Russia seek polycentric world: Moscow ahead of EAM trip," *Times of India*, November 8, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/india-and-russia-seek-polycentric-world-moscow-ahead-of-eam-trip/articleshow/95365852.cms>

³⁰² Derek Grossman, *India Upholds the Rules Based International Order—But in Its Own Way*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, December 9, 2022, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2022/12/india-upholds-the-rules-based-liberal-international.html#:~:text=India%20seeks%20to%20be%20beholden,it%20does%20so%20at%20all>.

³⁰³ Jagannath Panda, "India in a world of asymmetrical multipolarity," *Security and Development Policy* 15, no. 1 (January-March 2023): 18–22, <https://isdpr.eu/publication/india-in-a-world-of-asymmetrical-multipolarity/>

that had for decades, diplomatically encouraged states to categorically side with a bloc-structured network of U.S. allies for the purposes of economic security and defense.

Measuring the impact of Prime Minister Modi's personal influence on President Xi and Putin's private relationship is as difficult as it is inescapably speculative. Despite a warm relationship, Modi has given Vladimir Putin a number of reasons to doubt the bounds of his personal friendship. While Modi has pledged to sidestep sanctions targeting Russia, expanded economic and military relations, and abstained from UN voting to condemn military aggression in Ukraine, Modi and his ministers have more than once criticized Putin for his leading role in the Ukrainian invasion. In the high-visibility environment of a SCO summit in Samarkand, Modi directly criticized Putin in front of live cameras while his Parliament's Chair of Intelligence compared the Russian President to a dangerous animal backed into a corner.³⁰⁴ In December 2022, Modi cancelled an annual face-to-face summit with his Russian peer, wordlessly communicating a firm disapproval after Putin casually threatened the use of nuclear arms in a televised speech.³⁰⁵ Modi's Foreign Minister has since publicly communicated disgust for the Russian military's purported human rights violations, and in March 2023, issued a joint statement alongside Quad delegates that pronounced threatening nuclear warfare was "inadmissible."³⁰⁶

As for Xi and Modi—they share some similar views, but competing interests and personal dissimilarities discourage state-to-state cooperation. Like Xi, Modi places heavy emphasis on economic growth and considers development as a means to increase his country's global influence and maintain stability. However, both heads of state see themselves as leaders of the so-called Global South; both have expressed desire to lead emerging and developing nations.³⁰⁷ And though Modi emphasizes national pride and ambition like Xi, Modi's pathway to greatness involves a celebration of cultural and religious

³⁰⁴ Giannini, "India-China Russia Rhetoric 'Significant';" "U.S. Welcomes Modi Telling Putin Now is 'Not an Era of War.'"

³⁰⁵ Sen, "Modi to Skip Annual Putin Summit Over Ukraine Nuke Threats."

³⁰⁶ Sharma, "Quad slams nuclear threats as 'inadmissible' in India huddle."

³⁰⁷ Shin Kawashima, "China, India and the Fight for Global South Leadership," *The Diplomat*, February 7, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/china-india-and-the-fight-for-global-south-leadership/>

diversity (this is not to say esteem for diversity extends *beyond* Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist populations).³⁰⁸ Beyond the conspicuous absence of his customary bear hugs when greeting Xi, Modi has essentially turned his back on top-level diplomacy for the past several years, repeatedly rejected BRI propositions, and exchanged adversarial rhetoric with China over border disputes. Both leaders have made an effort to keep exchanges civilized when necessary, but state-to-state tensions over several issues will likely continue to serve as the shaky foundation for relations.

Either Xi or Putin may find Modi's personal vision of a Western-inclusive democratic world order emphasizing non-alignment too divergent a path from their own. And if Modi's membership factors into any potential triad of trust, his criticism of China and Russia is unlikely to go neither unnoticed nor excused. On account of Modi's criticism, Xi and Putin may ultimately resort to pledging permanence to the commonalities of a China-Russia vision and doubling down on their personal attachments as a matter of strengthening defenses.

³⁰⁸ Aryan Prakash, "How PM Modi is celebrating India's rich cultural diversity," *Hindustan Times*, April 14, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/how-is-pm-modi-celebrating-india-s-rich-cultural-diversity-101681456563156.html>; Ben Doherty, "Narendra Modi in Australia: A polarising leader meets a divided Indian diaspora," *The Guardian*, May 20, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/21/narendra-modi-in-australia-a-polarising-leader-meets-a-divided-indian-diaspora>

V. CONCLUSION

This thesis examined the strengthening nature of the Sino-Russian partnership. The thesis sought to answer the following question: *What explains the deepening partnership between China and Russia?* This concluding chapter considers limitations of the study and summarizes the research, and details the findings of the force in question. This thesis argues that China and Russia draw strength of partnership from a combination of material interests, ideological overlap, and personal friendship between Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin.

There were several significant limitations of the study. First, while there was no shortage of communiqués, joint statements, or high-profile diplomatic engagements, the research was restricted to information available to the public. The assessments drew from a chronologically-ordered narrative based on open-source information. Absent any privileged access, the research excluded information privy to the inner-workings of Chinese and Russian governments, any private dialogues between Chinese and Russian ministers, or any insight closed-door conversations between Presidents Xi and Putin would afford. Second, the research measured depth of economic cooperation based on metrics provided by the governments of China and Russia. As detailed in the conclusions of Chapters two and three, Beijing and Moscow are both likely to have inflated trade data for the purposes of encouraging more favorable perceptions of economic trends to audiences at home and abroad. Third, this research created event narratives based on mostly English language sources. Authored in Western perspectives, the volume of such sources likely influenced how events were analyzed and presented throughout the study.

A. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

Chapter II illustrated the significance of material interest, ideology, and presidential friendship in forging a stronger partnership. Despite social disruption, economic setback, and increased geopolitical tension during the two years that followed the COVID-19 outbreak, the pandemic created an opportunity for China and Russia to increase trade and defense cooperation, jointly pursue common ideological objectives, and further foster

friendship between Presidents Xi and Putin. Cheap Russian energy slowed the momentous rise of inflation in China while Beijing's oil thirsty industries helped alleviate the persisting strain of Western sanctions on the Russian economy. The partners' efforts to contain the virus, develop vaccines, and assist populations across the developing world resulted in more favorable opinions and perceptions of their global influence in some regions (Africa, South America, and beneficiary states in Eurasia). Meanwhile, engagements between the two Presidents occurred in-person, maskless, and in a comparatively higher frequency than with other heads of state.

Evidence in Chapter three also demonstrated how the promise of material benefit, ideological overlap, and personal relationship between heads of state inspired closer cooperation in the China-Russia partnership. Although increasingly harsher sanctions on Russia led to a more financially and technologically needy partner, the Chinese economy profited from Russia's redeeming capacity to deliver the volume of discounted energy commodities necessary to fuel industry in a sluggish post-COVID economy. Militarily, China benefited from the high-visibility nature of its continued defense cooperation and joint patrols with Russia, particularly in its perceived sphere of influence. Similarly, Moscow reinforced relations with a partner garrisoned with the world's largest standing army and a rapidly modernizing military infrastructure from which it could benefit. The partners discovered strength in jointly casting blame on the West for the Ukraine crisis—using the accusation to further advance demands for a reimagined, polycentric international order. And though Beijing has yet to provide Moscow the direct military support Russia needs to maintain operational momentum, Xi's pledges of general support inspired the confidence Putin needed to relaunch offensive operations on several occasions.

The context of the war that followed the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine also revealed important limits to China-Russia cooperation. Though China supported the Russian armed forces with some known intelligence products and dual-use technologies including drones and navigation equipment, Beijing refused to source Moscow the categories of equipment sure to trigger the kind of industry-crippling sanctions the West imposed on Russia. In denying the direct logistical support and lethal military aid Russia needed and likely expected to gain from its limitless partnership, the crisis in Ukraine

revealed the Chinese would not support Russia's military adventurism if it meant forfeiting its own economic security.

Unlike the first two case studies, the final chapter demonstrated how India's geopolitical ascendance revealed as many weaknesses as strengths in the China-Russia partnership. In the area of trade and defense, India's involvement with the partners has mostly encouraged strengthening of Sino-Russian connections. Because India possesses the fastest growing economy, New Delhi's membership adds greater consequence to the agenda and activities of SCO and BRICS, amplifies those forums' extra-regional presence, and further promotes the partners' interests in global trade. As the second-largest military on the planet in terms of personnel, India's active participation in Russia's bilateral and multinational exercises alongside China and other Eurasian states adds depth to Russia's joint military exercises and reinforces their efforts for improved regional security. At the personal and ideological level, Prime Minister Modi reinforces Xi and Putin's worldviews, emphasizing the imperative for sovereignty and territorial integrity under a nationalist banner. Like Xi and Putin, Modi too promotes multipolarity that extends opportunity for centers of power in Eurasia. And though the Prime Minister isn't anti-American, India's rise under Modi signals that geopolitical ascendance requires neither endorsement from the United States nor complete alignment with Western partners.

The final case study also suggests that India's diplomatic ambiguity and general influence on the partnership serves to potentially weaken China-Russia dynamics, particularly at the ideological and personal level. While India's democratic tradition and liberal economic model set New Delhi apart from Beijing's and Moscow's centralized government structure and state-led industry, the other divergences in world view are more profound. More specifically, India's position as the most populous democracy does not challenge the partners' anti-American agenda and model for centralized government, but its economic advancement and belief in democracy demonstrate the viability of the same liberal international order the partners seek to invalidate. And though Modi also desires a bigger role in the global arena, he believes not in military confrontation as a practical means to achieve a more inclusive international order. In fact, India's continued diplomatic

ambiguity and willingness to forge a closer relationship with America only serves to undermine the desired effects of the partnership's efforts.

Moreover, Modi has given Presidents Xi and Putin a number of reasons to doubt the bounds of his personal support. Despite civil relations between Xi and Modi, the leaders have soundlessly turned their backs on face-to-face meetings and forgone bilateral diplomacy in general. Both governments eagerly compete for leadership of the so-called Global South while continuing to exchange adversarial remarks over contested border regions. Xi and Modi actively avoided one another at the September 2022 SCO summit, and Modi has more than once rejected China's attempts to expand BRI networks along his Northern border. Similarly, Modi criticized Putin's invasion of Ukraine and cancelled on the annual Russia-India summit in December 2022. Modi's ministers have condemned the Russian military's alleged war crimes and disapproved Putin's nuclear threats on camera and by way of official statement, including the March 2023 joint statement issued by Quad delegates. Either Xi or Putin may find Modi's personal vision of a Western-inclusive democratic world order emphasizing non-alignment too divergent a path from their own. And if Modi's membership factors into any potential triad of trust, his criticism of China and Russia is unlikely to go neither unnoticed nor excused. On account of Modi's criticism, Xi and Putin may ultimately resort to pledging permanence to the commonalities of a China-Russia vision and doubling down on their personal attachments as a matter of strengthening defenses.

B. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Material interests inspire China and Russia to strengthen bilateral relations because both partners seek economic growth. China and Russia find utility in partnership because jointly, they can lessen dependence on a Western-centric system of global finance and profit from one another's complementary economies. To this end, Beijing and Moscow's joint trade initiatives advance such efforts. Among other arrangements, the initiatives standardize the use of local currencies in exchange settlements to reduce a dependence on the U.S. dollar, expand trans-Eurasian transportation infrastructure to increase trade, and integrate the Chinese tech industry into Russian communication networks. Additionally,

Russia's crippled and isolated economy needs a bottomless market for its commodities; China's expansive industry needs a bottomless supply of fossil fuels and commodities to feed production and help stabilize the commercial order. Because the economies structurally pair well, Russia's export-oriented economy profits as much as China's consumption-led model.

Incentives for strong military defenses are equally as strong for the partners. For China, security cooperation with Russia is a valuable add because its armed forces are experienced, operationally active, and equipped with a sizeable arsenal of nuclear and conventional warfighting technology. Meanwhile, the Russian state has realized it can effectively tolerate the weight of U.S. and NATO-borne pressure as long as China remains at least vaguely supportive of its national and military interests. Perhaps most significantly, sustained security cooperation serves as the foundation for a potentially permanent cooling of historical animosities between two on-again, off-again adversaries.

There are however, a couple of reasons to question the value of shared material interests. First, the transactional nature of the relationship is increasingly more substance than form. Though Chinese officials publicly express sentiments of limitless cooperation and general support for Russian interests, Beijing has yet to openly supply the Russian military with the material support such spoken assertions imply. Meanwhile, a more capable defense industry in China has gradually resulted in fewer contracts for the same high-end military items Moscow once delivered Beijing. And despite public calls for closer economic ties, the nearly immediate physical withdrawal of Chinese firms from Russia following the 2022 invasion illustrates yet another example of pretense. Second—as previously mentioned, China and Russia plausibly politicized trade statistics as a part of deliberate strategic deception. While economic incentives may still encourage closer cooperation, it is likely the trade volume between China and Russia is less sanction-defying and mutually beneficial than the partners would have global audiences imagine.

Ideological compatibilities inspire China and Russia to strengthen bilateral relations because both partners desire a less Western-centric, and more inclusive global power system. China and Russia share similar worldviews that encourage the partners to challenge the features of an international system that tend to deny them the prestige and

influence they seek on the international stage. And although mistrust of a Western-led international order unites Beijing and Moscow, the motives amount to more than just philosophical competition with the West. China and Russia seek the mechanics of a polycentric world order that both deemphasize U.S. institutions and extend power-sharing opportunities to Eurasian centers of influence.

The personal relationship between Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin has enabled the strengthening of China and Russia's strategic partnership. Based on available evidence, the presidential peers trust one another on a personal level. As such, their firm friendship has served as a springboard for furthering defense cooperation efforts, economic integration, and unified opposition to the current international order. Within the context of the Ukraine crisis, Xi's implicit tolerance for President Putin's military adventurism showed how the relationship could yield advantages for both governments. In the clearest example, Xi's conceptual support for Russia's national interest offered clear economic reward by measure of discounted hydrocarbons among others. For Russia meanwhile, Xi's public support—*however vague*, ostensibly functioned to reassure Putin before decidedly resuming hostilities or escalating offensive operations. Considering Putin's diplomatic alienation, validation from Xi as an internationally powerful peer served to encourage Putin's Western-defying influence in Ukraine and its hegemonic control over global affairs.

Despite the amicability between Xi and Putin, Chinese and Russian national interests ultimately mark the limits of the Sino-Russian cooperation. Media coverage suggests Xi's and Putin's birthday celebrations, gift exchanges, and public sports outings exceed qualitative norms for top-level diplomatic exchanges, but the friendship has a definitive ending point nonetheless. Xi will bear Putin's military gambles up until the point where Chinese support necessitates the sacrifice its own interests (e.g., economic prosperity or regional security) for the sake of maintaining affable relations. Both leaders desire greatness for their nations within a reordered global system, but their personal visions to achieve such a status diverge. Unlike Putin's preferred method of active military confrontation, Xi mostly seeks to achieve preeminence through a combination of economic and diplomatic methods, including global a role in global peacemaking. While China's

recent peace negotiation in the Middle East *does not* interfere with Russia's national objectives, motions like Xi's advancement of a plan to end Putin's war in Ukraine *does*. In this way, the national ambitions Xi represents brings the gracious terms of a personal relationship one step closer to its exact terminus.

The research suggests that material interests and ideological commonalities explain the fundamental deepening of the partnership between China and Russia. Meanwhile, the three case studies imply the friendship between Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin functions to enable closer Sino-Russian cooperation. That isn't to say that the positive personal connections between the Presidents are not profoundly important—*they are*. The bonds form a stable foundation that serve as the starting point from which China and Russia constructively exploit partnership for mutual benefit in the areas of trade, defense, and ideological advancement. So while the relationship is not the cause for deepening relations, it is significant because it serves as a mechanism by which cooperation is more firmly established for the purpose of achieving national objectives.

The partnership is not boundless however. It is restrained by the limits of China's and Russia's national interests. Beijing and Moscow are compelled to cooperate most in areas where mutual benefit is greatest—if not most convenient. Complementary economic models, common interests in defending their perceived spheres of influence, and jointly opposing the U.S.-led world order afford such opportunities. But when it comes to forfeiting national interests for the sake of sustaining the partnership, it is likely neither China nor Russia is willing to accept such a risk.

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