

CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS: WHERE IS THE PARTNERSHIP LIMIT BETWEEN THE TWO POWERS?

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The intensification of political rapprochement between Russia and China has recently become an important challenge for the global security environment. Differences in their attitudes toward their roles in the geopolitical arena may contribute to an unequal partnership between Russia and China, giving rise to potential threats of misperception in bilateral relations across various spheres. Both countries see themselves as surrounded by weak states with internal instability, whose growth may lead to external spillover, causing insecurity across the region. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, has exposed and tested the limits of the “no limit friendship” between Russia and China, showing that their interests do not always coincide. The declaration of boundless partnership against a backdrop of uncertainty regarding each other’s intentions, further exacerbated by inequalities in economic, geopolitical, and military spheres, creates conditions for conflicting geopolitical interests in regions where their spheres of influence overlap. This issue brief analyzes China-Russia relations in the regions where their interests clash most, assesses the intensity of their strategic partnership, and hypothesizes possible scenarios for its future development.

Introduction

The elevation of the China-Russia strategic partnership to the level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for the New Era represents a key element of the ongoing trend of political rapprochement between the two countries. The relevance of this process is increasing due to the emergence of new geopolitical players on the international arena who, through the effective utilization and continuous

strengthening of their economic and military potential, are capable of influencing the global geopolitical situation. Political rapprochement, however, is a long-term process with substantial historical roots. After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR in 1991, a new era began in China-Russia relations. After decades of tense relations between the Soviet Union and China, caused by their ideological split, China and the newly formed Russian Federation began

to develop a common policy based on a new vision that both sides accepted as the basis for future cooperation in the economic, cultural and security spheres.

For example, the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020, adopted in 2009, mentioned Russia's commitment to increasing cooperation in multilateral formats such as the former G8, G20, RIC (Russia, India, and China Foreign Ministers' Meeting) and BRICS, as well as utilizing the opportunities offered by other informal international institutions.¹ Similarly, the 2021 Decree of the President of the Russian Federation, "On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation," in the section "Strategic stability and mutually beneficial international cooperation," specifically states that Russia is ready to develop "relationships of comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction with the People's Republic of China."²

In turn, China also demonstrated its interest in cooperation with Russia. For example, in 2016, Xi Jinping underlined that the China-Russia comprehensive strategic coordinated partnership has rapidly advanced to a high level, with

fruitful results in cooperation in many fields, including mutual collaboration and support in international and regional organizations, such as the UN, SCO, BRICS, RIC and G20.³ In 2021, the China-Russia Treaty of Good-neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation was extended. The two sides agreed to continue close high-level exchanges, strengthen vaccine cooperation, expand bilateral trade, and deepen cooperation in low-carbon energy, the digital economy, agriculture, and other fields and promote the alignment of the Belt and Road Initiative with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).⁴

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China's position on its relations with Russia remained unchanged: China neither provides direct assistance to Russia, nor calls on it to withdraw its troops from Ukraine. At the summit, Xi and Putin again assured each other of their support and commitment to joint action in the international arena.⁵ At the same time, China demonstrated distinct limits on how far it is willing to support Russia's foreign policy. China's Ambassador to the U.S., Qin Gang, subsequently walked back the "no limits" rhetoric, saying that the "bottom line" is the "purposes and principles of the U.N. Charter, the international law and basic norms governing international relations."⁶

However, despite China's declaration of "boundless friendship" with Russia, shortly after Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow, China's ambassador to the EU, Fu Cong, said that critics had misinterpreted China's relationship with Russia, and suggested that their ties may not be as limitless as their leaders had once declared. He stressed that the so-called "no limit" friendship or relationship is "nothing but rhetoric."⁷

The declaration of a "no-limit partnership" between China and Russia, combined with China's reluctance to support or intervene in a war waged by Russia creates an asymmetric vulnerability between the states that favors China and, in the long term, decreases Russia's overall security. Despite their mutual interest

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in surpassing the U.S. as a global superpower, evidence of mistrust between China and Russia is reflected in a leaked document by the FSB's Department of Counterintelligence Operations (DKRO), according to which both countries have clashing interests in strategic areas of Central Asia, the Asia-Pacific, and the Arctic.⁸

The Arctic: China's Growing Influence in the Region

In recent years, the rapid development of resource extraction and transportation capabilities in the Arctic has caused significant changes in the geography of productive forces and the nature of the region's spatial development. The geopolitical interests of individual Arctic states are shifting towards strengthening their economic presence in the region, while non-Arctic countries are seeking to increase their role in the governance, regulation and development of the Arctic. Gradually, the Arctic is beginning to play an increasingly important role in the geopolitical arena, attracting the attention of states located outside the region. Therefore, despite not possessing territories in the Arctic region, China is striving to secure its economic and political presence there.

One factor pushing Russia towards closer cooperation with China in the Arctic has been the continuing deterioration of Moscow's relations with the West, following Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, which prompted the other Arctic states to impose sanctions on Russia and withdraw from joint Arctic projects. As a result, China is gradually becoming Russia's main political and economic partner, with virtually no alternatives. It is noteworthy that, after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, Russia became the only member of the Arctic Council that is not a NATO member.⁹ The impact of sanctions has already affected Russia's attempts to reinforce its position in the Arctic, resulting in the termination of contracts for the supply of LNG icebreaking tankers¹⁰ and

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a floating repair dock for the Russian nuclear icebreaker fleet.¹¹ This circumstance further complicates Russia's economic cooperation with the West, and contributes to increased geopolitical tension in the Arctic. The same logic applies to Beijing's Arctic policy: against the backdrop of deteriorating U.S.-China relations, it is increasingly difficult for China to cooperate with Western Arctic states, potentially further cementing Russia's role as China's priority partner in the Arctic. An important stimulus for Russia's further cooperation with Beijing in the Arctic is China's active pursuit of participation and cooperation with Russia in Arctic exploration and resource development.

For both parties, such cooperation seems beneficial for overcoming existing economic, technological, and even natural barriers to the potential interconnection of the NSR with the network of transport and economic corridors of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and for increasing the sustainability of commercial

navigation in the North. Russia and China have significantly increased mutually beneficial cooperation in the Arctic, as seen through the Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG-2 projects. In February 2026, Russia and China ratified a cooperation protocol on the Yamal LNG project,¹² demonstrating their commitment to further investment of Russian energy resources. However, a comparison of Russia's and China's Arctic policies shows that China has gradually expanded its presence in the Arctic, from being granted observer status in the Arctic Council¹³ to announcing China's Arctic Policy, which defines China as a “near-Arctic state,” or one of the continental states closest to the Arctic Circle.¹⁴ The inclusion of the Arctic in the 14th Five-Year Plan marks an evolution and greater sophistication of China's existing foreign policy goals, which were first articulated during the preceding five-year period.

China's Arctic engagement encompasses not only a geopolitical angle but also scientific research and the development of polar technologies, which can be defined as important elements of Beijing's foreign policy in the region.¹⁵ Within this policy framework, Russia is considered as China's strategic partner in the Arctic, as its territory includes most of the North Eurasian coastline and Russia administers the Northern Sea Route (NSR), the only major transport artery in the Arctic Ocean. However, it is noteworthy that China's 2018 “Arctic Policy” did not single out Russia as a privileged partner but only mentioned it along with other Arctic states. This demonstrates China's perception of Russia as one of several transit countries along the NSR.

Thus, China-Russia cooperation on the NSR serves as China's tool for strengthening its geopolitical presence in the Arctic, without asserting sovereignty but emphasizing its legal rights and, in particular, its claim to be considered an important Arctic actor. In this context, cooperation with Russia on the NSR offers China the most feasible way to achieve its goal, since the Russian fairway is better developed than other

Arctic routes. Russia, in turn, uses its Arctic partnership with China to gain access to export markets, bypass Western sanctions and attract Chinese investment. As a result, China-Russia cooperation on the NSR serves the interests of both countries while allowing each to maintain a degree of independence, from the diversification of economic cooperation to personnel training and the use of national languages in navigation aids.

Central Asia: Russia-led Regional Economic Union vs China-led Global Initiative

Regarding China-Russia cooperation in Central Asia, economic cooperation between the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the China-led Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),¹⁶ leads to a synergistic effect through increased trade volume between Russia and China, accelerated intraregional infrastructural development, and political rapprochement among regional countries. At the same time, the dynamics of regional integration processes show that, despite certain achievements, significant issues and contradictions remain. Nevertheless, the integration projects of Moscow and Beijing are different in nature: for Russia, the EAEU is, first of all, a political rather than economic association, through which Moscow seeks to expand its political influence in Central Asia. For China, on the other hand, SREB acts as a long-term initiative aimed at creating a cohesive economic area through the construction of both hard infrastructure, such as rail and road links, and soft infrastructure, such as trade agreements and a common commercial legal structure with a court system to police the agreements.¹⁷

Understanding the difference between their strategies in Central Asia, the two states have taken steps to reduce the likelihood of open confrontation. In 2015, Russia and China signed a memorandum, agreeing to align the BRI and the EAEU initiatives. The priority objectives of

this alignment included the creation of free trade zones, investment development, trade facilitation, and the construction of cross-border parks.¹⁸ At the same time, the alignment is not the only format of interaction designed to create a new environment for the sustainable development of Eurasia. In 2016, Russia proposed the implementation of the Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) initiative.¹⁹ Throughout 2016, the concept was repeatedly presented at various multilateral platforms, essentially becoming the Russian flagship initiative for the development of Eurasian integration. The ultimate goal of GEP was defined as the creation of a space for comprehensive, flexible, and mutually beneficial economic cooperation by combining the potential of states and regional associations, including the alignment of the EAEU development plans and the BRI.²⁰ As of 2025, the GEP initiative was

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being updated, with a focus on developing an action plan and industry-specific programs.²¹ Nevertheless, Russia’s analytical report on the GEP describes the BRI as an exclusive project that provides limited mutual benefits.²²

Russia’s concern regarding cooperation with the BRI is not unfounded. The implementation of the BRI project means the creation of a powerful system of transport communications along the Russian state border, providing Central Asian and Caucasian countries with access to world markets. In this regard, Russia acts as a mediator within China-EU supply chains rather than as their final beneficiary. Moreover, the BRI is not defined as a regional alliance, while the EAEU is an international organization with geographical and economic limitations. China has already become the top direct foreign investor in Central Asia, surpassing Russia, whose economic presence in the region has been declining since 2022 due to Western sanctions.²³

The analysis of China’s and Russia’s policies in Central Asia suggests that both countries prioritize cooperation and joint economic projects aimed at maintaining and expanding their presence in the region, while maintaining separate views and approaches on gaining a dominant geopolitical and economic role in Central Asia. Therefore, despite the alignment of BRI and EAEU initiatives, China views the EAEU as a part of the BRI, while Russia strives to maximize the number of areas of BRI-EAEU cooperation without seeking full integration or an alliance between the two initiatives.

Russia’s Far East: Joint Cross-Border Infrastructure Development with China or a Tool for Bypassing Sanctions?

Russia’s Far East, where Russia and China share the world’s sixth-longest international border, spanning over 4000 km and featuring both river and land sections, has also become a site of clashing interests. After the border demarcation

and resolution of territorial disputes between the two countries, the need for the construction and development of cross-border infrastructure has emerged. Therefore, after the annexation of Crimea, the development of border territories with China became one of Russia's priorities. Against the backdrop of deteriorating relations between Russia and the Western countries and increasing Western sanctions, Russia was urged to pursue the "pivot to the East" policy.

As a result, cooperation with China has become a priority for Russian foreign and security policy. Russian analysts note that the urgent nature of the China-Russia cooperation in Russia's Far East as part of the "pivot to the East" policy reflects the need to strengthen Russia's geopolitical position in the Asia-Pacific region (APR) in the face of a sharp deterioration in relations with Western countries.²⁴ Therefore, since 2015, active work has been underway in the Far East to create new investment support mechanisms, such as the free port of Vladivostok (FPV) and advanced development territories (ADT),²⁵ which provide a special legal regime for conducting business and other activities and aim to attract financing from predominantly Chinese investors.

China, in turn, initiated the creation of Russia-oriented regional FTZs in Northeast China,²⁶ together with the construction of an international railway logistics park.²⁷ However, the lack of a transport corridor across the China-Russia border, together with obsolete border infrastructure, complicated the establishment of reliable cross-border supply chains. In order to lay a solid infrastructural and economic basis for long-term cross-border cooperation with China, the Russian government approved a set of measures to create and modernize infrastructure facilities along the international transport corridors (ITC) "Primorye-1" and "Primorye-2,"²⁸ connecting the northeastern provinces of China with the ports of the southern Far East. The regular operation of these corridors was reinforced by the construction of a new road²⁹ and railroad³⁰ bridges across the China-Russia

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border. The aforementioned efforts to rebuild cross-border infrastructure caught the attention of Chinese investors. In December 2023, a meeting of the co-chairs of the China-Russia commission on cooperation and development of the Russian Far East and the Northeast of the People's Republic of China was held in Beijing. During the meeting, it was pointed out that 49 investment projects with Chinese capital were being implemented in the Russian Far East within the framework of preferential regimes, with a total investment volume of almost USD 9 billion, and that the trade turnover between the Far Eastern regions and the northeastern provinces of China amounted to USD 22 billion in 2022.³¹

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought another issue to China-Russia relations in the Asia-Pacific, manifested in the rapid development of Russia's relations with North Korea. The DPRK has taken on the role of Russia's foreign military supplier, providing ammunition and missiles and deploying combat troops to support Russian military forces in the war with Ukraine³² in exchange for Russian grain supplies and assistance with transportation, logistics, and space projects.³³ While Russia sees its strategic partnership with North Korea as an additional

source of weaponry and foreign military personnel for waging war against Ukraine, China, despite initially welcoming the growing Russia-North Korea ties,³⁴ may face security risks, such as an increased possibility of an arms race in Northeast Asia, a potential nuclear threat to Northeast China, and reduced opportunities to weaken the U.S.-Japan-South Korea alliance.³⁵ On the other hand, if North Korea demonstrates a conducive operating environment and investment security in its cooperation with Russia, Chinese state-owned enterprises are likely to increase their economic activities in the DPRK.³⁶

The overview of China-Russia cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region shows that the relevance of the Far Eastern project as part of the “pivot to the East” was driven by the need to strengthen Russia’s geopolitical position in the region in the face of a sharp deterioration in relations with

Western countries. The difficult geopolitical situation and ever-increasing Western sanctions are forcing Russia to strengthen cooperation with China. In turn, the trade war with the United States, which escalated in 2018, partially contributed to the intensification of Russian-Chinese cooperation on the part of China. One of the objectives of Russia’s multifaceted Asian strategy is to attract foreign investment into the economy of the Far East. Increasing the investment attractiveness of the subjects of the Far Eastern Federal District is expected to be facilitated by such tools as advanced development territories (ADTs) and the free port of Vladivostok (FPV). Interaction between the two countries is expected to serve as another unique catalyst for the regional development of the Far East: documents on China-Russia cooperation adopted within the framework of Russia’s “pivot to the East” policy will not only have political significance, but will also have mutually beneficial economic consequences.

On the other hand, China has also expressed interest in cooperation with Russia, focusing on the development of cross-border infrastructure and the creation of logistics centers in Russia’s Far East. The assessment of Russian-Chinese border relations in Russia’s Far East leads to the conclusion that both countries are moving towards the co-development of their respective border territories, taking into account their own interests in solving the problems of economic weakness in the border regions as well as creating the China-EU transport corridor using Russian territory and resources. Currently, China does not actively invest in the economic development of Russia’s Far East due to the region’s low economic potential, its general unpreparedness for large-scale projects, population outflow, and obsolete infrastructure. Due to these factors Russia’s Far East appears to China primarily as a region used as a link in the China-EU international transport corridor as part of the BRI and as a large source of easily accessible natural resources for the development of China’s north-eastern provinces. The establishment of road and

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railway connections between Russia's Far East region and China, as well as the development of border infrastructure, indicates that both countries intend to intensify the frequency and volume of economic cross-border transactions, potentially establishing a long-term China-Russia supply chain as well as opening a logistics corridor to European markets. Overall, China-Russia cooperation in the region is characterized by activities aimed at establishing and securing their economic presence through cross-border infrastructure on the China-Russia border, with China providing mostly financial investment while Russia provides natural resources and territory for such construction.

Conclusion: Creating an Image of Partnership Driven by Complementary Interests

The analysis conducted shows only the current state of China-Russia relations, since global power dynamics are constantly shifting, which may affect China-Russia strategic convergence. IR analysts point out that China and Russia, despite enjoying the highest level of strategic partnership, still have different core national interests. For example, Shiaushyang Liou notes that China's core national interests lie in the Asia-Pacific region, while Russia's core national interests are in Europe. Geographical and capability constraints, combined with a lack of willingness, result in both countries consistently approaching their cooperation from an expedient perspective.³⁷ Niklas Swanström and Andrew Scobell argue that inherent tensions within the China-Russia partnership, particularly regarding their relative power and competing regional interests, create potential vulnerabilities that more sophisticated Western policies might exploit. Therefore, they conclude that the long-term success of cooperation between China and Russia will likely depend on their ability to manage these internal contradictions while maintaining sufficient unity against external pressure.³⁸

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Dastan Tokoldoshev also notes that the proclamation of medium- and short-term strategic plans and their primacy over the development of long-term agreements may, to a certain extent, become the basis for long discussions regarding the subsequent development of contacts between states.³⁹ Therefore, while short-term rapprochement between Russia and China can be identified as stable with a focus on maintaining the status quo, this stability is expected to be temporary, especially regarding future geopolitical dynamics, caused by the uncertain outcome of the Russia-Ukraine war and the potential revision of the U.S. military presence in Europe. Under these circumstances, the EU may have an opportunity to exploit China-Russia frictions to gain economic benefits. China's launch of a regular container shipping service through the NSR⁴⁰ provides faster

shipment of Chinese goods to Europe than continental shipping routes, especially against the backdrop of geopolitical turbulence in the Strait of Hormuz and the Middle East. Such convenience, however, comes with potential political and security risks, including the possible use of the NSR by China and Russia for military purposes, increased Chinese control over the Arctic corridor, the expansion of the Russian icebreaker fleet, and potential cooperation with China aimed at bypassing Western-imposed sanctions. In addition, an intensive transit via the NSR is likely to increase carbon emissions and the risk of oil spills in the Arctic, resulting in disruption to marine wildlife and environmental damage.⁴¹

In Central Asia, the EU has already established its strategy by engaging Central Asian states in initiatives focused on infrastructural

development and technological modernization in the region. Such an approach can serve as a counterbalance to Russian and Chinese influence in Central Asia.⁴² However, it is necessary to point out that within the EAEU, Russia still has a dominant position, which allows it to expand its political influence in Central Asia. China, in turn, is interested in critical raw materials for the production of batteries and semiconductors as well as in the infrastructural development of the region within the framework of BRI, to integrate it into the China-Europe transport corridor. Differences in Chinese and Russian strategies in Central Asia show that the SREB is an initiative driven by China's need for Russian political influence in the region to promote the BRI and by Russia's need for Chinese goods, delivered via Central Asian states to avoid Western sanctions. Such China-Russia relations in the region require the EU to pursue a balanced strategy, which can benefit from investments in renewable energy and critical raw materials to reduce the dependence of Central Asian states on China and provide EU member states with clean electricity and strategic resources. An additional focus on clean infrastructural projects can strengthen EU cooperation with Central Asia on combating environmental pollution and climate change, as well as reduce the number of Chinese investments in regional infrastructure, thus assisting Central Asia in avoiding a debt trap.

Finally, the Asia-Pacific, despite being the most distant region from Europe, is important for European security. Rapid development of logistical infrastructure along the China-Russia border signals Russia's intention to intensify trade with China, which may include military equipment and dual-use technologies to support the war in Ukraine. Additional supplies of North Korean ammunition and military personnel allow Russia to maintain its aggressive policy toward the EU. To mitigate the challenges and threats resulting from Russia-DPRK cooperation, support for Ukraine should remain on the EU's agenda. The reinforcement of NATO's Eastern Flank countries can also provide military

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capacities sufficient to deter the continuing Russian threat.

As for the probability of increasing geopolitical tensions between Russia and China in the long term, it can be argued that if the domestic policies of Russia and China do not undergo significant changes, their relations are expected to continue developing under conditions of doubly stable security. Both countries maintain the status quo, enjoying cooperation in different spheres without forming an alliance. China benefits from Russian supplies of natural resources and military technologies, while Russia uses trade with China to obtain dual-use technologies without exposing itself to sanctions. Nevertheless, such a balance of interests is fragile and therefore susceptible to a variety of internal and external geopolitical factors.

For example, with Russia's continued reliance on China to avoid economic sanctions imposed by the West, Russia is likely to become increasingly subordinate to China's foreign and security policy. In exchange for potential economic benefits from China, Russia may support China's positions in its diplomacy and geopolitical strategy. In the event of a potential military conflict between China and a third party, Russia may provide military support to China; the annual China-Russia military exercises and joint border patrols support this scenario. The prospect of Russia's alignment with China poses a potential risk that Central Asian countries could fall into China's sphere of influence.

Unlike China's strong economic presence in Central Asia, its political and security activities in the region have been hindered by Russia's strong presence in these spheres. However, if Russia starts to play a subordinate role in its relations with China, China may expand its geopolitical presence into Central Asia, thereby gradually reducing Russian diplomatic and political control over the region. Such growing asymmetry between China and Russia in the economic and political spheres over the long-

term is likely to prompt Russia to cautiously distance itself from China, as it may perceive its dependence on Chinese technological supplies and alignment with Chinese geopolitical strategy as threats to its own security and international influence. In this case, China-Russia relations would be strained, and Russia could attempt to re-establish its relations with Western countries.

The aforementioned scenarios regarding the future development of China-Russia relations suggest that the intensity of the China-Russia partnership may change over time, but a certain degree of asymmetry will likely remain in their relations.

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