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Putin and Xi Jinping meet in Beijing in February 2022 Credit: Reuters

Friends with “No Limits”? A Year into War in Ukraine, History Still Constrains Sino-Russian Relations



February 21, 2023

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A year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, are China and Russia still friends with “no limits?” Since embracing that phrase, Chinese President Xi Jinping has publicly obfuscated regarding ties with Moscow. Meanwhile, ever stronger economic relations—including a doubling of bilateral trade—have offered much-needed support for President Vladimir Putin in the face of Western pressure. Could Chinese contributions undermine EU, U.S., and G7 country sanctions and prolong Putin’s war? What are the prospects for Sino-Russian partnership in politics, defense, and intelligence? How might a new China-Russia axis alter the global order?

February 24 marks the one-year anniversary of Putin’s devastating Ukraine invasion. Among its many reverberations are tremendous ramifications for Sino-Russian relations, which continue to deepen despite lingering differences between the two powers and the autocrats leading them. Emerging potential impacts include increasing energy and resource transactions, alignment in the form of international strategic coordination and

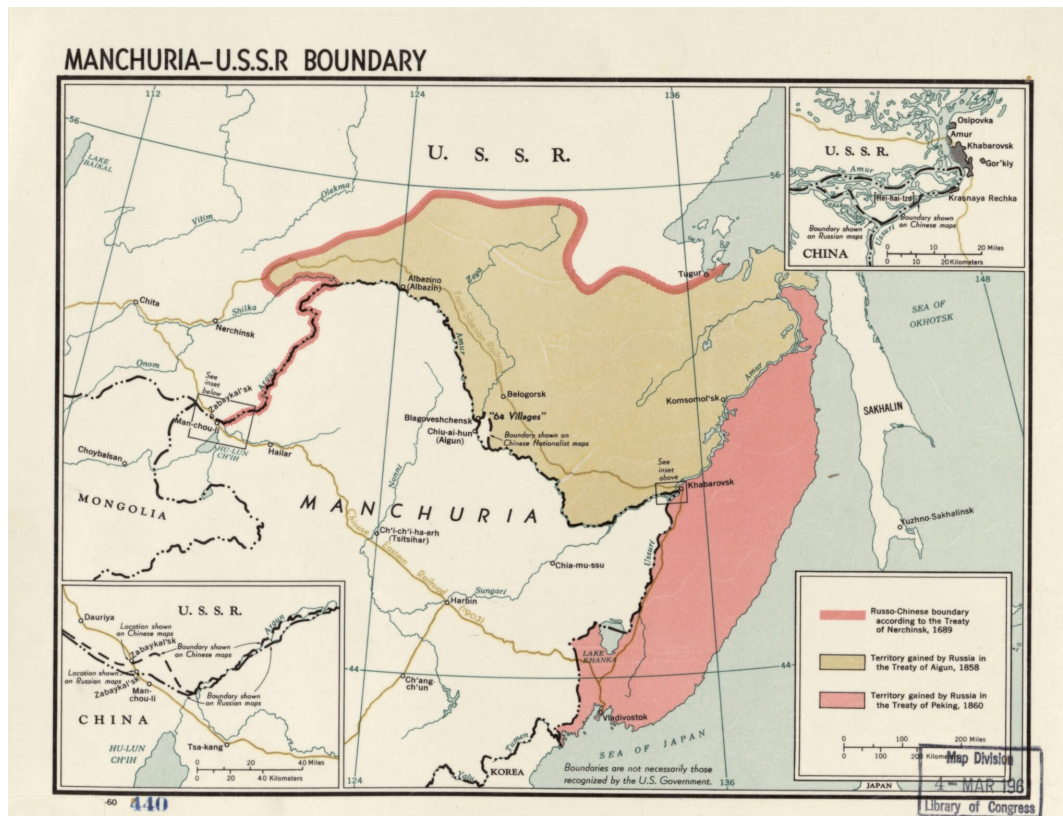
demonstrations of their partnership on the world stage, collaboration in military technology and operations, and maritime-security advances.

Xi may even regard developments in Ukraine as the opening salvo in a broad East-versus-West confrontation for control of the international system. This would be in keeping with his signature assessment that “the world is undergoing profound changes unseen in a century, but time and situation are in our favor”—and that attendant changes promise to shift the international system away from the American/Western dominance that he and Putin oppose. Yet complicated bilateral dynamics and history suggest that the future of Sino-Russia relations could include collaboration, codependence, or confrontation—even elements of all three.

Already Russo-Chinese energy, resource, and financial transactions have grown considerably. Less visible but similarly consequential is the sharing of military technology, possibly to be complemented with sharper intelligence on U.S. and allied military forces. A truly transformational possibility would be Russian granting China access to its air and naval bases in its Far East and High North/Arctic.

A Moscow under continued duress and isolation could yield far more than cheaper oil and gas for Beijing. Russian military crown-jewel technologies—particularly in the undersea-warfare realm—could be coupled with China’s financial resources and industry to tip the Indo-Pacific security balance in favor of a Sino-Russian axis of autocracy at the expense of the United States and its allies and partners.

The relationship between the two historically aggrieved great powers is highly complex, however. Despite strong incentives for far-reaching *entente*, a panoply of factors could constrain, divert, or even derail their interaction. China and Russia’s centuries-old relationship resounds with cycles of mutual suspicion, temporary *modus vivendi*, and repeated division. Existential concerns have periodically overshadowed positive-sum prospects, arguably since the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk that first defined their initial mutual border and market access. Exigencies of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war neither fundamentally change the reality that a weakened Russia could arouse irredentist aspirations in China; nor eliminate fears among Russia’s present leaders, or its populace, regarding China’s long-term ambitions.



Russia has been gaining territory over the centuries (Credit: Library of Congress)

No matter how severely damaged and marginalized by war, Russia will recoil from being regarded as a vassalized basket case responsible chiefly for meeting China’s resource demands. Such a vision is likely to rapidly generate friction points with China, the self-appointed leader of the “global South,” as it expands its already leading economic influence in Central Asia and elsewhere in Russia’s self-claimed “Near Abroad.” Moreover, in the probable event that Putin increasingly accommodates Xi’s demands in an attempt to save Russia’s economy, Russian popular resentment at national subservience may ultimately prompt Putin or whoever succeeds him to reset relations symbolically, perhaps even substantively, away from Beijing’s preferences.

The extreme complexity of the Sino-Russian relationship—both for the parties involved and regarding their combined impact—must thus be factored into projections of possible trends and outcomes. A key contradiction and friction point: China already regards Russia as unavoidably declining demographically and economically toward permanent marginalization. Yet Russia’s historical and cultural identity resists accepting a position as China’s resource-providing subaltern. Simultaneously, however, there is a complex codependency. To fulfill Xi’s ambitious vision for “enter[ing] the center stage of global affairs,” Beijing needs Moscow as a globally-recognized independent partner that both exemplifies the benefits that a China-led order provides for China’s partners and is sufficiently strong to resist mounting American and European pressure.

A year into Putin’s Ukraine War, Russo-Chinese relations should be assessed carefully. The equations likely to govern their evolution and attendant geo-economic and geopolitical shifts are dynamic and multivariate. Assessments of future prospects must consider a range of

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scenarios and possibilities. One of the few certainties is that this pivotal great power
relationship will continue to matter greatly.

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