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Between Rhetoric and Reality: China and Russia in the Shadow of Trump-Era Geopolitics

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China and Russia share a long and complicated history that dates back to the 17th century, when Russian expansion across Siberia first brought the two empires into contact along the Pacific frontier. Over centuries, the two powers have coexisted as neighbors, engaged as partners, and competed as rivals. Their relationship has always been one of accommodation mixed with rivalry, shaped by shifting geopolitical contexts and a persistent imbalance of power. Yet, since the invasion of Ukraine, their relationship appears to have reached an unprecedented level of *entente cordiale*, with both sides demonstrating willingness to set aside long-standing caution in their engagement. Indeed, Moscow's "Pivot to the East" has become a strategic mantra in Kremlin discourse – one that few Russian officials and experts now openly challenge. Beijing, for its part, has adopted an ambivalent yet flexible position of neutrality, allowing it to protect its national interests more effectively. While refraining from offering direct military support to Moscow, China has nevertheless echoed Russia's ideological narrative, which places the blame for the conflict on the United States and the "collective West". By capitalizing on loopholes in Western sanctions imposed on Moscow following the invasion of Ukraine, China has expanded its energy imports from Russia, effectively displacing Europe as Russia's primary customer, while Chinese firms have rapidly filled the void left by the withdrawal of Western, Japanese and South Korean companies from the Russian market - trends reflected in the sharp growth of bilateral trade since 2022. The enduring resilience of the Sino-Russian partnership has spurred a plethora of publications portraying it as a *de facto* alliance, with some commentators extending this narrative to include North Korea and Iran as part of the new "axis of evil".¹ Recent developments, however, suggest a more nuanced

¹ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine, "The Axis of Upheaval. How America's Adversaries Are Uniting to Overturn the Global Order," *Foreign Affairs*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/axis-upheaval-russia-iran-north-korea-taylor-fontaine>, accessed July

reality. What are the defining features of the pragmatic equilibrium between Beijing and Moscow, and to what extent can Washington's new, rather original diplomatic initiatives, reshape the contours and trajectory of their bilateral relationship?

China-Russia “Friendship Without Limits”: First Cracks in the Facade?

Official discourse in Beijing presents China-Russia strategic non-alignment as a perfect illustration of Xi Jinping's new paradigm for great powers relations – framed as “a model of relations between neighboring major powers” – and grounded in economic complementarity and security cooperation². However, in private conversations, Chinese experts often characterize their country's relationship with Russia using the idiom 唇亡齒寒 —“If the lips are gone, the teeth will freeze” – a metaphor reflecting the belief that, should Russia collapse or pivot back toward the West, China could find itself somewhat isolated on the global stage, facing the united US-EU front. The rapprochement with Russia is therefore a necessary, albeit temporary, measure that entails significant geopolitical risks and should be closely monitored and reassessed as circumstances evolve, particularly as Moscow's volatility seems to be accelerating.

Indeed, despite the official narrative emphasizing positive aspects of the bilateral relations, the depth and reliability of Russia's commitment to its partnership with Beijing has recently become a source of concern, openly voiced by leading Chinese think-tanks and academics. Some experts are stressing out the importance of exercising caution in dealing with Moscow, noting that Russia's foreign policy is shaped by its inherent sense of insecurity, obsessive fixation on the past and deep-seated hostility towards the outside world, as well as by insatiable desire for territorial expansion and geopolitical impulse to seek spheres of influence³ – a combination of factors that would inevitably drive Moscow towards initiating further conflicts with its neighbors. Others are urging Beijing not to forget that Moscow has long viewed itself culturally as the part of the West, warning that China risks being caught in a reactive and strategically disadvantaged position should Russia seek a compromise with the West and shift away from its current alignment with China.⁴ Finally, specialists with military background argue that Russia's recent pivot toward China does not reflect a genuine desire to forge a long-term strategic alliance with

21, 2025 ; "H.R. McMaster on how to play the inconsistencies in Trump's worldview," *The Economist*, June 23, 2025, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2025/06/23/hr-mcmaster-on-how-to-play-the-inconsistencies-in-trumps-worldview>, accessed July 21, 2025

² Marcin Kaczmarek, "Russia: China's Most Important Non-Alliance," *China Trends* 21, October 2024, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/ressources/documents/china-trends-21-chinas-balancing-act-axis-upheaval.pdf#page=18>, accessed July 22, 2025

³ Yujun Feng, "The Perils of Trump 2.0 for Ukraine and the World", interview by Thomas des Garets Geddes, *Sinification*, February 11, 2025, <https://www.sinification.com/p/the-perils-of-trump-20-for-ukraine>, accessed July 24, 2025.

⁴ Yongnian Zheng, "東南亞與中國的周邊外交", Talk given at the IPP“東南亞的和平與未來” Seminar, June 30, 2024, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/WPxpCZqYcEhIHNGIQR6rbQ>, accessed July 26, 2025.

Beijing, but rather stems from the absence of alternative major power partners to rely on. Moscow's overtures toward Beijing are therefore primarily intended to project the illusion of a united front against the West. If Russia were to lose the war in Ukraine, it could trigger the collapse of the current regime and, under new leadership, prompt a strategic reintegration with the West at the expense of its present alignment with China⁵ - a perception that was reportedly echoed by the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi during his meeting with top EU diplomats in Brussels in July.⁶

Meanwhile, signs of Kremlin frustration over China's cautious stance on the Ukraine conflict -coupled with growing unease about the deepening asymmetry in the bilateral relationship - have also started to emerge. In a daring and provocative shift, Moscow has sought to hedge its bets by strengthening economic and strategic ties not only with India and Iran, but also with North Korea – thus encroaching upon a geopolitical space long considered by Beijing as part of its own sphere of influence. Pyongyang's military assistance and its manifest security alignment with Moscow pose a threat to regional stability and, by extension, to China's core interests – making the management of this evolving dynamic an “inevitable responsibility” for Beijing.⁷

At the same time, in response to U.S. threats of secondary sanctions, Chinese banks significantly restricted financial transactions with Russian entities, greatly complicating bilateral trade. By the summer 2024, nearly all major Chinese banks have ceased accepting direct payments from Russia. While alternative channels remain – often involving intermediaries or informal arrangements – each additional layer adds to transaction costs and delays. As a result, in the first half of 2025, Sino-Russian trade declined by 8.2%: Chinese exports to Russia fell by 6.6%, while imports dropped by 9.5%. This marks a sharp slowdown compared to previous three years, during which bilateral trade surged to a record high of USD 240 billion, up by 60% from prewar levels.⁸

By late 2024, Moscow's growing resentment over these issues began to surface in the public sphere, marked by a certain, albeit short-lived, shift in official propaganda rhetoric: the previously unchallenged narratives celebrating “friendship without limits” with China were toned down. Several propaganda media outlets began to criticize Beijing's limited

⁵ Fangbin Gong "國防大學公方彬：俄向中國傾斜是弱的體現，若失敗大概率會加西方," *Sina.com*, May 29, 2024, https://blog.sina.cn/dpool/blog/s/blog_69303ebb0102ywpc.html, accessed August 7, 2025.

⁶ Finbarr Bermingham, "China tells EU it does not want to see Russia lose its war in Ukraine: sources," *The South China Morning Post*, July 4, 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3316875/china-tells-eu-it-cannot-afford-russian-loss-ukraine-war-sources-say>, accessed July 21, 2025.

⁷ Xin Cao, "中國應獨立看待並處理朝鮮問題," *The Charhar Institute*, June 16, 2025, <http://www.charhar.org.cn/NewsDetail/5973698.html>, accessed August 7, 2025

⁸ Darya Kolash, "Торговля между Россией и Китаем снизилась за первые пять месяцев 2025 года", *Gazeta.ru*, June 9, 2025, <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/news/2025/06/09/25993460.shtml>, accessed July 22, 2025.



support for Russia during the war in Ukraine, while prominent nationalist bloggers on Telegram published accounts accusing Chinese companies of predatory practices in the Russian market and called for stronger measures to protect Russia's economic sovereignty from overdependence on China. Given the level of media and Internet surveillance and censorship in Russia, these rhetorical adjustments are unlikely to have been spontaneous, rather, they probably reflected the Kremlin's dissatisfaction with perceived lack of China's commitment in economic sphere.

Indeed, although official Sino-Russian discourse emphasizes the natural complementarity of their economies, Chinese direct investments in Russia have fallen short of Moscow's expectations. Russia has abundant natural resources but lacks advanced technology and a diversified consumer goods sector. China, by contrast, has the technological expertise, capital, and manufacturing capacity, yet remains dependent on external resources to fuel its economic growth. On paper, this complementarity suggests the perfect foundation for mutually beneficial collaboration. In practice, however, economic cooperation has been slow to take off, constrained by the structural challenges of doing business in Russia, in particular by the widespread corruption and regulatory instability. While China has invested in large-scale energy ventures like Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG-2, it has refrained from establishing manufacturing operations on Russian soil or from supporting the modernization of Russia's infrastructure. The aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has seen even politically driven deals like the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline stalled as Chinese stakeholders have shown little inclination to risk exposure to Western sanctions in order to help Russia ease pressure on its economy. As a result, the potential for Sino-Russian synergy remains largely untapped today.

“Reverse Nixon” Strategy: A Dangerous Illusion

For years, Washington's approach to the growing entente between Moscow and Beijing has been marked by a certain degree of ambiguity. While the U.S. has adopted a multifaceted – albeit at times inconsistent – strategy, it has never formally identified China-Russia deepening alignment as a direct threat to its vital national interests. This perceived reluctance to confront the issue head-on has drawn sharp criticism from foreign policy hawks in Washington, who invoke the prophetic warning of the late U.S. strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski, cautioning that pushing China, Russia, and Iran together could ultimately topple down the U.S.-dominated international order.⁹ With Donald Trump's arrival at the White House, engineering a split between China and Russia was added to the

⁹Niall Ferguson, "The Second Cold War Is Escalating Faster Than the First," *Bloomberg*, April 21, 2024, https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2024-04-21/china-russia-iran-axis-is-bad-news-for-trump-and-gop-isolationists?utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&utm_term=240421&utm_campaign=author_2151773, accessed July 22, 2025.

list of Washington key objectives.¹⁰ Dubbed as “Reverse Nixon” strategy, Trump’s unorthodox diplomatic overtures concerning the war in Ukraine and hints that Moscow might benefit from distancing itself from Beijing have sparked widespread media speculation about prospects of this strategic recalibration.

However, this maneuver seems unlikely to succeed for several reasons. First, any attempt by Washington to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing would require the full backing of European allies, who have greatly expanded sanctions imposed on Russia since 2022. Even if Trump decide to lift some sanctions as part of a settlement in Ukraine, there is no guarantee that the EU will follow suit. Rather than weakening the Sino-Russian entente, such move may instead exacerbate existing divisions within an already fragile Western coalition – a dynamic that both Moscow and Beijing are well-prepared to exploit. Second, despite mounting frustrations, Russia continues to derive tangible benefits from its partnership with China. While the Kremlin may resent playing the role of junior partner in the bilateral relationship and lament the modest scale of Chinese investments in Russian economy, it still views Beijing as a stable and like-minded partner. By contrast, Trump is perceived by Moscow as erratic and unpredictable counterpart, whose actions are dictated by the uncertainties of the U.S. election cycle but also by his own hubris. Finally, the historical analogy with Nixon’s 1972 diplomatic breakthrough – when Washington dealt a decisive blow to Soviet global influence by engaging Beijing - is misleading, as today’s geopolitical landscape bears little resemblance to the Cold War context. The world has changed, and triangular diplomacy no longer operates under the same assumptions or with the same strategic leverage as it once did.

Although Russian propagandists briefly entertained the idea of normalizing relations with a Trump-led America in early 2025, Xi Jinping’s visit to Moscow in May once again underscored the resilience of the Sino-Russian partnership. Footage of Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping watching together the Victory Parade on Red Square, where Chinese and Russian troops marched side by side, followed by North Korean contingent, was meant to project an image of unity in the face of Washington’s pressure, while simultaneously reassuring domestic audiences of their unwavering friendship. At the same occasion, Xi and Putin pledged to deepen bilateral ties and signed 28 documents, primarily focused on cooperation in education, media and agriculture¹¹. However, the most consequential outcome was the signing of an agreement on investment protection aimed at boosting

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, "Secretary of State Marco Rubio With Matthew Boyle for Breitbart News Network," February 24, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-with-matthew-boyle-for-breitbart-news-network/>, accessed August 6, 2025.

¹¹ President of Russia, "Документы, подписанные и принятые по итогам переговоров Президента Российской Федерации В.В.Путина и Председателя Китайской Народной Республики Си Цзиньпина", *Kremlin.ru*, May 8, 2025, <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/6308>, accessed August 5, 2025.

Chinese investor confidence in Russia. This new legal framework is designed to encourage Chinese acquisition of stakes in Russian oil and gas projects and expansion of production activities into Russia. While it remains uncertain whether this framework will actually translate into concrete deals, it marks an important step toward broadening the scope of Sino-Russian economic cooperation.

The official list of signed agreements notably omits some of the most strategically significant issues, including the fate of the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline, Chinese support for Russia's military-industrial complex and ongoing payment hurdles, although they were probably discussed behind closed doors during the nearly four hour-long meeting between Putin and Xi held ahead of the Victory Parade. The presence of key figures such as Russia's defense minister, the head of Russia's Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation, and First Deputy Prime Minister Denis Manturov - who oversees the defense industry — suggests the deepening of Sino-Russian military-technical cooperation featured on the agenda.

Conclusion

Last October, in his interview with Tucker Carson, Donald Trump famously declared his intent to “un-unite” Russia and China¹². Yet, six months into his presidency, his efforts have produced little tangible results. Despite long-standing mutual distrust, historical grievances, and diverging geopolitical objectives, Moscow and Beijing appear largely satisfied with outcomes of their strategic non-alliance. Although Chinese experts question the viability and strategic depth of the partnership, in the eyes of Beijing, Russia still has its usefulness, as a reliable supplier of natural resource and as a strategic irritant that helps divert Washington's attention away from China. Beijing's approach to the bilateral relationship has always been grounded in pragmatism and long-term strategic calculation, so unless Russia ceases to serve these interests, Beijing is unlikely to change its approach. For Moscow, although frustration over its junior partner status occasionally surfaces in State-controlled media and public sphere, there are few viable alternatives to its strategic collaboration with Beijing. More importantly, for the Kremlin, this partnership is a matter of political survival, as China's continued economic and diplomatic support enables Russia to withstand Western pressure and avert domestic crises that could weaken the regime's hold over the society. As long as this flexible non-alignment continued to be perceived by both Beijing and Moscow as mutually beneficial arrangement, their strategic rapprochement is likely to deepen, despite the underlying geopolitical and strategic risks.

¹² Alexander Gabuev, "Can Trump Split China and Russia?", *Foreign Affairs*, December 6, 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/can-trump-split-china-and-russia>, c. le 2 août 2025, accessed August 6, 2025.