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Relooking China-Russia Relations Through a Historical Lens

By James Char

SYNOPSIS

Although China has not condemned President Vladimir Putin's so-called "special military operations" in Ukraine, and the Chinese official narrative has echoed Moscow's attribution of the war to the expansion of NATO, relations between China and Russia are not without limits. History and mutual distrust have troubled their ties in the past, and the possibility of a return to such open disagreement cannot be discounted.

COMMENTARY

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had far-reaching consequences for Europe and the world. Moscow's unprovoked war on a sovereign nation and its use of energy blackmail have served to pull the West more closely together as well as strengthened the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the process.

Although some observers have attempted to establish a parallel between Moscow's violation of Kyiv's sovereignty with a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan, a formal China-Russia alliance has yet to materialise despite the strategic pressures these two big powers face. To be sure, even if Moscow is desperate for [China's friendship and support](#), Beijing continues to tread carefully in its dealings with Russia.

Russia in Beijing's Diplomatic Strategy

Since the start of the war, China's official stance has been ambiguous: with their western and Ukrainian counterparts, Chinese diplomats express Beijing's support for Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity; with the Russians, the Chinese government attributes Putin's "special military operations" to the expansion of the NATO security alliance.

Quite likely driven by concerns over the possibility of secondary sanctions by Washington and Brussels, Beijing has thus far been careful not to extend military aid to Moscow. Still, from China's perspective, Russia's war in Ukraine has provided some strategic value in drawing away some of the [United States' \(US\) attention and military resources](#) from Asia.

And in its long-term struggle with the US for geopolitical supremacy, China needs to have Russia on its side. In Beijing's thinking, the US could never accept China as a friend given Washington's long-standing hostility towards authoritarian governments and peer competitors. Hence, China needs to band with nations of the Global South and the world's non-Western economies such as those in the grouping of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Now that Russia is stuck in an intractable war with Ukraine, China also stands to derive benefits from its resource-rich neighbour as well as its military-industrial complex.

China-Russia Ties: A Chequered History

The assertion by some western media platforms that Beijing is fully supportive of Russia's violation of Kyiv's national sovereignty and territorial integrity is less than accurate when seen through a historical lens. Although official narratives emanating from China have attributed Russia's invasion to the expansion of NATO – in so doing, alienating the US and many European countries – there are reasons to believe that the two Eurasian neighbours are not as close as it seems.

Besides Chinese President Xi Jinping's "questions and concerns" to Putin after a string of humiliating [Russian reversals](#) on the battlefield in September 2022, China has so far refrained from criticising Moscow openly for its invasion of Ukraine, supposedly because this gives [Beijing diplomatic space](#) to manoeuvre between the belligerents. Such may also explain why it adopted an agnostic view on the Crimean Referendum in 2014.

Although Xi's decision to enter into a "no-limits" partnership with Moscow at the Beijing Winter Olympics has been interpreted by some as [China's tacit endorsement](#) of Russia's subsequent invasion of Ukraine, the claim that he knew about Putin's invasion plans prior to 24 February last year remains speculative. Such an assertion lacks credibility in the absence of substantive evidence that the Chinese leader was informed in advance.

China-Russia relations continue to be affected by mutual mistrust although their relations have never been closer than in recent years. Notwithstanding that Beijing and Moscow view the West and the international liberal order as antithetical to their respective domestic political interests, there are good reasons why they have yet to enter into any formal politico-military alliance since the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance signed between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the erstwhile Soviet Union expired in 1979.

As a Soviet proxy prior to the founding of the PRC in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party was pressured into entering the [Korean War \(1950-1953\)](#) against the US-led United Nations forces – in so doing, delaying China's national re-construction following the destructive civil war against the previous Kuomintang (KMT) government. Most

detrimental for the new regime in Beijing at that time was the postponement of its plan to root out the remnant KMT forces in Taiwan, thereby forsaking for the time being, the mainland's unification with the island.

Later, following the Sino-Soviet split, there was a seven-month border skirmish in 1969 fought between Chinese and Soviet troops near Zhenbao Island in Northeast China. In fact, from the mid-19th century to the first half of the 20th century, Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity had suffered from encroachments by Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union as vast tracts of its territory came under the Russian Far East. Seen in this light, Putin's imperial ambitions are incompatible with the China Dream articulated by President Xi, and it is also not inconceivable that Chinese nationalist sentiments harbour a revanchist desire that Putin and his successors should worry about.

Putting Oneself in China's Shoes

By not condemning Moscow for its war on Ukraine, China, like other countries which have been sitting on the fence, has profited from the conflict by increasing its purchases of [cut-price Russian oil and gas](#), to the extent that Russia even eclipsed Saudi Arabia as China's top oil supplier in 2022. Although most European governments have reduced their reliance on Russian oil and imposed economic sanctions on Moscow, some of that lost trade has been offset by Asia's major economies. But to portray China as unambiguously siding with Russia, as some major western media outlets have been doing, is to overlook the history of the relationship – often marked by hostility and conflict – between the two.

As things stand, China can ill afford to condemn Russia for its war. In fact, Beijing has had little choice but to handle bilateral relations with its giant nuclear-armed neighbour with utmost care. As the short-lived mutiny by the [Wagner Group](#) and its purported attempt to acquire portable nuclear weapons has demonstrated, the potential for instability and chaos spilling across the border is real. In other words, think North Korea – but increase the threat level exponentially.

This appreciation of the historical baggage between China and Russia helps us to understand that relations between the two countries are not ironclad. Under the shadow of the Ukraine war, showing some empathy for Beijing's sensibilities as regards Moscow will more likely yield Chinese support when the belligerents are ready for a political settlement. Doing so, rather than castigating China to no end, can only be helpful in returning Europe to peace at the earliest opportunity.

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