

PARTNERS OR RIVALS?

Areas of Convergence and Divergence of Interests in the Indo-Pacific

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Introduction

The Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China announced that their friendship had “no limits” and “no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation” in 2022.¹ That summit between President Vladimir Putin and Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping occurred before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but the two leaders have since doubled down on their cooperation and partnerships. However, the limits of their “no limits” partnership have not necessarily been tested, particularly within the context of the Indo-Pacific region. How close are the two countries' priorities and interests in the Indo-Pacific? Are the two partners or prospective rivals? Do their interests converge or diverge?

The Foreign Policy Research Institute's report series for the US European Command's Russia Strategic Initiative has utilized the instruments of statecraft to analyze the interests, influence, and relationships of Moscow and Beijing across the vast Indo-Pacific region. The first report provided a general overview of the strengthening of the bilateral relationship and specific and joint interests in the region. The second report focused specifically on China's diplomatic, military, and economic interests across the Indo-Pacific region and gave Moscow's perspectives on these interests. The third report homed in on the two countries' relationship with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the prospect of the three forming a trilateral axis, concluding that such an arrangement is unlikely to occur. The fourth report analyzed Russia's use of diplomatic, military, and

economic instruments of statecraft to advance its interests in the Indo-Pacific region and examined how China perceived it.

This report seeks to bring the elements of the series together and provide a forward-looking approach to Moscow and Beijing's foreign policy trajectory in the Indo-Pacific region. It will first analyze how there is a systemic convergence of joint interests at the global level. Given the context of the Ukraine war and a general Western anti-China push, the two countries and their interests are quite close at the systemic level. However, at the regional level, some divergences emerge in the security and economic realms. Russia's historic relationships with Vietnam and India, in particular, could put Moscow and Beijing at odds, and the negative historical memories and economic imbalances of their own relationship have the potential to create new cleavages among their populations and hinder alignment formation. The report will then attempt to investigate the future trajectories of the bilateral relationship and where convergences and divergences may emerge. While specific tensions may erupt at the regional level, such as those related to a greater Russian defense presence in Southeast Asia or a Taiwan conflict, the deep structural interests and convergences will likely prevail.

Systemic Convergence at the Global Level

At the level of great power politics, Russia aligns with China as an economic, military, and political partner to counterbalance the United States and the broader West due to the convergence of primary alignment incentives shared by both countries. These include the global balance of power, perceived threats, and the presence of revisionist interests regarding the global order.²

In terms of the balance of power dynamics, the growing China-Russia alignment is unsurprising. Shifts in global power distribution among China, Russia, and the United States have fostered conditions favorable to anti-US balancing. While the United States remains the system's dominant actor, its relative power has declined since the 1990s and early 2000s, lowering the threshold that once deterred balancing. As a result, counterbalancing the US has become more feasible. This power distribution—where the United States is strong enough to provoke but not prevent balancing—encourages alliance formation among major powers.³

A shared perception of external threats also strengthens China-Russia alignment. Both view the United States and its allies as threats to their geopolitical interests, civilizational identities, and political regimes.⁴ Some argue this common adversary could transform their partnership into a formal alliance.⁵ As US-China and US-Russia relations have worsened, the once distant threat from the

United States has become immediate for both, aligning their stances on key issues such as missile defense, US influence in the Indo-Pacific, expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), “color revolutions,” sovereignty, and broader global dynamics.⁶

In this context, Russia's threat perception in the South China Sea has converged with China's. Many Russian experts and political elites view the US “rebalancing to Asia” as a clear attempt to exploit regional security concerns—particularly in countries like Australia, the Philippines, Japan, and India—to contain China and provoke confrontation.⁷ Some Russian military analysts even argue that China's assertiveness in the South China Sea benefits Russia's broader Indo-Pacific security interests by offering a buffer against US military presence and promoting a more balanced regional power structure.⁸ Criticism of US policies in Asia as “increasingly threatening” and calls for joint resistance have become standard in China-Russia security dialogue.⁹

A shared perception of external threats strengthens China-Russia alignment. Both view the US and its allies as threats to their geopolitical interests, civilizational identities, and political regimes.

China-Russia alignment is also rooted in shared interests in reshaping the international order. Both oppose US global leadership and,

since the late 1990s, have shifted from merely endorsing multipolarity to actively promoting it—particularly through platforms like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Russian and Chinese leaders consistently call for a global system where “non-Western” voices hold greater sway, making the Indo-Pacific a strategic priority. Increasingly, both China and Russia view multipolarity as a way to protect national interests, with their partnership shaped by a shared “non-Western” identity that deepens the normative divide with the West and fosters a bloc of like-minded states challenging Western dominance.

Divergence in Regional Relationships

This section will address possible areas of friction between Moscow and Beijing and what such issues could mean for the bilateral relationship. Given the PRC’s continued rise as an economic and military power not only in the Indo-Pacific but around the world, there is a growing asymmetry between the two countries, which has the potential to cause problems among the populations, particularly from the Russian side. Two key relationships in the Indo-Pacific—those with India and Vietnam—have the greatest potential to drive cleavages in Moscow and Beijing’s ties. However, pending major geopolitical shifts, none of these sub-systemic problems will drive either country away from the other.

Bilateral Economic Relationship

The deepest challenge to strengthening the China-Russia alignment lies in their economic imbalance. This stems from two main factors: the disparity in economic size and their contrasting models: Russia as a major resource exporter and China as a leading consumer. While this creates economic complementarity, it also reinforces asymmetries and fuels geopolitical concerns.

The widening gap between China’s and Russia’s economies poses a significant challenge. In 2013, China’s gross domestic product (GDP) was 4.3 times larger than Russia’s; by 2020, the ratio had grown to 9.8:1, before slightly narrowing to 8.5:1 in 2024. Meanwhile, Russia’s per capita GDP was more than double China’s in 2013 (2.2:1), but by 2016 it had dropped to near parity (1.1:1) and has remained there. Given the demographic differences between the two countries, this shift is particularly concerning for Russia.¹⁰

Russia plays a much smaller role in China’s external trade than China does in Russia’s. In 2024, Russia accounted for about 5.6 percent of China’s total trade, while China made up roughly 36 percent of Russia’s. Although China is now Russia’s largest trading partner, Russia remains a relatively minor, though important, part of China’s trade portfolio. This highlights Russia’s far greater dependence on China than vice versa.

At the same time, while China and Russia’s economic “complementarity”—with Russia supplying energy and China consuming



The Russian Goods Pavilion is in Chongqing, China, on January 4, 2025. (Costfoto/NurPhoto/REUTERS)

it—makes sense in terms of comparative advantage, it masks deeper complexities. This division of labor creates trade imbalances and conflicting development priorities, hindering deeper integration. Russia's growing economic dependence on China is marked by inequality: China exports high-value-added goods, while Russia exports raw materials and imports Chinese products. This dynamic spills over into other areas of the relationship and fuels unease in Russia, where reliance on China is seen as diminishing its status.¹¹ Although often muted by geopolitical realities, this discomfort drives ongoing resistance to the current economic arrangement.

These economic asymmetries carry geopolitical weight. The provider-consumer divide often places China and Russia on opposing sides in economic negotiations,

making both reluctant to compromise. This tension is evident in prolonged pricing disputes over energy deals, which have fueled frustration and occasionally spilled over into other areas of cooperation.

The current pattern of China-Russia economic cooperation also shapes mutual perceptions. China increasingly views Russia primarily as an energy supplier, while Russia struggles to adjust to this role. This shift stirs deep-rooted anxieties in Russian society, where China is often seen as a threat. Outside the military-industrial sector, Russia is less perceived as a source of innovation and more as a provider of raw materials and a market for Chinese goods—a stark contrast to two decades ago, when Russia led China in many development indicators. This perceived decline fuels public unease, prompting calls to protect domestic

markets from Chinese economic influence and resist becoming a mere resource appendage. These sentiments strain the broader climate of China-Russia economic and strategic relations.

These divergences hinder joint China-Russia initiatives and strain their bilateral relationship. Notable examples include stalled negotiations on integrating the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia's reluctance to finalize a free trade agreement (FTA) between China and the EEU—despite having signed one with Vietnam and launching FTA talks with Indonesia in late 2022.¹² This disparity frustrates China and fosters mistrust, even as both governments have recently taken steps—such as easing trade regulations in non-energy sectors—to counter these tensions.

Bilateral Historical Memories in the Far East

Another point of divergence between China and Russia lies in their historical narratives. Despite efforts by both governments to promote a positive relationship, lingering grievances and strategic mistrust persist beneath the surface. Thus, according to the Chinese version of history, the Russian Empire forced China to sign a series of unfair treaties in the 1850s–1860s that illegitimately gave Russia 1.5 million square kilometers of Chinese territory. In contrast, many Russian sinologists argue that the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk was the original injustice—imposed on Russia by force—and that the 19th-century treaties merely restored historical justice.

Nonetheless, narratives of territorial loss remain deeply rooted in Chinese society, fueling nationalism and revanchist sentiment, especially under the “China Dream” rhetoric of national rejuvenation.¹³

Despite efforts by both governments to promote a positive relationship, lingering grievances and strategic mistrust persist beneath the surface.

Similarly, the two sides diverge in their interpretations of Sino-Soviet relations, particularly the 1960s split and the 1950 Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, creating ideational challenges for contemporary alignment. In China, the split is attributed to the unequal nature of the relationship, favoring the USSR, and the imposition of the Soviet model on Chinese society.¹⁴ In contrast, Russia places primary blame on Mao Zedong and his ambitions.¹⁵ Differing views on the 1950 Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance remain a key obstacle. Russia sees the treaty as equal and mutually beneficial, while China views it as unfair—partly due to a secret appendix barring third-party activity in Northeast China and Xinjiang. Similarly, China criticizes Soviet policies of 1950s Xinjiang, aimed at “sovietization” and detaching the region from the PRC.



Commemorative stamps honoring the signing of the Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty in 1950. (Wikimedia Commons)

These divergent historical interpretations continue to influence alliance-related debates in China and, to a lesser extent, in Russia. Notably, Fu Ying—a senior diplomat and former chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National People’s Congress—articulates views that reflect mainstream, if not official, Chinese policy thinking. In her article “China-Russia Relations: Are We Allies or Partners?” published in *Contemporary International Relations* (*Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*), she stresses the “lessons of history” China must remember. While acknowledging that the 1896 Li-Lobanov Treaty helped contain Japanese aggression after Qing China’s defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, she highlights that by 1900, Russian troops were looting Beijing alongside other Eight-Nation Alliance forces, including Japan. This, she argues, marked a

betrayal of Chinese interests. Similarly, she notes that the 1950 alliance treaty lasted less than a decade and ended in strategic rupture and military tension, implying that Beijing should be cautious about forming alliances with Russia.¹⁶

These “burdens of history” remain embedded in the collective memory of both countries, fostering a level of distrust that, while not halting, complicates deeper alignment. China is likely to monitor closely Russia’s expanding role in the Indo-Pacific, such as its recent request to station long-range aircraft at Indonesia’s Manuhua Air Force Base, especially as Indonesia boosts its military presence in the South China Sea in response to growing Chinese incursions into its exclusive economic zone.

Vietnam and the South China Sea

One of Russia's historically close partners in the Indo-Pacific is Vietnam, a country that has long-lasting tensions with China as a result of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War and the South China Sea dispute. Russia is Vietnam's most important supplier of military materiel, and Russian oil companies are important in Vietnam's offshore energy exploration.¹⁷ Vietnam has taken a cautious approach in rebuking or punishing Russia for its invasion of Ukraine as well. In June 2024, Putin traveled to Hanoi for a state visit in honor of the 30th anniversary of the two countries' friendship treaty, where Putin and Vietnamese President To Lam signed many bilateral deals.¹⁸

Given the ongoing tensions over energy exploration rights and sovereignty in the dispute, the South China Sea has the potential to cause problems in the Russia-China relationship. For China, the South China Sea is an important issue, announcing in 2023 an expansion of its controversial nine-dash line to a new ten-dash line.¹⁹ While the expansion of territory did not directly affect Vietnamese territory, Beijing still lays claims to Vietnamese waters—something that Hanoi continues to reject.

Claimants like Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia have grown more assertive in protecting their claims and waters in the South China Sea since the COVID-19 pandemic. The Philippines, in particular, under President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr.,

has reinvigorated its efforts to protect rightful Philippines waters recognized under the 2016 arbitral award—this new strategy has caused significant turmoil in the relationship between Manila and Beijing.²⁰ Should Vietnam begin to push back in a similar way as the Philippines against China, the situation has the potential to force Russia to respond to the tensions between Beijing and Hanoi. Overall, the South China Sea is not an important foreign policy issue for Moscow, but its relationship with Vietnam is. If the situation in the South China Sea becomes more tense between Hanoi and Beijing, Moscow will likely hedge in an attempt to appease, and not anger, either party.

India

Another important regional partner for Russia, and one that has the potential to cause tension in the Russia-China relationship, is India. Like Vietnam, India has taken a more neutral and cautious approach toward Russia in the aftermath of its invasion of Ukraine. Russia and India have a close security relationship. US Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick recently highlighted this issue and its role in causing tension between New Delhi and Washington: “[India] generally buy[s] your military gear from Russia. That’s a way to kind of get under the skin of America, if you go to buy your armaments from Russia.”²¹ This comment was made in light of recent news that Russia intended to deliver the remaining two of five S-400 systems to India to complete an existing contract by the end of 2026.²² Deputy Chief of Russian mission in India Roman Babushkin even lauded the

performance of the S-400s during the recent military clash between India and Pakistan: “We heard that the S-400 performed very efficiently during the recent clashes between India and Pakistan. The air defense systems, according to what we are experiencing, the situation in Europe and here, this is one of the promising topics of our partnership in defense preparation in general.”²³

In addition to the defense relationship, New Delhi and Moscow have expanded energy ties in response to Western sanctions against Russia’s energy for the invasion of Ukraine.

In addition to the defense relationship, New Delhi and Moscow have expanded energy ties in response to Western sanctions against Russia’s energy for the invasion of Ukraine. India saw the potential for a deal and new opportunities—something that Moscow needed after the European energy market was shut off from Russian companies. In May 2025, Russian gas exports to India reached a 10-month high of 1.96 million barrels per day. Russian oil accounts for 38 percent of India’s energy imports. The reason for the surge in oil from Russia is that Moscow has offered India discounted prices, as low as \$20 cheaper per barrel, as a way to gain a bigger foothold into the market as other markets were closed.²⁴

India has continued its long-term strategy of diversifying its relationships and hedging

from completely choosing one side. While India’s relationship with the United States has improved in light of joint concerns about PRC assertiveness, that has not come at a cost to India’s relationship with Moscow.

Ties between Russia and India have remained steady despite the invasion of Ukraine. In some sectors, India’s relationship with China has great potential to upend Moscow’s ties with Beijing. China and India have long-term tension over disputes in their shared border in the Himalayas region, largely centered around Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh. In 2020, the two sides came to blows over China’s objections to India’s construction of a road in the area. Soldiers from both sides were badly injured, with some dying in the brawls. Beijing and New Delhi worked to defuse the situation so that the two sides would stop fighting in the remote border areas. It took until October 2024 for India and China to come to an agreement to end the clashes.²⁵ Beijing and New Delhi agreed to stop patrolling certain areas to reduce military tensions. However, tensions remain high, with Beijing announcing in May 2025 new names for locations in Arunachal Pradesh.²⁶ This practice of changing names in the area is not a new one. Beijing announced similar name changes in April 2024, which India also rejected. Even though tensions between China and India have stabilized, it will be telling how Russia refers to these areas in official government documents in the future. Will Moscow use the Chinese or the Indian names when referring to these places? Such references have the ability to cause low-level issues in either relationship, as the use of a particular name marks taking a clear side in the sovereignty dispute. And if the truce over the border areas

collapses in the future, Moscow will have to navigate a tightrope between the two sides to avoid setting off one relationship. While Vietnam is an important partner for Russia, India's sheer size and potential for the Russian market elevate India-China disputes into a different space. As long as Moscow attempts to serve as a mediator and bridge between the two countries, it will likely continue to avoid being forced to take one side in a dispute and maintain good relations with both New Delhi and Beijing.

The Future Trajectory of Russia-China Relations

The deepened Russia-China relationship has been fostered by a perceived Western-dominated system aimed at containing Moscow and Beijing. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the relatively unified Western response against Russia forced Moscow to find partnerships elsewhere. The Trump and Biden administrations' efforts to slow down the PRC's economic development in critical, high-tech fields and diminish its military growth have made Moscow and Beijing natural partners, given their leadership's worldviews.

However, a critical question remains: how long will this no-limits partnership last? Will it outlast the war in Ukraine and become a long-term, sustainable relationship? What cleavages or relationships have the potential to push the two countries away? While the relationship is not perfect, the structural geopolitical system will continue to push

Moscow and Beijing into each other's orbit. Specific issues likely do not have the sustaining power to break the relationship apart.

The Structural Level Prevails

Despite the divergences in China-Russia relations, structural dynamics, particularly great power politics, remain the dominant forces driving their alignment and are likely to continue doing so. Two key factors suggest that the three main incentives for alignment—balancing power, shared threat perceptions, and revisionist goals—remain in sync, sustaining momentum toward closer ties, if not a formal alliance.

First, in today's international climate, Moscow continues to see the United States and European Union as more immediate threats than China. As Vladimir Portyakov, former deputy director of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, noted, "Any unprejudiced person now sees more clearly that Russia faces a far greater and more real threat from the West today and tomorrow than a hypothetical one from a rising China the day after tomorrow."²⁷ This perception—reinforced by worsening US-China and US-Russia ties and the West's military support for Ukraine—encourages closer military cooperation between Moscow and Beijing.

Whether to counter a potential China-Russia alliance or anticipating Ukraine's defeat, President Trump has attempted to shift the dynamic by making unprecedented overtures to Russia. These included a position on



Keith Kellogg, Special Envoy for Ukraine and Russia, Department of State, United States of America seen during panel Peace Through Strength: A Plan for Ukraine at the 61st Munich Security Conference. (IMAGO/Andreas Stroh via Reuters Connect)

Ukraine, outlined by US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at the Ukraine Defense Contact Group in Brussels on February 13, 2025, that meets the Kremlin's core demands: Ukraine would not join NATO and would not reclaim territories occupied by Russia.²⁸

The Trump administration has also signaled a sharp shift from its traditional commitment to European security.²⁹ Keith Kellogg, US special presidential envoy for Ukraine and Russia, bluntly said “no” to European involvement in Ukraine peace talks at the Munich Security Conference on February 15, 2025. Washington's subsequent efforts to sideline Europe have played into Russia's hands, potentially removing a key driver of China-Russia alignment—the shared need to counter US influence.³⁰

However, the lack of progress in resolving the

Ukraine crisis and the deep mistrust between Russia and the United States continue to stall any breakthrough. Moscow also remains uncertain whether Trump's bold foreign policy shifts reflect a lasting change in US strategy or are merely temporary moves driven by his personal leadership style.

The second reason concerns US-China relations, which are expected to worsen in the coming years. The Trump administration has proposed expanding investment restrictions between the two countries.³¹ Meanwhile, House Republicans have suggested denying US visas to all Chinese students and researchers, and pressuring universities in allied countries, such as Australia, to disclose ties with China to block its access to “Western knowledge.”³²

While these initiatives toward China remain

inconsistent, there is little sign of easing in the US-China rivalry, making Russia a highly valuable strategic partner for Beijing. As a result, China has shown increased sensitivity to Moscow's concerns. Despite ongoing economic asymmetries, China has accommodated Russian interests within a broader strategic partnership, advancing joint projects in nuclear energy, high-speed rail, aviation, and technology.³³ The US-China trade war, especially under Trump, further pushed Beijing to deepen economic ties with Russia. More fundamentally, US containment efforts have created a dynamic where China needs Russia much like Russia needed China during the Ukraine war—as its only great power ally amid intensifying US pressure. As this containment grows, Beijing's perception of the United States as its primary threat is likely to outweigh lingering mistrust of Russia, encouraging deeper military cooperation.

Trumpism and a Post-Trump Republican Foreign Policy

With the return of Donald Trump to the Oval Office, one of his administration's foreign policy priorities has been to end the war in Ukraine and orchestrate a “reverse Kissinger,” i.e., pulling Russia away from China and closer into the US orbit.³⁴ Trump campaigned on ending the war in Ukraine, which he has admitted is more difficult than expected.³⁵ The theory aligns with overall Republican popular opinion, with 40 percent of Republicans viewing Russia as an “enemy.”³⁶ Since the rise of Trump in the GOP in 2016, Republican

popular perceptions of Russia and Putin have followed Trump's generally positive and trustworthy views. How long will Trump continue to hold Putin in a class of his own? And how will Republican popular perceptions of Russia and Putin change over time?

Trump's successor may not be publicly supportive of Russia, but they still may seek to bring Moscow back into the greater international community and drive a wedge between it and China.

As Trump has struggled to end the war in Ukraine, he has increasingly grown frustrated with Putin's reluctance to seriously come to the table for peace. If the war continues with Putin sending mixed signals, Trump could quickly change his rhetoric on Putin and Russia's overall role in the war. However, one constant throughout Trump's political career has been his desire to work more directly and closely with Putin on important international issues, so it is unlikely that he would completely break with him over Ukraine. It is unclear if the Republican popular perceptions of Putin and Russia are tied directly to Trump or if such viewpoints will continue in a post-Trump GOP. The answer to that question lies in Trump's successor and that person's foreign policy priorities.

Trump's successor may not be publicly supportive of Russia, but they still may seek to bring Moscow back into the greater

international community and drive a wedge between it and China. Given the strength of the Russia-China relationship, Trump or his successor will likely not be successful in resetting the relationship or implementing a “reverse Kissinger.” Russia and China’s larger geopolitical interests align at higher levels, and no matter who sits in the Oval Office, Moscow will remain skeptical of US efforts to fostering a stronger relationship, unless Washington is ready to make costly, in reputational terms, moves, such as recognizing Crimea as part of Russia or withdrawing from or dissolving NATO. It is unlikely that Trump’s foreign policy priority in this sense will drive Russia and China apart.

Effects of the Ukraine War

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the resulting crisis in Moscow-West relations did not derail China-Russia alignment. Beijing firmly refused to join the global effort to isolate Russia, despite incurring reputational costs and risking secondary sanctions. This stance reflects China’s growing belief that it is on a long-term collision course with the United States—a dynamic unlikely to shift. In the international system, established superpowers like the United States pose the greatest threat to rising powers like China, just as emerging powers threaten the dominance of established ones.³⁷

This logic underpins US-China relations. From Beijing’s perspective, US policy over the past decade confirms that Washington has firmly committed to a strategy of containing China. Initiatives, such as the “Rebalancing to Asia,”

the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” the Third Offset Strategy, and AUKUS, are seen as efforts to counter China’s rising geopolitical influence.³⁸ The Trump administration’s tariffs and other escalations in US-China competition have reinforced this perception, making Beijing increasingly reluctant to jeopardize its strategic alignment with Russia.

The growing alignment in China and Russia’s threat perceptions is evident in ongoing joint military exercises and air patrols over the Western Pacific—such as incursions by Chinese and Russian warplanes into South Korea’s air defense zone, signaling Beijing’s continued closeness to Moscow.³⁹ Similarly, on July 24, 2024, the United States intercepted Russian and Chinese bombers flying together in the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone for the first time, underscoring that, amid looming confrontation with Washington, Beijing cannot afford to abandon its only great power ally.⁴⁰

The Impact of US Tariffs

The Trump administration’s trade agenda—primarily centered around implementing tariffs on incoming goods—will have a role in shaping the future of the Russia-China economic relationship. While the Trump administration walked back many of the devastating tariffs against most of the world, the ones that were not removed and remain are tariffs against China. At one point, US tariffs on PRC goods were as high as 145 percent, but Trump lowered them to 30 percent in the hopes of reaching a deal.⁴¹ Striking a trade deal with China was a priority



US Secretary of the Treasury Scott Bessent, left, speaks with Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng, right, during a bilateral meeting between the United States and China, in Geneva, Switzerland, on Saturday, May 10, 2025. (KEYSTONE/EDA/Martial Trezzini)

of the first Trump administration, and it remains a priority during the second Trump administration.

The future of tariffs is unclear after regular changes to their implementation. Whether or not the tariffs are re-implemented against China and the rest of the world at a high level is as important as the uncertainty in the context of the Russia-China relationship. The perceived US unpredictability and unreliability will provide an edge to both countries as they seek to paint a negative picture of the United States around the world—showing how unilateral US action has the ability to upend national economies and that Moscow or Beijing is a more reliable partner.

It is unclear what the long-term effects of such efforts could be for either country, but in the short term, countries may seek out

greater market access to China in response to the Trump tariff threats. After all, China, Japan, and South Korea convened a trilateral economic dialogue in direct response to the tariffs.⁴² While Japan and South Korea disagreed with the PRC's interpretation of the meeting, their dialogue demonstrates how quickly countries may move to find new markets and access if the US market becomes too expensive. In terms of the Russia-China relationship, Beijing may seek to increase its trade with Russia for previously US-bound goods. An oversaturation of the Russian market with cheaper Chinese goods has the potential to cause friction among the population, as the economic imbalance between the two is a persistent issue in the relationship.

Russia's Security Role in the Indo-Pacific

Another possible area for tension to develop between Russia and China is Moscow's expanding role in the security and military spheres with partner countries throughout the Indo-Pacific. Russia's relations and role as an arms supplier to India and Vietnam have already been explored in this report. Russia and China have also conducted joint military exercises near Alaska in 2024.⁴³

Moscow has sought to expand its role as a military power in the region in a number of ways, primarily centered in the Southeast Asia region.

However, Moscow has sought to expand its role as a military power in the region in a number of ways, primarily centered in the Southeast Asia region. For almost 20 years, from 2004 to 2023, Russia provided 25 percent of Southeast Asia's arms, but that figure has declined since.⁴⁴ Given Western sanctions, Russia has fewer options for countries willing to accept the risk of purchasing Russian arms and military assets, and many of the countries willing to accept that risk are located in Southeast Asia—almost all of them have historically strong relations with the Soviet Union. Beyond its focus on arms sales in the region, Russia works to deepen military ties with the region

by conducting port calls and joint military exercises. The frequency of port calls before the COVID-19 pandemic was quite robust.⁴⁵

While none of these things is particularly new and likely to cause tension with China, Moscow's reported interest in a military base in Indonesia—which did not come to fruition—could be perceived as a challenge to PRC military power in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁶ Beijing is prickly about “foreign powers” seeking to enhance their permanent military presence in the Indo-Pacific. The Indonesia base did not occur for a number of reasons related to pressure from Australia, Indonesia's nonaligned foreign policy, and the fact that no foreign powers have such a base in the country. However, if Putin seeks to make Russia a more formidable presence in the Indo-Pacific, he has other countries to utilize for a base. A stronger Russian military in the Indo-Pacific would likely receive pushback from Beijing, but it is unclear (1) if Russia would successfully open a base out of deference for PRC concerns and (2) if China would scuttle the depth of the relationship over this issue.

The Taiwan Factor

Perhaps the greatest threat to peace and security in the Indo-Pacific is a potential PRC military invasion of Taiwan. How would such a contingency affect Russia-China relations? Even though Russia previously had a relatively stable unofficial relationship with Taiwan (Chiang Kai-shek's son Chiang Ching-kuo studied and lived in the Soviet Union, giving Moscow and Taipei a strong historic link), Moscow calculated that a decrease in support

for Taiwan internationally would not hurt the country as that was a cost that came with a closer political relationship with Beijing.

Given Beijing's immense support for Russia in its war in Ukraine, Putin would likely provide the PRC with a similar level of support.

While economic studies point to the catastrophic nature of a conflict over Taiwan, such a war would likely put initial stress on the bilateral relationship, but, like the Ukraine war, the two countries would be forced into an even closer relationship.⁴⁷ The initial stress on the relationship would be determined by Putin's decisions and response to a military invasion of Taiwan, but given Beijing's immense support for Russia in its war in Ukraine, Putin would likely provide the PRC with a similar level of support. The war could result in a reversal of roles in some sense, with Moscow providing the PRC with military support for the Chinese war efforts. Assuming there is a strong Western sanctions response, Russia could even receive PRC goods at discounted prices, including critical minerals, as has occurred with Russian oil going into China. Despite an even closer overall relationship, a Taiwan conflict would still negatively impact the Russian economy. However, that is a cost that Putin has already been willing to pay in Ukraine, and it would come with a reset in power relations with Beijing.

Conclusion

The Russia-China relationship represents a deep geopolitical alignment that has gotten stronger over time as a result of factors related to the war in Ukraine and both countries' general distrust of the Western-led international order. Both Putin and Xi seek to reshape the international order in their image and diminish the role of the United States internationally. The relationship is not perfect, with many existing and potential cleavages that have the potential to diminish the strength of the relationship. Moscow's strong ties with Hanoi and New Delhi, and Beijing's poor ties related to military coercion and aggression against both parties may put Russia in an awkward position if China's ties with either of those countries continue to sour. The economic imbalance between China and Russia in the relationship and the ways in which Moscow and Beijing interpret historical issues related to the Far East can also drive wedges between the two. However, despite many possible areas of divergence, Moscow and Beijing's geopolitical alignment at the systemic level will prevail over issue-specific problems. It will take a significant combination of factors and events to truly drive a lasting wedge between the two countries. Putin and Xi remain personally close, so the strength of the relationship will continue as long as both men lead the two countries.

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