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China-Russia Relations

The People's Republic of China (PRC or China) and the Russian Federation (Russia) maintain a strategic and multifaceted relationship with extensive military, diplomatic, and economic connections. Although the contemporary China-Russia relationship dates back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the two countries also share a long, tumultuous history that has included periods of security and diplomatic cooperation, fluctuations in ideological alignment, diplomatic crises, and a border war in the 1960s. Many experts trace the current dynamism of the relationship to 2014, when the reaction of some countries to Russia's first invasion of Ukraine, including sanctions, led Moscow to seek to strengthen its ties to China and other countries.

The two countries' apparent mutual affinity has led some U.S. policymakers and Members of Congress to express concern that Beijing and Moscow constitute a *de facto* alliance, and to seek ways to counter their global influence. The PRC and Russia's bilateral relationship falls short of a mutual defense pact, more closely resembling a non-binding alignment based on shared opposition to what they describe as the U.S.-led international order. This common opposition has spurred cooperation between the two countries, but has not fully overcome their historical strategic mistrust.

Key Features of the Relationship

Building on the foundation of the 1991 Sino-Soviet Border Agreement, the 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, among other things, noted Beijing and Moscow's satisfaction on border issues and set broad areas of cooperation ranging from economics and trade to counterterrorism. The renewal of the treaty in 2021 reflects the overall positive trajectory of relations.

The direction of the bilateral relationship appears to reflect personal ties between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin, both of whom project the image of a close relationship. Since 2013, Xi and Putin have met numerous times and established regular dialogue mechanisms at lower levels. In 2019, PRC and Russian leaders announced their intention to develop a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era," professing a "high degree of political trust" and "all-around cooperation."

Military cooperation between the PRC and Russia is significant, encompassing exchanges and joint exercises, as well as intelligence sharing and joint development of weapons systems. In November 2021, the two sides signed a Road Map for Military Co-operation for 2021-2025 to guide collaboration in this sphere. The PRC and Russia are founding members of the Eurasia-based Shanghai

Cooperation Organization (SCO), an intergovernmental group mainly focused on security affairs.

The PRC and Russia also enjoy strong commercial and financial ties and are partners in their attempts to "de-dollarize" the global economy, which they see as beholden to the United States. Both governments express opposition to the use of unilateral sanctions as tools of policy.

The PRC and Russia often cooperate and coordinate in multilateral settings, including the United Nations; the SCO; the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) grouping; and the Group of 20 (G20). The PRC and Russia have also tried to harmonize the interests of overlapping ventures, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

PRC and Russian Perspectives

PRC officials frequently describe the current moment as a "historic high" in the China-Russia relationship, with the two sides mutually supporting each other's positions on national sovereignty, security, territorial integrity, and economic development. For the PRC, one of the guiding principles of the relationship would seem to be flexibility, as is evident in its call to "form partnerships, not alliances," which has allowed it to distance itself from some of Russia's behavior in the international arena. Russia's role as a strategic partner in global affairs has at times been disruptive for the PRC, which values access to the markets, including capital markets, of the United States and Europe. PRC companies have typically abided by foreign sanctions on Russian companies in order to continue doing business in Western markets.

Russian concerns over China's growth and economic advantage often are overshadowed by the perceived benefits of greater economic, political, and military cooperation. Despite being aware of the practical benefits of a positive relationship with the PRC, Russian policymakers remain guarded and harbor skepticism toward its leaders. This includes avoiding the binding obligations of a formal alliance, especially commitments that could draw it into a potential conflict over Taiwan. Russian officials appear to reject the label of a "junior" partner and seek to manage the relationship on mutually beneficial terms. Whether or not Russia can maintain equal status in the relationship is unclear as the country's international isolation following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine has made China an even more important partner.

Select Issues

Challenging the Global Order

The PRC and Russia view each other as partners in their efforts to challenge the U.S.-led global order. Xi and Putin issued a joint statement on February 4, 2022, emphasizing their commitment to “true multilateralism” and “respect [for] the rights of peoples to independently determine their own development paths,” which some analysts interpreted as a blueprint for a new international order.

A number of experts contend that while the PRC and Russia both seem to reject the current world order, their visions of what ought to replace it are not necessarily consistent. Many analysts view the PRC as a “revisionist” power working to change certain aspects of the existing order, possibly with the intention of superseding it in the long run. PRC officials often depict China’s vision for global order as based on the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs, and contrast it with the current order, which they describe as having subordinated these principles to human rights and interventionism. Russian policymakers argue that the existing global order ignores the position and sovereignty of great powers other than the United States, and denies other powers what Russian policymakers view as legitimate spheres of influence. Russia therefore attempts to push back against what its leaders see as U.S. unipolar overreach, and remind the United States of Russia’s great power status and role in the international system.

Defense Cooperation

The PRC and China are close partners in military and defense affairs. The PRC has been a major buyer of Russian arms, which it has sought in order to modernize its growing military. As direct defense imports from Russia have decreased—partially due to Russian concerns over technology transfer and intellectual property violations—cooperation between the two militaries has grown more complex. This is in part due to the increasing sophistication of the PRC’s defense industry. Russia’s defense industry relies on importing key components and investment from China for the development of advanced weapon systems.

Current relations stress combined military exercises, developing interoperability, and increasing defense sector cooperation and joint arms development. Russia has sought to increase its participation in military exercises with the PRC, including at the strategic and tactical level, as well as naval exercises and air patrols in the Asia Pacific region. Russia arguably conducts these exercises to develop interoperability with PRC forces and to signal to foreign audiences that Russia remains a player in the Asia Pacific. The PRC likely views these military exercises as an opportunity to learn from Russia’s more experienced forces.

Energy and Economics

Economic relations between China and Russia are asymmetrical; China’s economy is considerably larger and more dynamic. China is Russia’s second largest export market after the European Union (EU); Russia, meanwhile, is China’s ninth largest. Russia’s role as a key provider of PRC energy imports is a defining feature of the bilateral

relationship. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, in 2019, Russia was China’s second largest source of crude oil, providing approximately 15% of China’s total imports. That same year, crude oil accounted for nearly 60% of the PRC’s imports from Russia. China’s transition away from coal could potentially lead to a greater role for Russian hydrocarbons (including “green coal” and natural gas). The recently-completed Power of Siberia Pipeline, when running at full capacity, could make China the second largest individual importer of Russian natural gas, after Germany.

The deepening of PRC-Russia economic ties accelerated starting in 2014, as Russia sought to increase ties with countries other than the United States and European countries, which imposed sanctions on Russia following its initial invasion of Ukraine. Moscow has also accelerated efforts to “de-dollarize” its economy in favor of alternative currencies, including China’s *renminbi*, which Beijing has sought to internationalize. For more, see CRS In Focus IF11885, *De-Dollarization Efforts in China and Russia*.

Impact of Russia’s 2022 Invasion of Ukraine

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has drawn increased scrutiny to the Beijing-Moscow relationship, which many analysts see as a critical avenue through which Russia may be able to relieve the pressure of international sanctions. The PRC’s reaction to the invasion arguably is more accommodating to Russia’s position than it was during Russia’s invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. Such a change could raise questions about the direction of PRC-Russia strategic cooperation and its implications for U.S. national interests. For example, will the PRC’s tacit acceptance of Russia’s invasion lead to a fundamental change in China’s stated foreign policy? Can the PRC serve in any kind of capacity to help mediate between Russia and Ukraine? To what extent is the PRC taking measures that can reduce the effects of sanctions by the United States and its allies and partners on the Russian economy?

Issues for Congress

U.S. policymakers, including in Congress, have identified countering PRC and Russian challenges to the current international order as a top national security priority. Both the Trump and Biden Administrations included such language in their national security strategies. Members of Congress have introduced S. 1260 and H.R. 4521, which would require a series of measures aimed at increasing the United States’ ability to compete with global competitors, including by increasing investment in critical sectors and expanding U.S. foreign engagement and assistance. Several Members of Congress have issued statements criticizing China’s support for Russia in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine, and proposing measures—including secondary sanctions on PRC entities allowing Russian access to the international financial system. H.R. 7314 would require the Department of State to report on whether and how China is supporting Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and call on the President to impose sanctions on entities aiding Russian sanctions evasion. Critics of these measures argue that secondary sanctions have limited effectiveness, and that U.S. officials would face difficulty convincing international partners to adopt and enforce similar measures.

Andrew S. Bowen, Analyst in Russian and European
Affairs

Ricardo Barrios, Analyst in Asian Affairs

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