



RCAS Commentary

The Sino-Russian Alliance: Reality or Strategic Advantage?

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About RCAS

香港亞洲研究中心| The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS) is a nonprofit research organization focusing on Asian affairs. It is a newly established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng in Haikou and subsequently moved to Hong Kong in September 2023. We currently have an international research team with nearly 100 resident/nonresident researchers from China and other countries.

RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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China and Russia elevated their relationship in February 2022, just ahead of the start of Russia's military campaign against Ukraine. A "limitless friendship" between Beijing and Moscow, jointly announced, will underpin deeper trade, energy, and security cooperation. The announcement comes against a backdrop of global politics exacerbated by the Ukraine crisis and a dramatic downturn in Russia's relationship with the Western world. This alliance between China and Russia made many people think it would forge a new style of cooperation that would contend for a new powerful bloc to rival the West.



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However, doubts about the relationship's importance and strategic benefits have emerged. China's foreign policy has always had a two-tier approach, particularly with its strategic interests and economic ties with the West at the forefront of its ties to Russia and other great powers in international relations. China is strategically standing with Russia by announcing that it is standing with Russia in the war in Ukraine, but China has not been directly involved in this war.

Instead, China wanted to preserve its role as a "practical mediator," which would not take a side in the war but would shore up its position on the world stage. This policy suited China. Because this is the world's second-largest economy, and most of the world's trade is with the United States and Europe. China knows close relations with Russia are risky for its economic and strategic relations with the West. Consequently, China has been careful in its engagement with Russia. While "limitless friendship"

sounds graphically attractive, the relationship between China and Russia is predicated on strategic gain.

The relations of Beijing and Moscow have stirred a flurry of discussions in China in recent months. Although some even back closer ties with Russia, many doubt excessive reliance on Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin's May visit to China is a glaring example of this conundrum. While Putin called Xi Jinping "as close as a brother" during the visit, Xi Jinping called Putin "a good friend and a good neighbour." Such a reaction shows China is beginning to draw the line on its relationship with Russia. China has tried to make it clear that it does not want to become directly involved in the war in Ukraine or any other military conflict and that it does not want to identify itself as an ally of Russia. Two years into the war, the crisis in Ukraine has no foreseeable resolution and military and political chaos in Russia is increasingly becoming an issue of interest to China.

The mutiny by the Wagner Group in 2023, while forces have moved into Russia's Kursk region, has drawn attention to Russia's fragility in the eyes of China. Such events are an important sign to China that the time has come to rethink the Russian state's capabilities and its armed forces readiness. The Wagner mutiny mirrors Russia's internal tensions and security struggles. The history of the past three decades tells us that regime stability in Russia declines whenever the country is confronted with severe internal or external crises. Chinese rulers are also learning from these disputes and are behaving more cautiously in their relations with Russia.

Trust each other enough intensely for the stability of the region. Russia has never committed to stand by China, especially in a dispute over Taiwan, and China has never directly backed Russia in its war in Ukraine. In Hicham's case, the absence of this trust is a hurdle to a potential partnership between the countries. The other hot topic of the China-Russian partnership is economic cooperation. Despite being China's most powerful economic partner, China's overall trade aligns more with the Western world than with Russia. China's main trading partners are Europe and America; these partnerships matter more to the Chinese economy than any other. Old habits are hard to break, and China knows it has to use the economy to influence the world stage—the West's ventures.

China has repeatedly proven its stagnant economy and weak trade with Russia depend on the Western economic system. Russia, by contrast, wants to obliterate the current international order and create a new one, whereas China wants to reshape the existing order by establishing itself at its centre. Older than in the system. For this reason, China's policy toward Russia is risky. History has demonstrated that China's attempts to tie up with Russia were always defeated. Moreover, the Sino-Soviet struggle, particularly in the 1960s, damaged China strategically.

Right now, China is critical to keeping strategic ties with the West. China knows that Europe and the USA are essential for China. A China-America relationship helps secure long-term stability and economic growth for China. If China draws too close to Russia, it risks being drawn into, if not conspiracies of isolation from the West that will imperil China's strategic stance. China needs to take a significant role in leading the world.

As for China, it must define its relations with Russia and limit them to security, even in politics and the economy. With the new international inventory, China became a strong country that now sets the rules in the economy. Still, there is a strategy, too. However, China, in this respect, does require a balanced foreign policy, on the one hand, keeping relations with Russia while, on the other hand, continuing economic cooperation with the West.

Meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the margins of the BRICS conference, Putin said: "It can be stated with confidence that China and Russia have become examples for the rest of the world, providing the models for how relations between states should be built in the modern world." The Russian leader noted that this is a mutually beneficial multilateral cooperation relationship on an equal footing. A three-day BRICS summit is in progress in Kazan, Russia. Some world leaders at the top level went to Russia to participate in this conference.

The first large-scale international conference has been held in Russia since military operations began in Ukraine. Although Russia and China are considered 'borderless' strategic partners, they compete for interests and influence in Central Asia. Moscow has historical links with five countries — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. However, China's growing economic muscle and investment in these countries have reduced Russian influence.

Russia's relations with the West are at their lowest point since the Cold War. For its part, Sino-U.S. relations have also turned perilous. Time for China to respond soberly to Russia's suspension of the New Start Treaty. The agreement is of great significance in promoting peace and stability, Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said of the agreement. Beijing hopes the two can properly manage their differences.

In contrast, Russia has sided firmly with China as tensions have flared between China and the United States over the Taiwan question. The two nations also demonstrate their close connections in the defence sphere through military exercises. China, Russia, and South Africa are conducting naval exercises this week in the Indian Ocean. Two countries' good relations do not look right to the West. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, concerned about Chinese help for the Kremlin's war effort, said Thursday that any such effort would be a "serious problem".

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, the US-led military alliance, said in an interview that the group had some indications that China may provide arms support to Russia. He made the remarks after being asked by the AP news agency in the Polish capital, Warsaw. The NATO chief again strongly urged Beijing against taking such steps, warning that such an initiative by China would seriously violate international law. However, many believe the US and its allies have ‘perceived the Russia-Ukraine conflict through tinted glasses’.

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