

AN INQUIRY INTO CHINA AND RUSSIA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP FROM GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, China and Russia have come to forge strategic partnership which is seen as the counterbalance to the U.S. hegemony. Yet, the solidarity between the two largest powers in Eurasia is under the question since the Ukraine crisis has not only caused the unexpected impacts on the global energy and food security, but also the geopolitical dimensions now and beyond. What can Russia expect from China during the ongoing conflict, and how can China offer to Russia's urgent needs as it has fought alone against the U.S.-led allies? Regarding the question if Beijing has tried "to keep its distance" from Moscow now or afterward, this study asserts that there is a profound historical logic for China-Russia relationship to reach where it is today. As the largest neighbours to each other and the high-level strategic partnership, China and Russia have strong internal dynamics to facilitate the comprehensive strategic partnership in rebuilding a multilateral world order. Beijing is aware of the consequences if China losses Russia as the most effective strategic partner given the prospect of the Global NATO pivoting to

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the Asia-pacific to merge with the U.S.-Japan axis, AUKUS and the Quad security dialogue. Thus, the rationale behind the policy-making elites in Beijing remains that China-Russia relations is a strategic choice that Beijing has made to realize national rejuvenation and support world multi-polarity based on international laws and the authoritative role of the U.N.

Key words: China, Russia, *Realpolitik*, Ukraine crisis, sanctions, NATO

There have been meaningful discussions on the bilateral relations between China and Russia since the end of the Cold War. Due to the sea-changes domestically and globally, Beijing and Moscow made the efforts to urge a transition from constructive partnership to strategic one during the 1990s that eventually paved the way for the treaty of good-neighbourhood, friendship and cooperation between the two sides in 2001. The treaty is legally accredited as the cornerstone of the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination between China and Russia while their relations are literally based on “non-alliance and non-targeting of any third party” [23].

Internationally, the most vital reason for China and Russia to have upgraded their strategic partnership is the U.S. prior unilateral world order. Since the end of the Cold War, Washington has acted as the saviour of the world now and in the future [22]. Their arrogant rhetoric and awkward deeds have revealed a prejudice that there are serious obstacles to form a conventional alliance between China and Russia given the divergent views on the bilateral relations in modern history and the growing asymmetric demographic and economic factors that had caused growing anxiety in Moscow. [4] All the factors would undercut mutual trust between Beijing and Moscow and then hinder the shared visions of the world order [14: 25].

In fact, although China and Russia don't declare a formal alliance, the U.S. and its allies are aware of the two Eurasian powers becoming the strongest competitors and the systemic rivals in the region and the world at large. In 2020, a group of leading experts from the Atlantic Community issued a report asserting that the rise of China and its deepening solidarity with Russia had contributed to the global equilibrium in favour of their geopolitical

designs and acts in Europe and Asia [33: 35, 39]. Due to this, the U.S.-led allies has listed China and Russia as the pacing challenge to the rules-based and shared-values world order.

Over the past decades, China and Russia have extended their supports to mutual core interests including the legitimate claims and security concerns. To further cement the geostrategic partnership in terms of *Realpolitik*, started in 2013, China has called for “standing back-to-back” relations with Russia to jointly address common challenges and looming risks in Eurasia and beyond. In term of geography, Eurasia refers to the “Heartland” of the world stretching from the Volga to the Yangtze and from the Himalayas to the Arctic Ocean, which is primarily under the jurisdiction of Russia and China [13: 127,179]. Yet, geopolitically, the United States has coveted Eurasia as the key to its global hegemony now and in the future. During the 1990s, Kissinger and Brzezinski alike asserted that “no matter which power, either of Europe or Asia, dominates Eurasia, that danger eventually leads the U.S. to see it as a structural threat to its primacy in the world” [9: 813; 2: 27]. Yet, the United States has often ignored the legitimate rights and security concerns of China, Russia and Iran, etc.

The Ukraine crisis broke out as a turning point in the post-Cold War era. Since the launch of “Special Military Operation” in February 2022, the United States led NATO allies to respond with a proxy war with Russia. As Condoleezza Rice and Robert Gates acknowledged, Washington’s efforts to arm and train the Ukrainian military and to integrate it into NATO systems “aimed to sustain the most intense and costly military entanglement in the global competition between the United States and Russia” [7]. Yet, China opines that the Ukraine issue was rooted in the NATO eastward expansions over the past decade and its refusal to consider the legitimate security concerns of Russia in Europe. [15] At the SCO Summit in 2022, Xi and Putin then reaffirmed the mutual support to a multipolar world order in the post-crisis era [34]. Geopolitically, now China and Russia can’t afford to lose each other as the strategic partner. In response to the growing solidarity between China and Russia, the NATO-EU has seen Russia as the severe threat to Euro-Atlantic security and China as

systemic competitor globally [24]. Such mental rigidity of NATO was reiterated at the Vilnius Summit. [16]

This study focuses on the central question why China and Russia must maintain ever high-level strategic coordination during the Ukraine crisis and afterwards. Some scholars and politicians in the West and China have questioned China's neutrality stance on the Ukraine issue. They argue that China's trade-off between standing with Russia and being isolated by Western block does not worth it. But the fact is that U.S. hostility towards China is obviously beyond the Ukraine issue. Historically, the row between the ruling power and the rising power is a fundamentally structural issue of the international system. Now that the U.S.-led allies have seen China as an assertive power to challenge their interests, security and values, China and Russia have no options but work together as a *de facto* ally to assure each security interests and sustain domestic development.

To make a sound argument on the issues as follows, the article uses the classic realism to analyse the rationales behind the policy-making elite of China. Three sub-hypotheses will be dissected like: first, what are the key factors that have driven China and Russia to forge strategic partnership since the 1990s? Second, why has China adopted the principled neutrality during the Ukraine conflict at the risk of being sanctioned by the U.S.-led allies? Third, how will China and Russia practically and effectively push forward a multiple and balanced world order in the post-Ukraine crisis era? What follows is the normative analysis of the questions aforementioned.

Strategic solidarity to counter the U.S. hegemony

With the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1992, neither Russia nor China wanted to challenge the United States since they were more concerned with their own domestic issues, e.g., social-economic inertia and science-technology stagnation. [4] For China lagged far behind international development trend due to its radical policies, it was more anxious to join the world economy as it was urged by the reform-minded leadership. Russia which was led by the liberal-minded elite, was deeply involved in the internal

transition in the post-Soviet era. This scenario required both Beijing and Moscow to look to the West for the necessary help in political restructure and economic reform. However, for the sake of its primacy, the U.S. was reluctant to take either Russia or China as equal partner then. As national strategy report argued that the U.S. should make all practical efforts to prevent the emergence of peer competitors [22]. Such narrow-mindedness only aroused Washington to pursue the goals that were predestined to antagonizing, offending and alienating Russia, China and other countries globally.

For sure, some scholars urged the U.S. policy-making elites to make practical efforts to restore a new kind of the concert of major powers involving Russia and China, like the Concert of Europe after 1815 [6]. Yet, the paradox of America's hegemony remains that, on the one hand, Washington opined that it would outmatch Russia and China as it did to the former Soviet Union during the Cold War. On the other hand, the U.S. and its allies were aware that Russia and China had been not only the nuclear powers but also possessed the resources to re-emerge as the great powers sooner or later even though they are not as affluent as the G-7 members in terms of the total GDP per capita. First, Russia has been one of the leading powers of Europe and the world as well. And China has also been in the seminal transition from a developing country to a major player since the 1980s. Second, both countries have shared the visions for regaining national glory and greatness respectively in a multipolar world order. In a long run, it requires the U.S. and its allies to integrate China and Russia into the post-Cold War world order other than rejecting their legitimate claims and security concerns. [10:117]

Moreover, the U.S. was obsessed with the primacy that has made the post-Soviet Russia frustrated to find allies or partners in Eurasia and beyond. Similarly, the U.S. has steadily trespassed the "One-China policy" which is defined by Beijing as the red-line of the bilateral relations. Under such circumstances, China and Russia have limited options to expect developing a sound relationship with the United States. Thus, they started the strategic dialogues throughout the 1990s and came to finalize the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination in 2019. [5] It is the strategic choice

made by the two countries in light of mutual geostrategic concerns and reciprocal needs, e.g., political consultation, diplomatic coordination and strategic-economic cooperation [25]. There are the logics that China-Russia strategic partnership has been integral in the global systematic transition. Now the question arises on how China and Russia would continue maintaining high-level strategic synergy while legitimating respective security claims internationally?

With the start of the war in Ukraine, China sincerely appealed to holding peace talks between Russia and Ukraine which has been backed up the U.S.-led allies. Since then, Chinese President Xi and top foreign policy advisor Wang Yi have reiterated that all states' legitimate security concerns must be taken into consideration and the peace talks are urged between Russia and Ukraine, and also dialogue between the U.S.-led NATO and Russia [26]. What China has expected is obvious to restore an effective and concerted European security framework that involves Russia as a major player as usual. According to *realpolitik*, it is extremely fatal for a nation to act in the total want of consideration of what others will naturally hope or fear [13: 587]. Now it seems that the U.S.-led NATO has deliberately moved away from this maxim.

While China declines taking sides in the Ukraine crisis, it has commended Russia for its efforts to resolve the crisis through political dialogues. In addition, amid the vexing international issues in 2022, bilateral trade between China and Russia has grown steadily and covered major areas from investment, the use of local currency settlement to key highway-railway hubs put in operation. In a long run, what China and Russia need to be aware during the uncertain era is how to earnestly thwart external attempts to drive a wedge between the two great powers in Eurasia. [5]

The rationales behind China's position on the Ukrainian crisis

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched military operation against Ukraine. The U.S and its allies around the world immediately denounced it as a flagrant invasion of a sovereign state. They have also criticized China for refraining from condemning Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine while

adhering to neutrality or independent stance on the Ukraine crisis. For example, the U.S. and its EU allies raised the question that the Presidents of China and Russia held an in-depth talk on February 4, followed by a joint statement that reaffirms “mutual support for the protection of their core interests, state sovereignty and territorial integrity” [27]. In addition, Chinese supports to the security concerns of Russia were well-written between the lines of the text, like “new inter-State relations between Russia and China are superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era”. [15]

Under such circumstances, more outrageous rebukes against China came as a few media and politicians in the West have taken the joint statement to verify China’s making a secret deal with Russia during the Summit in Beijing, just three weeks prior to the start of the war in Ukraine. Despite China’s tireless efforts to explain the key points of the joint statement, it works little if not nothing in alleviating the public opinions and suspicions on the role of China in Russia’s war against Ukraine. One of the EU leaders Ursula von de Leyen criticized China not to use the term of “invasion of Ukraine” other than “SMO” in state media and formal talks. The U.S. and EU have gone further to warn China “abstaining from aiding Russia’s war effort in any way” [28]. Otherwise, Beijing would be responsible for the consequences that followed.

However, the U.S. has since assembled more than 50 states around the world to launch a hybrid war against Russia with a geopolitical pulse to deprive Russia of the status as a major power of the world. [16] The people of the world were even astonished by Lloyd Austin’s rhetoric of weakening of Russia through “helping the Ukrainian soldiers to fight until the last one.” [8] If this happened, it would allow the U.S.-led allies to resolve the “Russian question” for good and then overwhelm China. [20] Yet, China’s stance on the Ukraine issue has affected its already strained ties with the Western bloc, most of which are also China’s major trading partners, let alone Ukraine having been a major trade partner and a participant of the BRI in Eastern Europe. Then during his talks with the EU leaders, Chinese leader revealed that “China finds it deeply regrettable that the situation in Ukraine has come to where it is today” [29].

Despite this, China has been firm and transparent in justifying its

judgements of the Ukraine issue in light of the merits of the issue itself. As in foreign affairs where sovereign states have reacted with each other in terms of *Realpolitik*, China has argued that a country can't build its own security at the cost of others. Given this, China has taken "principled" neutral policy and urged Russia and Ukraine to have direct dialogue to end the war while not labelling Russia as the aggressor in the ongoing war. [5] In fact, China is relieved to see that India, Indonesia and Turkey along with many states of the Global South have not acted in line with the West at the United Nations to condemn Russia on the Ukraine issue [19].

For sure, negative opinions on Russia's war in Ukraine have existed in China. Yet, the mainstream line goes that even if Russia suffers temporary failure in the battle fields, it would be able to re-emerge as a formidable military power sooner or later due to its possession of remarkable natural resources and human wisdom, let alone its overall military and industrial capacities [31]. In a long term, Europe has no other options but to work with a strong Russia if it claims for its strategic autonomy. As history displays that Russia's might has dwarfed those of the rest of Europe combined. [8] Although the regimes in Moscow changed, the rhythm has remained extraordinarily consistent in seeking for the national greatness [11:50]. Due to this, the rationales behind China's stance on the Ukraine issue can be understood as follows.

First, like many other countries in the world, China's national power is shaped by its geography as it constitutes the permanent part of the tenet of geopolitics. With 14 neighbouring countries surrounding it, the policy-making elites in Beijing decided to adopt the "NEWS" doctrine in 2014 which refers to China's neighbouring areas such as north, east, west & south, and is based on a strong strategic partnership with Russia. In doing so, China is able to make its North borders secure, while concentrating its military forces on countering the threats over the Taiwan Straits and in the South China Sea. Otherwise, China will be alone to deal with the challenges from the AUKUS, the Quad security dialogue and a looming NATO establishment in Asia, all of which aim to forge the geopolitical containment of the rise of China. As a

result, without a strong Russia as the strategic partner, it is only a matter of time that the U.S. and its allies will take on China mercilessly. [20]

Second, since the U.S.-led allies have applied the containment and deterrence doctrines in a much more irrational way than they did to the rivals during the Cold War, China and Russia are aware of the necessity of maintaining a geostrategic environment in a more effective and practical way, such as a range of cooperation from energy, agriculture to strategic synergies between the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative, which is supposed to link the Asian-Pacific with the Eurasian region. On the one hand, China requires long-term and steady flows of energy from Russia to sustain its rapid economic growth. On the other hand, Russia needs to receive substantial amount of foreign direct investment and digital technologies to upgrade its traditional industries and civil infrastructure—remoulding. Except China, other states of the Global South like India, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are also the partners.

Taking a look at what happened in 2022 and then look into what is going on in 2023, it is worth to note that China-Russia strategic partnership has withstood the test of the Ukraine issue. As Xi talked to Medvedev in December 2022 that China and Russia had not only consolidated political trust but also extended mutual support for the long-term and stable bilateral relations [26]. With regards to the post-crisis Ukraine and many other issues concerned, China vows to hold the stance that the international community and the major powers particularly should urge the peace talks between Russia and Ukraine while making room for political settlement, rather than adding fuel to the fire for the geopolitical end.

China and Russia relations in the post-war era

Now the quest ahead remains how China and Russia will continue strengthening the strategic partnership to pursue common interests and shared vision on the world order in the post-Ukraine war era? Like any decisive war in history, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine is no exception since it is one of the most costly and cruel test of national endurance, social cohesion and

overall strength involving the calibre of leadership on each sides—Russia and Ukraine which was backed up by the NATO. From now on to one decade or more, Russia will be in a *de facto* state of war with the U.S.-led NATO and their partners around the world. Although the U.S. and its allies have failed to achieve two of three objectives: to ruin Russia economically and kick Russia out of the rank of global power, the third objective—to turn Ukraine into a devastated NATO bastion—is being realized according to the strategy outlined by the Anglo-American axis. [19] As a result, Russia has to take on all the geopolitical pressure from the West since the bilateral relations may take years or decade to be normal as before [17]. It is not what Russia really wants, but the NATO has defined its goal as a strategic defeat of Russia which was incredible during the Cold War. [8]

In January 2023, the EU and the NATO Joint Declaration reaffirmed Russia an immediate threat to the world order while China was seen as a growing assertive power in an era of growing strategic competition. China is aware of the extreme uncertainties ahead as President Xi spoke to the senior cadres of China that the peaceful rise of China is not granted freely. Given the challenges and risks ahead more vexing and uncertain than the previous decades, he has called for more strenuous efforts to realize the rise of China and set “the next decade (2035) as crucial for national rejuvenation” [32]. It requires that China and Russia will continue strengthening the strategic cooperation in the areas from energy, food to new-technological applications to large-scale transfer. They have geared for the joint strategic research involving satellite navigation and joint construction of outer space monitoring stations that will serve compatibility and interoperability of the global satellite navigation systems of each country. Moreover, to respond increased pressure from the United States and its allies aiming to decouple China and exclude Russia from the international system, Beijing and Moscow have vowed to develop domestic replacements for certain imported high-technological items to meet their urgent needs through applying the dual-use technologies [1].

According to what have been discussed previously, China and Russia need to be more earnest and trustful to tackle their differences on several issues.

First, China is a rising power to shrug off its inferior status for only 73 years, while Russia has been a major power in Europe for 400 years and lost its superpower status only 30 years ago. As a result, China is much keen on how to advance its social-economic progresses and technological innovation while Russia is more anxious to restore its old-time prestige in history. Due to this, they have different priorities yet not opposite in respective foreign policy-makings.

Second, China is now climbing up to the second largest economy in the world in terms of GDP in total. Yet, it has still lagged behind some advanced and sophisticated military technologies and capacities. Given this, China sees science and technology cooperation with Russia as the next focus of the bilateral relations as the latter has possessed unique advantages in primary research and original innovation. But some uncertainties exist among Russian elite regarding how to identify the role of Russia in terms of strategic partnership with China as it has nearly 10 times of the total GDP and population than those of Russia. Both sides are aware of the remaining asymmetric economic and demographic factors that will cause anxiety and misperception of each other in the future if they could not handle wisely and efficiently. [34]

Despite all this, the geopolitical scenario requires China and Russia to sustain ever close solidarity in the post-war era: from consolidating political trust and extending mutual efforts. In doing so, the two countries need to consult with each other through what Stephen Walt said of “geopolitics of empathy” to enhance respective core interests and common security concerns. [18] For example, China supports Russia’s Greater Eurasian partnership since it has a prior role in Central Asia in terms of geography to cooperate security-wise with the CSTO and economically with the EAEU. In addition, Russia has been a major power with much valuable experiences in dealing with the EU and the U.S.-led NATO since the end of the WWII. [8] Due to this, China, as a rising power, has to drive on a bumped road for at least one or two decades.

In history and in reality, today alliances can be formal or informal collective security arrangements between two or more sovereign states [3: 174]. This remark helps to identify what China and Russia refer to the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination in the new era. The bilateral relations are literally based on the principles of non-alliance, non-confrontation and the non-targeting of any third party. Yet, in a show of strategic dimensions, China and Russia revealed in 2022 that their relations are more flexible than conventional alliances of the Cold War era. In terms of *Realpolitik*, friendship between them has no limits; accordingly, there are also no “forbidden” areas of practical cooperation [33: 27].

As for the role of the SCO where China clearly holds the leading position in terms of economic and financial clouts, Russia has been the co-founder and bi-driving force behind it. Thus, China and Russia can exert mutual leverage in Central Asia in the SCO as multilateral mechanism. As the most ascendant of all emerging countries in the world and in Eurasia particularly, China and Russia do hold the key to the success of constructing the economic corridor in the region and a multipolar world order based on international laws and the central role of the United Nations. Accordingly, it requires the policy-making elites in Beijing and Moscow to agree tacitly to start from what they are able to do and on what has been agreed. [15]

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**ՀԵՏԱԶՈՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ ՉԻՆ-ՌՈՒՍԱԿԱՆ ՀԱՄԱԳՈՐԾԱԿՑՈՒԹՅԱՆ
ՎԵՐԱԲԵՐՅԱԼ ԱՇԽԱՐՀԱՔԱՂԱՔԱԿԱՆ ՀԵՌԱՆԿԱՐԻ
ՏԵՍԱՆԿՅՈՒՆԻՑ**

**Յան Մին-չին, Վան Լի,
Համփրի Ռասսել**

Հիմնաբառեր. Չինաստան, Ռուսաստան, *Realpolitik*, ուկրաինական ճգնաժամ, պատժամիջոցներ, ՆԱՏՕ

Ամփոփում

1990-ական թվականներից սկսած Չինաստանի և Ռուսաստանի միջև սկսվեց ռազմավարական համագործակցության գործընթացը, որի նպատակը ԱՄՆ-ի հեգեմոնիայի դեմ հակակշռի ստեղծումն էր: Երկու խոշորագույն եվրասիական ուժերի համերաշխությունը որոշակիորեն սասանվեց պայմանավորված ուկրաինական ճգնաժամի պատճառով, քանի որ այն հանգեցրեց անկանխատեսելի հետևանքների: Ինչ կարող էր ակնկալել Ռուսաստանը Չինաստանից ԱՄՆ-ի գլխավորությամբ գործող դաշինքի դեմ միայնակ պայքարելու պայմաններում:

Չինաստանը և Ռուսաստանը հակված են խորացնելու իրենց ռազմավարական համագործակցությունը բազմակողմ աշխարհակարգ ստեղծելու նպատակով: Պեկինը գիտակցում է, որ իր առավել էֆեկտիվ ռազմավարական դաշնակից Ռուսաստանին կորցնելու դեպքում կկանգնի ՆԱՏՕ-ի դեպի ասիական-խաղաղօվկիանոսյան տարածաշրջան առաջխաղացման վտանգի առջև: Այդ պատճառով չին-ռուսական ռազմավարական հարաբերություններում Չինաստանը պետք է ընտրություն կատարի և աջակցի բազմաբևեռ աշխարհի ստեղծման հեռանկարին: