

RUSSIA-CHINA RELATIONSHIP IN THE ACTUAL GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

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***Abstract:** This article presents the relationship between Russia and China in the modern world, with the current challenges and how these have taken a turn after the start of the war in Ukraine. Although from the beginning of the conflict, China was mostly neutral and evasive, it seems to have changed its position recently, despite the fact that was not openly stated. The purpose of this paper is to show what changes have taken place, how they came about and future consequences.*

***Keywords:** Geopolitics, Peace and Conflict Studies, International relations, Security and Defense*

Introduction

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China refused to condemn the war and even abstained from voting in the Security Council (UN)¹. It was not well seen by America and the international community, which hoped and asked a much firmer and decisive stand in condemning the war.

China's rise as a global economic power has reshaped the geopolitical landscape. More than 50 years ago, U.S. President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger secretly traveled to China to meet with ailing leader Mao Zedong, a daring act that changed the geopolitical dynamics of the superpower rivalry. The initiative was to encourage China to become more involved in the rest of the world.

China and the Soviet Union were communist allies, but they were so at odds that Mao feared a Soviet invasion. The visit of Richard Nixon laid the groundwork for Beijing's opening to the world and the establishment of

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¹ Michelle Nichols, Humeyra Pamuk, "Russia vetoes U.N. Security action on Ukraine as China abstains", Reuters, 26 February 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-vetoes-un-security-action-ukraine-china-abstains-2022-02-25/>, accessed on: 24.03.2023

full diplomatic relations in 1979², and the two countries became allies, facing off against the Soviet Union until its collapse in 1991.

The nature of the relationship has changed over time. Today, the diplomatic relations between China and the United States are complicated and their economies are intertwined as they engage in a battle for technological supremacy. The reasons for these changes range from increasing geopolitical tensions to environmental risks. The trade war President Donald Trump launched against China in 2018 has damaged U.S.-China relations. In addition to massive tariffs on U.S. imports from China, the Trump administration has taken a number of measures to curb China's technological rise.

Regarding European and UK multinational companies, they became suspicious of China influence on their economies given the rapid increase in Chinese acquisitions of high value-added companies and critical infrastructure. Beyond China's appetite for strategic goods, European policymakers are increasingly concerned about China's influence in the media, education, and other areas. They also worry about misinformation and even political interference. Despite growing mistrust on both sides, trade flows between the U.S., the EU and China continue to increase. In 2022, China was the third largest partner for EU exports of goods (9.0 %) and the largest partner for EU imports of goods (20.8 %)³.

China continues to expand its state-led economic model, with many sectors still insulated from foreign competition and lacking reciprocity. The lack of cooperation during the pandemic, which caused significant disruption to the China-focused supply chain and increased inflationary pressures, its zero COVID-19 policy and its increasing belligerence in relation to Taiwan with military exercises around the island have further eroded Western confidence in China. The international community must come to terms with Chinese support for Russia, at least in terms of presentation. China's drive to build global influence - a 'global South' allied

² Office of the Historian, “*Address by President Carter to the Nation*”, Department of State, Washington, 15 December 1978, available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d104>, accessed on: 24.03.2023

³ Eurostat, “*China-EU - international trade in goods statistics*”, February 2023, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=China-EUinternational_trade_in_goods_statistics, accessed on: 24.03.2023

not only with China but also with Russia - poses a threat to the international liberal order.

On the other side, Russia, despite the Ukraine crisis and the resulting cooling of relations with the West, it has taken a central role in recent years, both in the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue, which concluded with an agreement in July 2015, and in Syria, where Moscow intervened militarily in September 2015, providing decisive support to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the country's civil war, which has been ongoing since 2011.

In general, Russia's image as a relatively reliable partner has been permanently undermined, and Moscow has increasingly turned to cooperation with China. China has always been viewed by Moscow with partial suspicion: as an important economic partner and, at the same time, as a threat to Russia's traditional influence in Central Asia and to the reassertion of its status as a great power, which fell into crisis after the collapse of the USSR. On the other hand, economic opportunities - especially given the rapid deterioration of Russia's economic situation following the imposition of various sanctions measures by the West - led to the signing of important agreements in the energy sector⁴.

1. Building ties

Over the past decade, China has built closer ties with Russia, another centralist autocracy, to challenge U.S. hegemony⁵. Three decades ago, Beijing and Moscow were economically equal. Today, China is the economic powerhouse, while Russia provides the military know-how to modernize China's armed forces.

It seems that the „intimate” relationship between Xi and Putin began in 2013 in Bali, at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit, on Putin's birthday, when Xi presented himself with a cake while the Russian leader pulled out a bottle of vodka. *“I've never established such relations or*

⁴ Alicia Garcia Herrero, *“China and the West: growing apart as geopolitical tensions grow”*, Bruegel, 5 October 2022, available at: <https://www.bruegel.org/blog-post/china-and-west-growing-apart-geopolitical-tensions-grow>, accessed on: 24.03.2023

⁵ Stephen Fidler, Michael R. Gordon, *“Russia, China Challenge U.S.-Led World Order”*, Wall Street Journal, 21 February 2023, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-china-challenge-u-s-led-world-order-3563f41d>, accessed on: 24.03.2023

made such arrangements with any other foreign colleague, but I did it with President Xi” Putin told the Chinese CCTV broadcaster in 2018⁶. On the other hand, Xi stated “*No matter what fluctuations there are in the international situation, China and Russia have always firmly taken the development of relations as a priority*”; “*He is my best, most intimate friend*”⁷.

Xi has stuck to those words, even after Putin invaded Ukraine just over a year ago. Chinese officials have avoided criticizing Russia, and they wouldn't even call it a war, while repeating Putin's narrative that NATO expansion was to blame.

The 2022 Beijing Olympics brought the two heads of state together, and according to some U.S. officials and Western intelligence agencies, China has asked Russia to delay its invasion of Ukraine until the end of the Olympics⁸, a claim that has been denied by the Chinese government, even though the timing is quite convenient. Russia may have learned from past experience, when its 2008 invasion of Georgia, which took place during the Summer Olympics in Beijing, angered Chinese officials, or in 2014, when its immediate annexation of Crimea wiped out any prestige and recognition it could have gained by hosting the Winter Olympics in Sochi.

The current close relations between China and Russia are a remarkable departure from history, in which the more powerful neighbour often took advantage of the weaker country. In the 19th century, the Russian Empire forced China to cede territory and money to European powers. The 1858 Treaty of Aigun and the 1860 Treaty of Peking forced China to cede about 1 million square kilometers to the Russian Empire. The Sino-Sovietic

⁶ Nectar Gan, „*Why Xi Jinping's the man for me: Vladimir Putin highlights birthday party with 'good friend' from China as sign of growing closeness*”, South China Morning Post, 6 June 2018, available at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2149585/why-xis-man-me-putin-highlights-birthday-party-good>, accessed on: 24.03.2023

⁷ Reuters Staff, “*China's Xi awards 'best friend' Putin friendship medal, promises support*” Reuters, 8 June 2018, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-russia-idUSKCN1J41RO>, accessed on: 24.03.2023

⁸ Edward Wong, Julian E. Barnes, “*China Asked Russia to Delay Ukraine War Until After Olympics, U.S. Officials Say*”, The New York Times, 2 March 2022, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/02/us/politics/russia-ukraine-china.html>, accessed on: 24.03.2023

Split resulted in large scale conflict between the two communist powers until 1980⁹. After the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations in 1989, China and Russia officially settled their long-standing border disputes, and Moscow began to express support or neutrality on sensitive Chinese issues such as Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang.

Since then, relations between the two countries have become increasingly close, culminating in a joint statement signed by the leaders on February 4, 2022, days before the invasion of Ukraine. The joint statement affirmed that "Russia-China relations are superior to the political and military alliances of the Cold War era." It added: "Friendship between the two states has no borders, there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation"¹⁰.

There its not all sunshine and roses in this alliance as both parts have different interests in Asia and the Arctic area. Since Russia still considers former Soviet countries as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, as part of its sphere of influence, it "accepts" the presence and involvement of Beijing¹¹. After the Belt and Road Initiative, China's trade with central Asia increased in a way that easily replaced Russia. Since the start of the war between Russia and Ukraine, new economic agreements have been signed between China and Central Asian countries, and new major infrastructure has been confirmed. China's increasing trade with Central Asia indicates Beijing's growing influence. In the first half of 2022, trade with Kazakhstan¹² was three times higher than

⁹ China Power Team, "How Has the China-Russia Relationship Evolved?" China Power, May 10, 2022, Updated May 12, 2022, available at: <https://chinapower.csis.org/history-china-russia-relations/>, accessed on: 24.03.2023

¹⁰ President of Russia, "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development", 4 February 2022, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770?s=08>, accessed on: 24.03.2023

¹¹ Paul Stronski, Nicole NG, "Cooperation and Competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 February 2018, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/28/cooperation-and-competition-russia-and-china-in-central-asia-russian-far-east-and-arctic-pub-75673>, accessed on: 24.03.2023

¹² Assem Assaniyaz, "Trade Turnover Between Kazakhstan, China Reaches Record-Breaking \$11 Billion For First Half-Year", The Astana Times, 15 August 2022, available at: <https://astanatimes.com/2022/08/trade-turnover-between-kazakhstan-china-reaches-record-breaking-11-billion-for-first-half-year/>, accessed on: 24.03.2023

in the first half of 2016, while trade with Uzbekistan in the first six months of 2022 was 32.5% higher than in the same period in 2021. The \$15 billion agreement between China and Uzbekistan¹³ and the confirmation of the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railroad line are two breakthroughs that demonstrate China's growing economic influence in Central Asia. The CKU railroad, which will provide an important alternative to the Russian route¹⁴, is an example of how China is expanding its power at Russia's expense.

It is impossible to know if China's purpose is to replace Russia, but that is certainly not a realistic goal, as most of the Central Asia states rely on Russia from many points of view. As a result of Western sanctions, the volume of trade between Russia and its former satellites seems to be increasing. Investments in Uzbekistan increased in 2022 with 37% and the volume of investments exceeded 10 billion dollars¹⁵. As for Kyrgyzstan, the volume increased by 42% in 2022¹⁶. Also, most of the immigrants from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan working in Russia contribute to their country GDP by 33% and 34%, respectively¹⁷. The countries in the Central Asia are massively dependent on Russia for food, wheat, clothes. In addition, Russia is a transit country for Central Asian trade and

¹³ TASS Staff, "Uzbek leader, Xi sign deals worth \$15 bln on sidelines of SCO summit", TASS Russian News Agency, 15 September 2022, available at: <https://tass.com/world/1507977>, accessed on: 24.03.2023

¹⁴ Joanna Lillis, "China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan sign landmark railroad deal", Eurasianet, 15 September 2022, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-sign-landmark-railroad-deal>, accessed on: 28.03.2023

¹⁵ KUN.UZ Staff, "Trade turnover between Uzbekistan and Russia may reach \$8.5 billion by year end", KUN.UZ, 24 October 2022, available at: <https://kun.uz/en/news/-2022/10/24/trade-turnover-between-uzbekistan-and-russia-may-reach-85-billion-by-year-end>, accessed on: 28.03.2023

¹⁶ inozPress.Kg, "Trade between Kyrgyzstan and Russia grows", 3 November 2022, available at: <http://inozpress.kg/en/11184-2/>, accessed on: 28.03.2023

¹⁷ Press Release, "Remittances to Reach \$630 billion in 2022 with Record Flows into Ukraine", The World Bank, 11 May 2022, available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/05/11/remittances-to-reach-630-billion-in-2022-with-record-flows-into-ukraine>, accessed on: 28.03.2023

Kazakhstan's oil exports¹⁸. Russia is the main security provider in the region, although the campaign in Ukraine is not an example of this and has a major impact on the Russian-speaking governments of Central Asia.

Regardless of the problems Russia may now face, it's still a military power with influence in Central Asia. As for China, it's possible that it'll continue to expand its economic ties and infrastructural development in the region to Russia's detriment. As happened when China pushed to establish itself as a state close to the Arctic and presented its vision of a "Polar Silk Road," and when Russian prosecutors charged a Russian Arctic expert with treason in 2020 for passing secret information to China¹⁹.

So far, China and Russia have managed to disentangle competition in these areas and strengthen their relationship despite their turbulent history. Although China and Russia have long attempted to portray themselves as equal partners, this narrative is becoming more and more challenging to uphold given the rising power imbalance between the two. Russia is destined to be a less valuable partner in fighting Western influence as it stagnates or even collapses, and China continues to build its national power. In the event that Russia feels disrespected or treated like a junior partner, China's expanding advantage over Moscow might possibly intensify existing tensions and mistrust between Beijing and Moscow. Putin needs Xi and wants to show the West that it is not isolated, that a large and powerful country like China is on its side.

2. A challenge for American led world order

Relations between Moscow and Beijing have not changed since the start of the war in Ukraine. Xi and Putin continue to present themselves as close allies, strategic partners who are jointly trying to create a new, more democratic and just world order to replace the U.S. led one.

A key element of the current situation is the absence of any reference to the war in Ukraine until recently, or, more generally, to legitimate

¹⁸ Ashutosh Pandey, "*Germany: How does its Kazakh oil deal benefit Russia?*", DW, 3 January 2023, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-how-does-its-kazakh-oil-deal-benefit-russia/a-64849621>, accessed on: 28.03.2023

¹⁹ Reuters Staff, "*Russia accuses scientist of treason for passing secrets to China – lawyer*", Reuters, 15 June 2020, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-china-scientist-idINKBN23M12P>, accessed on: 28.03.2023

Russian concerns about the country's security²⁰ from the Chinese side. On the contrary, the Russian press release explicitly mentions the war in Ukraine and "condemns the provocative steps taken by U.S. and their satellites on issues concerning China's fundamental interests"²¹ (the island of Taiwan, which Beijing considers an integral part of the territory of the People's Republic of China).

In 2022, after the war in Ukraine and due to Western sanctions, Russia became China's second largest supplier of crude oil, after Saudi Arabia with 1.7 million barrels per day, meaning 17 percent of China's imports and 35 percent of Russia's exports²².

In terms of gas delivered through pipelines, Russia was China's second-largest supplier after Turkmenistan, with 15.5 billion cubic meters, accounting for 15 percent of Russian exports and 25 percent of Chinese exports²³. Yet, Russia delivers ten times less gas to China than it supplied to Europe in 2021²⁴.

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "*Forging Ahead to Open a New Chapter of China-Russia Friendship, Cooperation and Common Development*", 20 March 2023, available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/-202303/t20230320_11044359.html, accessed on: 28.03.2023

²¹ The State Duma, "*Leaders of the State Duma factions met with Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress*", 9 September 2022, available at: <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/55208/>, accessed on: 01.04.2023

²² Andrew Hayley and Muyu Xu, "*Saudi Arabia Stays Top Crude Supplier to China in 2022, Russian Barrels Surge*", Reuters, 20 January 2023, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/saudi-arabia-stays-top-crude-supplier-china-2022-russian-barrels-surge-2023-01-20/#:~:text=3%20minute%20read,by%20-Janane%20Venkatraman>, accessed on: 01.04.2023

²³ "*Russia's Gas Supplies to China via Power of Siberia Hit 15.5 bcm in 2022, Says Novak*", TASS, 16 January 2023, available at: <https://tass.com/economy/1562675>, accessed on: 01.04.2023

²⁴ Russia Briefing, "*China-Russia Trade Breakdown and Future Development Trends*", Russia Briefing, 9 March 2023, available at: <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/china-russia-trade-breakdown-and-future-development-trends.html/>, accessed on: 01.04.2023

With 68.1 million tons of coal delivered, Russia was China's second-largest coal supplier after Indonesia. This represented 32% of Russian exports and 20% of China's imports²⁵.

After Australia, Qatar, and Malaysia, Russia was China's fourth-largest LNG (Liquefied natural gas) supplier, supplying 6.5 million tons, which represented 10% of China's imports and 20% of Russia's exports²⁶.

In total, in 2022, China imported \$81.3 billion worth of LNG, pipeline gas, coal, and oil from Russia, an increase from \$52.8 billion in 2021²⁷.

Russia and China edge closer to deal on a second Siberian pipeline after Power of Siberia that is already in use. The third, Far Eastern line is in phase of development²⁸.

Oil, gas, but also semiconductors, microchips, 5G equipment and heavy industrial machines are the basis of trade between the two countries, which value this commercial partnership as profitable for both. Russia adopted renminbi as currency for some of its international reserves, overseas trade and some personal banking services as it moves toward China in the face of Western sanctions²⁹.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has and will certainly have an economic impact on the entire global economy, including China's efforts to build the New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor-a rail link between

²⁵ Reuters Staff, "China's coal imports from Russia fall in Dec, but up 20% in 2022", 20 January 2023, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/chinas-coal-imports-russia-fall-dec-up-20-2022-2023-01-20/>, accessed on: 01.04.2023

²⁶ Hou Ruining, "Overtaking China, Japan Returns to Being the World's Largest LNG Importer", Jiemian, 31 January 2023, available at: <https://m.jiemian.com/article/8819247.html>, accessed on: 01.04.2023

²⁷ Max Seddon, Joe Leahy, "Xi Jinping-Vladimir Putin talks highlight Russia's role as 'junior partner' to China", Financial Times, 21 March 2023, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/73d50de6-53e8-4bf6-adf9-8cf108f82ca1>, accessed on: 01.04.2023

²⁸ David Rogers, "Russia to invest almost \$100 bn in gas pipelines to China", Global Construction Review, 15 February 2023, available at: <https://www.globalconstructionreview.com/russia-to-invest-almost-100bn-in-gas-pipelines-to-china/>, accessed on: 01.04.2023

²⁹ Anastasia Stognei, "Russia embraces China's renminbi in face of western sanctions", Financial Times, 26 March 2023, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/65681143-c6af-4b64-827d-a7ca6171937a>, accessed on: 01.04.2023

China and Europe that runs through Kazakhstan, Russia and ends at the border Belarus- Poland³⁰- which is not passing near a war zone.

Abstention from the vote on the U.N. General Assembly resolution that condemns Russia's aggression might also result in long term economic consequences. At the same time, the US and European markets are more profitable for China than Russia is. Another important blow that could bring its burgeoning economy to a halt is that, as it happened not long time ago, the prices of energy, gas, petroleum raised so much that consumers didn't have economies left to spend on Chinese goods as they needed to fulfil their basic needs³¹.

In addition to natural fuels, China may have interests in Russian weapons, but as it stands, it appears that it is China that provides drones to its ally, not the other way around³². Beijing has grown in importance as a military, diplomatic, and economic pillar for Russia's war effort.

Along with conducting joint military drills, the two sides have jointly attacked the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Beijing is set out on a more sophisticated debate calling for a stronger China's role in global rule-making and debates about shared values and good governance. China's claims for a high degree of democracy may seem unconvincing, absurd, or even dangerous, but they call for absolute sovereignty, non-interference, a more pluralistic international discourse, and a rejection of American criticism³³.

An interesting fact is that, as mentioned in the beginning, apart from Central Asia, China has become a major player in the Gulf region. In March, it brokered a diplomatic move to resume diplomatic ties between

³⁰ OBOReuropa, "*Belt and Road Europe*", available at: <https://www.oboreuropa.com/en/beltandroad/one-belt/>, accessed on: 01.04.2023

³¹ Andreea Brinza, "*Putin's War Has Killed China's Eurasian Railway Dreams*", Foreign Policy Magazine, 1 March 2022, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/01/belt-road-initiative-new-urasian-land-bridge-china-russia-poland/>, accessed on: 01.04.2023

³² Paul Mozur, Aaron Krolik, Keith Bradsher, "*As War in Ukraine Grinds On, China Helps Refill Russian Drone Supplies*", The New York Times, 21 March 2023, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/21/business/russia-china-drones-ukraine-war.html?auth=login-google1tap&login=google1tap>, accessed on: 01.04.2023

³³ Jason Li, "*Conflict Mediation with Chinese Characteristics: How China Justifies Its Non-Interference Policy*", STIMSON, 27 August 2019, available at: <https://www.stimson.org/2019/conflict-mediation-chinese-characteristics-how-china-justifies-its-non-interference-policy/>, accessed on: 07.04.2023

Iran and Saudi Arabia³⁴. This is not China's first foray into the Middle East scene, in 2022 on the first Arab-Chinese summit in Riyadh announced China's strategy of working with the Gulf countries to build a common future³⁵.

The summit comes in the light of developments on the international stage, starting with the withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East, through the war in Ukraine, and ending with Sino-American tensions seeking to contain China as a strategic adversary of the United States as per the recently approved US National Security Strategy³⁶.

China has also made statements about other regional issues. Referring to Yemen, the Chinese president praised Saudi Arabia's initiative to end the war and acknowledged Saudi Arabia's efforts and initiatives to promote dialogue between Yemeni sides.

This agreement goes beyond the borders of individual countries. This is a major turning point in a rivalry that has the potential to tear the region apart and change the face of the Middle East. At the same time, it is also an achievement that highlights China's diplomatic prowess and brings it to the international stage. The country, which never missed an opportunity to attack Washington and has proven itself to be an "honest and credible intermediary," as noted by Chinese foreign affairs chief Wang Yi; he added: "The world is not only about Ukraine", "There are many issues related to peace and people's lives that require the attention of the international community"³⁷.

³⁴ Sarah Dadouch, John Hudson, Claire Parker, "Iran and Saudi Arabia set to restore ties after mediation by China", The Washington Post, 10 March 2023, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/10/saudi-iran-diplomatic-ties-restored/>, accessed on: 07.04.2023

³⁵ Nadia Helmy, "The significance of China- Arab summit: Building a new world order", Moderndiplomacy, 6 January 2023, available at: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/-2023/01/06/the-significance-of-china-arab-summit-building-a-new-world-order/>, accessed on: 07.04.2023

³⁶ The White House, "National Security Strategy", 12 October 2022, Washington, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>, accessed on: 07.04.2023

³⁷ Consulate General of The People's Republic of China in Johannesburg, "Wang Yi: Saudi-Iranian Dialogue in Beijing is a Victory for Peace", 10 March 2023, available at: <http://johannesburg.china->

Americans, who have been protagonists in the Middle East for more than 70 years, suddenly find themselves on the sidelines of a scene that captures momentous change. A long-time ally of Riyadh but with no diplomatic ties with Iran in decades, the United States could not act as an intermediary between the two countries. But while the White House has officially welcomed the restoration of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Democratic government officials have weighed in on Beijing's role in the scope and reading of the deal³⁸. This shows that America's influence in the region is waning.

The war in Ukraine also gave the People's Republic of China room to operate in Central Asia, but Russia's declining presence came at the cost of potentially destabilizing an already troubled geopolitical quadrant, leaving a blank space that needs to be filled.

The clash has limited America's ability to pursue targets, particularly with regard to the Iran nuclear deal.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has shifted the balance of the world and adversely affected Washington's regional goal. The war in Ukraine has soured relations between Russia and the United States and, to some extent, Sino-American relations, complicating the already troubled negotiations with Iran.

The People's Republic of China has postponed negotiations in the Middle East to improve its position in international dispute resolution. In fact, Beijing had already presented a peace plan for the war in Ukraine, in which it was actually quietly pushing the principles guiding its foreign policy. Beijing seems to be sending a clear message to Americans, that diplomatic activity clearly demonstrates the changing distributive elements of international and regional systems. The Middle East has been the quadrant in which Washington has had an undisputed advantage in managing the regional balance since the 1990s. Currently, the Russian presence in Syria, the alliance with Iran, and the economic ties between

consulate.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/zgyw/202303/t20230313_11039691.htm, accessed on: 07.04.2023

³⁸ Jon Gambrell, "Iran, Saudi Arabia agree to resume ties, with China's help", AP NEWSs, 11 March 2023, available at: <https://apnews.com/article/saudi-arabia-iran-diplomatic-ties-2f80bb71a995910cb4b172e5dbec3526>, accessed on: 07.04.2023

Beijing and the geopolitical players in the Persian Gulf are eroding Washington's hegemonic posture.

The deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran will not end the confrontation, it will only lower its level. At the same time, it promotes a certain image of the actors involved. China emphasizes its ability to influence international affairs and its diplomatic capabilities. Iran has managed to gain external legitimacy and Saudi Arabia is reaffirming its elevated regional stance thanks to Iranian instability to maintain the relative advantage it has gained in the short term.

In any case, while China can challenge Washington on the diplomatic component of international politics, the military component of the Middle East remains moot for the time being. Americans, who still have a large number of military bases in the region, remain a major security provider.

China's initiative for peace in Ukraine, a 12-point plan presented at the end of February³⁹, appears to Western analysts as a challenge to U.S. hegemony and a project for a new world order shared by Beijing and Moscow.

According to the Ambassador and International Affairs expert, Francesco Bascone: *“Beijing is concerned with averting a lasting crisis in the international order, gaining recognition as a rational force, and strengthening beneficial economic ties with the West. Only China can exert strong pressure on Putin to end the war of aggression if it wants to. But China has no intention of putting out fires for the West at this point, sticking to the cross-border alliance with Russia it declared before the conflict erupted and hoping for ceasefire negotiations”*⁴⁰.

The same expert states that the conflict in Ukraine would have many benefits for China as it undermines US hegemonic claims, depletes NATO and the US arsenal of conventional weapons. Also, the development of China-Russia relations into a vassalage, providing an ample supply of

³⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, „*China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis*”, 24 February 2023, available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html, accessed on: 07.04.2023

⁴⁰ Francesco Bascone, “*L'incerto fattore Cina nella guerra in Ucraina*”, Aspenia online, 8 March 2023, available at: <https://aspeniaonline.it/lincerto-fattore-cina-nella-guerra-in-ucraina/>, accessed on: 07.04.2023

Russian hydrocarbons at cheap prices. In the event that Ukraine loses, it would demonstrate the futility of US assistance, open the door for Taiwan to submit, and encourage isolationist tendencies among American voters⁴¹.

In last years, China has adopted a more assertive and aggressive diplomatic style, recently threatening U.S. with consequences over the shooting of the ‘spy balloons’ over American territory and after the United States Navy sailed a destroyer around the disputed Parcel Islands in the South China Sea for the second day in a row⁴².

The Russian invasion of Ukraine teaches Taiwan and China vital lessons. Beijing's aircraft spent the fourth consecutive day in the Taiwanese Air Defense Identification Zone on October 2021, establishing a new record at 56 aircraft incursions in a day, in what appeared to be a show of force in a continuation of the People's Republic of China's National Day celebrations. On January 2022, using a remarkable 39 aircraft—34 fighter jets, one bomber, two electronic warfare planes, and two intelligence collecting planes, made its largest raids since October 2021⁴³. More recently, on 9th April 2023, China simulated attacks on key targets in Taiwan and surrounding waters, after the meeting between Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen and US House Speaker, Kevin McCarty⁴⁴.

Pew Research Center did a study on March 2022 to measure the American perceptions of China. The study's findings show that most Americans believe there is a serious issue with relations between China and Russia; that they view China as a superpower and a threat while viewing

⁴¹ *Ibidem*

⁴² David Rising, “China threatens consequences over US warship's actions”, AP NEWS, 24 March 2023, available at: <https://apnews.com/article/us-china-destroyer-south-china-sea-5f761c49179f622b8c296885c46a2a80>, accessed on: 07.04.2023

⁴³ Helen Davidson, “China sends largest incursion of warplanes into Taiwan defence zone since October”, TheGuardian, 24 January 2022, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/24/china-sends-largest-incursion-of-warplanes-into-taiwan-defence-zone-since-october>, accessed on: 07.04.2023

⁴⁴ Eric Cheung, Larry Register and CNN Beijing Bureau, “China carries out ‘simulated’ precision attacks on Taiwan targets”, 10 April 2023, available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/09/asia/china-taiwan-simulated-attacks-military-drills-day-two-intl-hnk-mil/index.html>, accessed on: 29.04.2023

Russia as an enemy; two in three believe the United States to be the world's top military power⁴⁵.

Relations between Taiwan and China took an alarming turn after then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited the island in August 2022. Beijing has denounced Ms Pelosi visit as "extremely dangerous". As response, China has launched a series of military exercises, including ballistic missile launches, focused on the six threat zones around Taiwan, three of which overlap the island's territorial waters⁴⁶.

Taiwan's comfort is particularly dependent on the US-led world order, and US allies can and will defend Taiwan. These factors force Taiwan to reassess its current and future national defense⁴⁷. The West, distracted by Russia's recent aggression in Ukraine, may be less effective in responding to the emerging conflict.

In the Russian case, personalization has reached paroxysmal rates. By calling Putin "my best friend," Xi is undermining China's impartiality more than unverified rumours about alleged military aid to Moscow. To rebalance the scales, the 26th of April 2023, Xi spoke with Zelensky on the phone and as a result, an Ambassador was sent to Beijing and a Special Representative of the Chinese Government to Kiev. On the same day, China, India, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Brazil voted in favour of a UN resolution that acknowledge Russia's aggression against Ukraine⁴⁸. China is playing a tricky balancing act, trying to save a face and maintain its partnership with Russia, while at the same time protecting its access to Western markets and

⁴⁵ Christine Huang, Laura Silver, Laura Clancy, "*China's Partnership With Russia Seen as Serious Problem for the U.S.*", Pew Research Centre, 28 April 2022, available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/04/28/chinas-partnership-with-russia-seen-as-serious-problem-for-the-us/>, accessed on: 29.04.2023

⁴⁶ David Brown, "*China and Taiwan: A really simple guide*", BBC News, 6 April 2023, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-59900139>, accessed on: 29.04.2023

⁴⁷ Hilton Yip, "*Taiwan Is Rethinking Defense in Wake of Ukraine Invasion*", Foreign Policy Magazine, 28 February 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/28/taiwan-defense-ukraine-invasion/>, accessed on: 29.04.2023

⁴⁸ Jorge Liboreiro, "*China and India vote for UN resolution with a reference to Russia's 'aggression' against Ukraine*", Euronews, 2 May 2023, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/05/02/china-and-india-vote-for-un-resolution-with-a-reference-to-russias-aggression-against-ukra>, accessed on: 05.05.2023

finance. The point is that Beijing has much more to lose than Moscow, in case that global tensions escalate.

The meeting of the foreign ministers of Iran and Saudi Arabia on April 6, 2023, in China, is China's most recent accomplishment. It appears that steps were taken toward the reopening of consulates and embassies⁴⁹.

Looking at the big picture and in order to understand the common interests of these two great powers, the subject BRICS cannot be ignored. BRICS, the alliance between Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa aims to promote peace, security, development and cooperation, similar to G7. One of their goals is to de-dollarize global financial markets, which would have significant implications for U.S. national security. The United States relies on the dollar's dominant currency status to reliably pursue coercive policies and sanction its opponents. An increasingly de-dollarized world will reduce the ability of the United States to change the behaviour of its adversaries and may thus increase threats to US national security⁵⁰.

The current G7 share has dropped to 30%, while the current BRICS five provide 31.5% of the world's GDP. With a combined world population of 41%, is estimated that by 2030, the BRICS will account for more than 50% of the world's GDP⁵¹, as more countries want to join it.

The BRICS coordination has relaunched the two projects, BRICS Plus (new members) and BRICS Outreach (enhancing external cooperation), in order to address requests for membership and/or collaboration with the alliance that have been made by numerous states on various continents, from Latin America to Africa, from the Mediterranean to South-East Asia.

⁴⁹ AlJazeera, “*Foreign ministers of Iran, Saudi Arabia meet in China*”, 6 April 2023, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/6/foreign-ministers-of-iran-saudi-arabia-meet-in-china>, accessed on: 05.05.2023

⁵⁰ Zongyuan Zou, Mihaela Papa, “*Can BRICS De-dollarize the Global Financial System?*”, Cambridge University Press, 24 February 2022, p.2, available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/0AEF98D2F232072409E9556620AE09B0/9781009014625AR.pdf/can-brics-de-dollarize-the-global-financial-system.pdf>, accessed on: 05.05.2023

⁵¹ Chris Devonshire-Ellis, “*The BRICS Has Overtaken The G7 In Global GDP*”, Silk Road Briefing, 27 March 2023, available at: <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/-2023/03/27/the-brics-has-overtaken-the-g7-in-global-gdp/>, accessed on: 05.05.2023

Serghei Lavrov claimed that Algeria⁵², Argentina, and Iran had all submitted applications for BRICS membership. It is already known that Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and Afghanistan are also interested, in addition to Indonesia, which is anticipated to submit a formal application for membership at the upcoming G20 summit in Bali⁵³. Kazakhstan, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Senegal, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates are other candidates for membership. The future presence in the BRICS of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia is very striking, two oil-producing countries traditionally linked, for better or worse, to the industrialized West.

Contrary to many predictions, the BRICS has managed to remain active and consolidate in recent years, intensifying both internal cooperation and external cooperation. With the BRICS, we are faced with an important coordination between states that play a leading role on the international stage. The summits of the past few years—Moscow 2020, New Delhi 2021, and Beijing 2022—were preceded and followed by numerous meetings at the most varied levels, including those of ministers, specialists, businesspeople, academics, and others.

BRICS are making concrete steps to build their own original monetary system that will help to increase stability and balance in the global financial markets. The BRICS are moving forward with the creation of their own common currency, common investment reserves, and a multiplicity of reciprocal agreements regarding the use of national currencies. Many emerging and developing states outside of the coordination are particularly supportive of this development. In addition to their Reserve Fund (CRA) and Development Bank (NDB), the BRICS have recently established a number of significant organizations, including the Insurance Pool⁵⁴ in case

⁵² Silk Road Briefing, “*Algeria Applies To Join BRICS*”, 8 November 2022, available at: <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2022/11/08/algeria-applies-to-join-brics/>, accessed on: 05.05.2023

⁵³ ⁵³ Chris Devonshire-Ellis, “*Indonesia, Hosting The G20 Next Month Is Also Eying BRICS Membership*”, Silk Road Briefing, 23 October 2022, available at: <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2022/10/23/indonesia-hosting-the-g20-next-month-is-also-eying-brics-membership/>, accessed on: 05.05.2023

⁵⁴ The Economic Times, “*BRICS nations agree to create \$100 billion forex pool*”, 7 July 2015, available at: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/finance/brics-nations-agree-to-create-100-billion-forex-pool/articleshow/47978331.cms>, accessed on: 05.05.2023

of problems with dollar liquidity, the BRICS Exchange Alliance, and a program to enhance trade relations called "Financial Trade Promotion". A strong impulse toward intensifying these initiatives has been provided by the rising of international tensions, which have resulted in Western sanctions against Russia and to the loss of many trust-building components among the key players in global development.

More nations have begun to accept transactions in yuan since the Xi-Putin deal in 2014 that permitted them to trade using their own currencies through the platform of the Shanghai Oil and Natural Gas Exchange. China has been pushing for the adoption of the petroyuan, and Iran, Venezuela, Iraq, and Russia are all involved in non-dollar trading to lessen the dominance of the petrodollar. The Gulf Cooperation Council nations of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will fully utilize the Shanghai Petroleum and National Gas Exchange as a platform for conducting yuan settlement of oil and gas trade⁵⁵.

China wants to reduce the dependency on dollar, to limit the exposure of the dollar risk, to avoid sanctions and to reduce the need to hold large amounts of US dollars in its foreign exchange reserves. De-dollarization will increase China's power in the global financial system, but it might also cause issues for smaller, weaker nations and instability in the system as a whole.

The shift to petroyuan is not simple in any case because of the strict control of Beijing. Foreign investors are not attracted because the yuan is not fully convertible, is fixed daily, prone to intervention and subject to capital controls.

The U.S. dollar is still dominant in the global system as for now and is unlikely that will be replaced anytime soon. De-dollarization is a secular tendency that has resulted from the aggregation of numerous modest legislative changes meant to promote non-dollar settlements. It seems improbable that the process of de-dollarization will be accompanied by

⁵⁵ Reuters, "China to use Shanghai exchange for yuan energy deals with Gulf nations – Xi", 9 December 2022, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/chinas-xi-tells-gulf-nations-use-shanghai-exchange-yuan-energy-deals-2022-12-09/>, accessed on: 05.05.2023

broad-reaching measures as part of a major de-dollarization strategy that signifies a visible turning point in the decline of the US dollar hegemony⁵⁶.

Conclusions

According to some observations, Moscow is turning more and more toward Chinese suppliers, while before the conflict, its imports were more diverse. Very often, Russian market is totally dependent on the dragon market. The strong connection between convenience and survival is what might scare U.S. and Europe. This could be one of the reasons why Emmanuel Macron and Ursula von der Leyen did a visit to Xi Jinping. The already famous declaration of Macron about Europe that must not be “caught in crises that are not ours”⁵⁷, with reference Taiwan, made the Beijing leader offer greetings and time and ignore von der Leyen.

With its document “US Hegemony and Its Perils” published in February 2023, China states that “The hegemonic, domineering, and bullying practices of using strength to intimidate the weak, taking from others by force and subterfuge, and playing zero-sum games are exerting grave harm. The historical trends of peace, development, cooperation, and mutual benefit are unstoppable. The United States has been overriding truth with its power and trampling justice to serve self-interest. These unilateral, egoistic and regressive hegemonic practices have drawn growing, intense criticism and opposition from the international community”; „China opposes all forms of hegemonism and power politics, and rejects interference in other countries' internal affairs. The United States must conduct serious soul-searching. It must critically examine what it has done, let go of its arrogance and prejudice, and quit its hegemonic, domineering and bullying practices”⁵⁸.

These assertions appear to suggest that China is unwilling to accept the US hegemony and its methods.

⁵⁶ Zongyuan Zuo, Mihaela Papa, *Op.cit.*, p. 66

⁵⁷ Gregorio Sorgi, “EU: Macron and von der Leyen were united in the room with China's Xi”, POLITICO, 11 April 2023, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-says-macron-von-der-leyen-were-united-in-china-beijing-taiwan-mamer-unilaterally-change/>, accessed on: 05.05.2023

⁵⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “US Hegemony and Its Perils”, February 2023, available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/-202302/t20230220_11027664.html, accessed on: 05.05.2023

With the war in Ukraine, the world as we know it took a turn that is challenging to reverse or return to the previous state.

China-Russia relation became stronger even if in the past there were tensions. Western sanctions accelerated the process and the friendship between the two. None of them seem open to accept requests or threats from the Western world, as the Chinese Ambassador in Russia Zhang Hanhui said: “*The West is not in a position to give instructions to China, and even more so does not have authority to throw responsibility on it*”⁵⁹.

The coincidence of interests that links Russia and China is causing the United States and the European Union to face their own challenges. If the EU on its borders is unable to independently manage the conflict that has been raging in Ukraine for nine years and must turn to NATO for protection, the United States appears to be in even more trouble in the Pacific Ocean, particularly in the section of the China Sea. While diplomatic channels are available in Europe to avoid the crisis from turning into a complete war, China has issued a very precise and unreachable threat in the Pacific region: Beijing must regain full sovereignty over Taiwan⁶⁰.

In an ongoing show of force, Russia and China are testing the reflexes of the West and determining its capacity to respond in Ukraine and along the shores of Taiwan. The ongoing cooperative naval drills and the ongoing Chinese fighter incursions of Taiwan's airspace cannot be explained in any other way. Because of the continuous threats from North Korea, the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan are unstable, further complicating the situation in the Pacific. As a result, Japan, a close ally of the United States, has revised its constitution to allow for increased military spending and the construction of aircraft carriers.

The Ukrainian crisis strengthened the military cooperation between Moscow and Beijing that had grown over the years without the necessity for an ad hoc treaty. China's promise to support Russia's arguments in Ukraine in all global forums was quickly reciprocated. Beijing has reaffirmed the

⁵⁹ Nicolas Camut, “*China to the West: Don't tell us what to do on Russia*”, POLITICO, 7 April 2023, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-west-dont-tell-us-what-do-russia-ukraine/>, accessed on: 05.05.2023

⁶⁰ Didi Tang, David Charter, “*Taiwan will be China's by 2050, threatens Xi*”, TheTimes, 3 January 2019, available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/taiwan-will-be-china-s-by-2050-threatens-xi-zqgd59mwm>, accessed on: 05.05.2023

view shared by Moscow that the West's provocation in extending NATO to encompass Ukraine will only escalate tensions.

For its part, Moscow supports Beijing's right to assert its sovereignty over Taiwan and to impose its own laws on the island⁶¹. Russia also favours China's right to rule the atolls in the South China Sea and impose its own legislation in Hong Kong.

It is difficult to make the transition from petrodollar to petroyuan. Because of its strong economy, China has been able to flourish, and its trade with the United States and the European Union is far more substantial than with Russia. An approach to replace the West might be to open towards the Gulf States. In any case, because the two economies markets depend on one another, China and the West are interdependent and linked. Losing such markets is not something China can afford to do in order to support Russia. Is a continuous process, and the future development of the problem must be monitored. Several nations want to alter the current situation since it appears that the war in Ukraine has flipped the world upside down.

It seems the Sino-Russian cooperation will last for as long as it is beneficial to all parties concerned, just like any other partnership. Very different goals, tactics, and interests that are occasionally in conflict, are hidden behind Xi and Putin's handshakes. For now, the United States and commerce are the only two lowest common denominators.

Moving ahead, China will want to keep its strategic alliance with Russia intact while limiting any negative effects on its reputation. But, this cost-benefit analysis might be altered, for instance, if the Ukraine conflict harms Moscow and further erodes China's relations with Europe. Sino-Russian relations could then start to deteriorate if and when Putin becomes too much for Xi to handle.

⁶¹ Reuters, „*Kremlin says China has every right to conduct Taiwan exercises, France cannot mediate in Ukraine*”, 10 April 2023, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/kremlin-says-china-has-every-right-conduct-taiwan-exercises-france-cannot-2023-04-10/>, accessed on: 05.05.2023



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