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The China-Russia partnership and the Ukraine war: aligned but not allied

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China and Russia maintain a strategic partnership rooted in shared opposition to the U.S. and liberal democracies, but their relationship is shaped more by pragmatism than trust. While Putin and Xi declared a "friendship without limits" before Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, China has since avoided repeating the phrase. Their cooperation remains strong, yet historical tensions, diverging priorities, and mutual distrust prevent a formal alliance.

China's claims of neutrality in the Ukraine war are undermined by its economic and political support for Russia, its selective criticism of Western military aid, and its silence on North Korea's involvement. Beijing promotes peace rhetoric but does not offer any concrete proposal and provides negligible humanitarian assistance. Meanwhile, the 2024 North Korea–Russia alliance creates additional challenges, as it contradicts China's stated positions and risks further destabilizing East Asia, strengthening regional US alliances.

For Europe, expecting China to mediate or distance itself from Russia is unrealistic. Despite

significant EU-China trade, Beijing has shown no inclination to influence Putin.

Moving forward, the EU must adopt a firm and clear-sighted approach in its dialogue with China:

- **Reaffirm Core Principles** – The EU must consistently stress the fundamental importance of upholding the UN Charter, Ukraine's sovereignty, and territorial integrity, emphasizing the direct security risks for Europe.
- **Expose China's Double Standards** – Brussels must challenge Beijing's self-proclaimed neutrality and call out its contradictions, demanding that China refrain from criticizing countries that legally support Ukraine while tacitly backing an illegal aggressor.
- **Adopt a Holistic Strategy** – The EU must avoid compartmentalizing its relationship with China. Instead of treating the war in Ukraine separately from other political and trade matters, Brussels should pursue a holistic approach, integrating security, political, and economic considerations—just as China does in its own diplomatic strategy.

THE LIMITS OF THE "LIMITLESS FRIENDSHIP"

Just over two weeks before Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, President Vladimir Putin traveled to Beijing to attend the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics. During his visit, he held a bilateral meeting with

Xi Jinping, which resulted in the publication of the *Joint Statement on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development*.¹

At the time, Putin and Xi described their relationship as a “friendship without limits.” However, the joint statement did not explicitly mention this phrase or their bilateral ties. Instead, it presented an in-depth articulation of their shared vision for the global order.

Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, China refrained from repeating the “limitless friendship” rhetoric, yet both countries continued to advocate for a reformed international system—one they see as dominated by the United States and shaped by Western values they regard as biased. As stated in the February 4th joint statement, China and Russia pledged “to promote genuine democracy,” in contrast to what they called Western “democratic standards’ [that] prove to be nothing but flouting of democracy and go against the spirit and true values of democracy.”²

No alliance but a ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’

There is an ongoing and vivid debate in Europe about the so-called China-Russia “alliance” or alliance in the making. However, if we define an alliance as a partnership based on a mutual defense clause, the China-Russia relationship does not meet this criterion and is unlikely to become one. Two key reasons support this assertion: first, there is no alliance treaty or mutual defense agreement between Beijing and Moscow; second, opposing formal alliances has been a cornerstone of the PRC’s foreign policy since its founding.

This aligns with the mainstream consensus, articulated as early as 2008 by Bobo Lo in *Axis of Convenience*,³ that the China-Russia partnership “falls well short of strategic cooperation, which implies not only a common sense of purpose across the board, but also the political will and coordination to translate broad intent into meaningful action”.⁴ In a 2023 paper for the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri), Lo further described China and Russia as “strategically autonomous actors.”⁵

Yet, the absence of a formal alliance does not mean that the China-Russia partnership is weak or unsustainable. Rather, it is a relationship driven by pragmatic interests rather than trust and shared values.

Beijing and Moscow do share significant common ground. Both oppose U.S. strategic dominance, the Western-led international order, NATO, and liberal democracy as a whole. These points of convergence are subtly reflected in their February 4th Joint Statement. Another key similarity between Xi and Putin is their shared model of governance—authoritarian, nationalist, and ultra-conservative.

However, their interests are not fully aligned. They have competing priorities and diverging views on Central Asia, the Arctic, the future of BRICS, and the reform of the international system. Historically, their bilateral relations were marked by conflict and territorial disputes from the late 19th century until the early 1990s. Even today, deep-seated mistrust persists between the two sides, often surfacing in private discussions with Chinese international relations scholars.⁶

CHINA’S DOUBLE STANDARDS ON UKRAINE

From the outset of the war, Beijing has claimed neutrality and positioned itself as a constructive actor. It has consistently called for a ceasefire and peace talks, justifying its neutrality by asserting that it has not provided military support to either belligerent.

Unpacking the ‘neutrality’ claim

Beyond the rhetoric, China’s claim to neutrality does not hold. Beijing refers to the “Ukraine crisis” rather than acknowledging it as a “war”. It emphasizes a “complex historical context” and expresses understanding of Russia’s “legitimate security concerns”, yet it avoids recognizing the “invasion” of Ukraine—an act that goes far beyond a simple security concern. Although Beijing formally upholds the UN Charter, it has refrained from holding Russia accountable for violating international law, Ukraine’s sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Instead, it has consistently blamed the United States and Europe for instigating the war, portraying Ukraine as a pawn manipulated by Western powers.

This blatant double standard shatters the “neutrality” narrative. Given China’s limited strategic interest in the conflict, its initial neutrality stance made sense—Beijing has more to lose than to gain by becoming entangled in a European war. However, true neutrality would require refraining from taking sides, avoiding condemnation of

those assisting the victim, and not showing leniency toward the aggressor.

This double standard becomes even more glaring in light of North Korea's involvement in the war. While China has repeatedly accused the U.S. and Europe of "pouring oil on fire" by supplying Ukraine with military and financial aid, it has remained conspicuously silent regarding Pyongyang's delivery of ammunition and more than 10,000 troops to Russia. Officially, Beijing has merely stated that it does not interfere in Russia-North Korea relations.

Yet, these contradictions and inconsistencies reveal China's discomfort with the war. While Beijing supports Russia politically and blames the West, it has not fully endorsed Moscow's rhetoric. For instance, China continues to recognize Ukraine's sovereignty within its 1991 borders, including Crimea and Donbas (at least it has not stated otherwise). It has also opposed (albeit quietly) the use of nuclear weapons and has avoided crossing the Rubicon of providing lethal military aid—an action that would trigger U.S. sanctions.

China's role in supporting Russia's war effort remains a contentious issue in Europe. While Beijing has not officially provided direct military assistance, it is undeniably propping up Russia's economy by purchasing vast quantities of oil and supplying raw materials, industrial machinery, technologies, and electronic components—including semiconductors. Many of these goods fuel Russia's defense industry, enabling Moscow to sustain its war effort in Ukraine.

So far, neither the EU nor the U.S. has considered this level of economic and technological support as crossing the threshold into direct military aid. However, several Chinese private companies have been sanctioned for providing dual-use technologies, such as drones, that have ended up on the battlefield in Ukraine.⁷

A Constructive stakeholder?

A closer look at Beijing's concrete actions to help resolve the conflict further undermines its claim of playing a "constructive role." While China has repeatedly stated the need for peace talks, its efforts have remained largely performative, lacking substantive action.

Since the war's outbreak, Beijing has published no fewer than four position papers on Ukraine, yet these

documents consist primarily of broad statements rather than concrete proposals:

- China's Five-Point Position on the Current Ukraine Issue, February 26, 2022⁸
- China's six-point initiative for preventing a large-scale humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, March 7, 2022⁹
- China's 12-point Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis, February 24, 2023¹⁰
- Xi Jinping's Four principles to prevent the Ukraine crisis from spiraling out of control and to restore peace at an early date, April 16, 2024¹¹

Beijing also dispatched its Special Representative on Eurasian Affairs, Li Hui, to Europe twice. However, these diplomatic tours yielded no tangible results—for obvious reasons. First, Li Hui was a questionable choice from the outset. Having served as China's ambassador to Moscow for a decade, he is widely regarded as pro-Russian. Second, he arrived in European capitals echoing Russia's narrative while offering no substantive proposals.

On 23 May 2024, China and Brazil jointly published a six-point proposal on the "Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis,"¹² which included:

- No expansion of the battlefield, no escalation, no provocation;
- Support an international peace conference recognized by both Russia and Ukraine;
- Increase humanitarian assistance and prevent a humanitarian crisis on a larger scale;
- Oppose the use of WMDs, particularly nuclear, chemical and biological weapons;
- Oppose attacks on nuclear power plants;
- Enhance international cooperation.

Following this proposal, China and Brazil convened the "Friends of Peace" meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2024, gathering representatives from 15 Global South states.¹³

While the initiative was a positive step, no further efforts have been made to organize the proposed "international peace conference". Moreover, President Zelenskyy has openly accused Beijing of actively undermining other peace efforts. He specifically alleged that China attempted to pressure Global South countries into not attending the *Summit on Peace in Ukraine*, held in Switzerland in June 2024.¹⁴

China has also repeatedly called for humanitarian assistance, yet its actual contributions remain minimal—amounting to roughly €2.2 million in early 2022. By comparison, the European Union has provided €1 billion, while EU member states have contributed an additional €2.6 billion in humanitarian aid alone.¹⁵

Finally, in terms of diplomatic engagement, there is a stark imbalance between Beijing’s deep ties with Moscow and its near-total lack of interaction with Kyiv. Since February 2022, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin have met five times—through state visits or multilateral summits—while Xi has spoken to Volodymyr Zelenskyy only once, in a single phone call on April 26, 2023.

Xi Jinping’s visits to Russia	22-24/10/2024	BRICS summit in Kazan
	20-22/03/2023	State visit
Vladimir Putin’s visits to China	16-17/05/2024	State visit
	17-18/10/2023	Belt and Road Forum in Beijing
	04/02/2022	Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Olympics + bilateral meeting

China’s Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, has not visited Ukraine. Dmytro Kuleba, then Ukraine’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, made his first trip to China only in July 2024. However, instead of being received in Beijing, he held a three-hour meeting with Wang Yi in Guangzhou. Meanwhile, four months earlier, in April 2024, Russia’s Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, traveled to China, where he was granted an audience with President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing.¹⁶

THE NORTH KOREA–RUSSIA ALLIANCE: CHINA’S DELICATE POSITION

China’s stance on the alliance treaty signed between North Korea and Russia in June 2024, as well as Pyongyang’s military involvement in the Ukraine war, remains ambiguous. Some argue that this new axis could enhance trilateral coordination with Beijing and that China benefits from North Korea supplying military aid that it cannot provide itself.

However, while Chinese officials and experts refrain from commenting—insisting that sovereign nations are free to form their own partnerships¹⁷—this alliance does not serve China’s interests. Instead, it places Beijing in a precarious position for three key reasons.

First, North Korea’s military support for Russia starkly contradicts Beijing’s rhetoric about not “fueling the conflict.” This highlights China’s double standard, as it condemns one side while turning a blind eye to its allies’ actions.

Second, the alliance accelerates the interconnection between the European and Northeast Asian security theaters. As a result, it prompts closer coordination between European and Asian democracies, South Korea and Japan in particular. It also heightens security concerns in Seoul and Tokyo, fueling military buildups, renewed debates on nuclear armament, and stronger alliances with the United States, as well as expanded security partnerships with other regional and extra-regional nations.

Third, North Korea’s support for Russia is likely to be reciprocated with Russian assistance to Pyongyang’s military programs, particularly in ballistic missile development and space technology. This would significantly enhance North Korea’s military capabilities and further destabilize the Korean Peninsula.

In sum, the North Korea–Russia alliance could have unpredictable consequences in East Asia in the coming months and years, posing a significant risk of destabilization—even for China.

WHAT’S IN FOR EUROPE?

China’s stance on Russia and the war in Ukraine has remained consistent and is unlikely to change. As of early 2025, Vladimir Putin finds himself in a favorable position on the battlefield, while Donald Trump has initiated bilateral talks with him, sidelining the EU and even Ukraine.. Europe should not expect China to turn its back on Moscow. While the two countries are not formal allies, their strategic partnership remains robust, and their opposition to Western democracies is deeply entrenched. The use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine has often been considered a red line for Beijing, yet China has never explicitly stated this. Even if Putin were to go so far as to use nuclear weapons, it would not necessarily

prompt China to oppose Russia—it would merely refrain from offering support.

Against this backdrop, European leaders have repeatedly displayed naïveté by portraying China as a potential “mediator” and referring to the *12-Point Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis* as a “Chinese peace plan”—a term that China itself never used. Figures such as President Emmanuel Macron of France (April 2023), President Charles Michel of the European Council (December 2022), Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany (November 2022), and Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez of Spain (March 2023) have given undue credit to China’s claimed “neutrality” and have naturally failed to engage Beijing in a mediation role it never intended to assume. Despite the European Union’s trade with China reaching €744 billion in 2024¹⁸—compared to just €240 billion with Russia¹⁹—Beijing has shown no willingness to accommodate Europe’s interests or to exert pressure on Putin to help end the war in Ukraine.

That said, the EU must adopt a firm and clear-sighted approach in its dialogue with China. First, the EU must consistently stress the fundamental importance of upholding the UN Charter, Ukraine’s sovereignty, and territorial integrity, emphasizing the direct security risks for the Union. Second, it must expose China’s double standards and false neutrality, demanding that Beijing refrain from criticizing countries that legally support Ukraine while tacitly backing the illegal aggressor. Third,

the EU must avoid compartmentalizing its relationship with China. Instead of treating the war in Ukraine separately from other political and trade matters, Brussels should pursue a holistic approach, integrating security, political, and economic considerations—just as China does in its own diplomatic strategy.

For the sake of its credibility, the EU must abandon a siloed policy toward China and engage in a unified, strategic dialogue that reflects the full spectrum of its interests.

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