

CHINA'S RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA, INDIA, AND EUROPE

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Executive summary

The Russia-Ukraine war has generated or accelerated negative trends in China's relations with Russia, India, and Europe. By fall 2022, the growing limitations in China's relationships with all three were evident. Russia is now a less reliable partner given the uncertainties over the longevity of President Vladimir Putin's regime; China's rhetorical support of Moscow's justifications for its brutal invasion of Ukraine has heightened European concerns about Chinese influence on the continent; and India's attempts to balance its ties with Russia and the West have not created new openings for Beijing.

Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine war has generated or accelerated negative trends in China's relations with Russia, India, and Europe. Before February 24, 2022, China largely viewed Russia as a stable, reliable partner as the two worked in tandem to undermine U.S. dominance of the international system. While Europe was moving closer to the U.S. position that China posed military, political,

economic, and technological challenges to Western interests, many in Europe were reluctant to harm Chinese investments across the continent. India's ties with China were already at a low point due to the 2020 Sino-Indian border crisis.

By fall 2022, however, the growing limitations in China's relationships with all three were evident. Russia's power had diminished as a result of its colossal failures on the battlefield in Ukraine, and Putin's hold on power had become more tenuous as criticisms mounted from around the globe. Russia's increased dependence on China might benefit the latter generally, but the prospect of regime change in Moscow has created uncomfortable uncertainty in Beijing. Similarly, the Russia-Ukraine war has heightened New Delhi's concerns about Beijing's intentions and actions. Beijing has been unsuccessful in using New Delhi's differences with its Western partners on Russia to build a common stance supporting Moscow's narrative, to create a wedge between India and the United States, to stem the deepening of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad), and to normalize Sino-Indian ties. Meanwhile, Europeans have been shocked and deeply concerned by China's rhetorical support for the brutal and unprovoked Russian assault against Ukraine, and the war has strengthened trans-Atlantic ties.

China-Russia

On February 4, 2022, on the eve of the Beijing Olympics, Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping announced a “no-limits” partnership.¹ But more than nine months after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it is clear that this partnership does have limits. China has supported Russia rhetorically since the war began, claiming that because of provocations by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Russia had no choice but to initiate its “special military operation” in Ukraine. Chinese media have also repeated Russian disinformation about the United States constructing biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine.

Beyond this rhetoric, however, since February 24, 2022, China has given little material support to Russia for the war effort. The United States has warned China that if it were to supply weapons to Russia, Washington would impose sanctions on it. There is no evidence so far that China has supplied any weapons to Russia.² Beijing has been careful not to violate the extensive Western sanctions regime imposed on Russia because China has a far greater economic stake in relations with the United States and America’s Asian and European allies than it does with Russia. For instance, the Chinese technology corporation Huawei has moved some of its staff from Russia to Central Asia over fears of Western sanctions.³

At the September 2022 Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, a much diminished Putin acknowledged that China had “concerns” about the crisis in Ukraine.⁴ Xi did not mention Ukraine in his public remarks and instead said that he and his “dear friend” Putin were committed to making the world a more stable place. While China has clearly been taken aback by the poor performance of the Russian military, Beijing does not want Russia to lose the war. It also wants the West to acknowledge that Russia’s security interests were previously violated and must be taken into account in any postwar settlement. Xi’s nightmare scenario would be a post-Putin government that, after the disastrous Kremlin deci-

sion-making on the war, might reexamine Moscow’s foreign policy choices and seek a rapprochement with the United States, distancing itself from China. Meanwhile, any nuclear use by Russia in the war would also make it difficult for Beijing not to distance itself from Moscow. The White House readout from President Joe Biden’s meeting with Xi at the G20 summit in November 2022 stated that the two leaders “reiterated their agreement that a nuclear war should never be fought and can never be won and underscored their opposition to the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine.”⁵ (Notably, the Chinese readout mentioned reaching agreement on the first part of the sentence but did not include the language on the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine.)⁶

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Even with China and Russia’s current partnership and antagonism toward the United States, the two countries’ visions for world order diverge. China’s notion of a “post-West” order is one where there are still rules but China has a greater say in making those rules and maintains the right and ability to flout the rules as a great power in the Indo-Pacific. By contrast, Putin’s Russia prefers a disrupted world order with no rules, where Russia can flex its muscle. Ultimately, these two visions are irreconcilable.

China-Europe

Since the war in Ukraine began, the China-Europe relationship has rapidly moved toward greater separation. China’s Europe strategy long prioritized trade and investment relations with Europeans,

particularly those working in China, as well as deepening investments in European physical (ports) and digital (telecoms) infrastructure.⁷ However, about five years ago, China's relations with Europe, and the European Union (EU), began to deteriorate significantly. This is because of both increasing U.S. pressure on Europeans to adopt a tougher line on China and increasing recognition that Europeans need to limit China's influence on their economies, societies, and technologies. Meanwhile, with the EU's condemnation of human rights violations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, as well as with Lithuania's stance on Taiwan, China has engaged in aggressive cultural and political "wolf warrior diplomacy" to intimidate European nations as well as to support its global strategy of de-Westernization.⁸

Over a short time span, the relationship between China and the EU has shifted from economic engagement to an increasingly tense standoff. In spring 2019, the European Commission characterized China as a "systemic rival."⁹ A year later, the COVID-19 pandemic underlined European vulnerabilities given the need to procure masks and other personal protective equipment from China, while China's continuing travel closures complicated long-standing business ties. Meanwhile, U.S.-EU dialogue has deepened, including via the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council, but China and the EU have yet to ratify the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment despite the completion of negotiations at the end of 2020.¹⁰ Europeans continue to focus on protecting their critical infrastructures, screening investments, and technological advancements. The criticism leveled at German Chancellor Olaf Scholz for going back to "business as usual" during his visit to China in November 2022 highlights the growing fears in Europe about the threats China poses.¹¹

China's rhetorical support for Russia as it carries out a devastating war on European soil has deepened the rift between Beijing and European leaders. For example, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock linked Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and integrity to the risks Taiwan is facing, while French President Emmanuel Macron, at the 2022 U.N. General Assembly, raised the alarm on the dangers of the international community staying

passive in the face of Russian aggression.¹² Yet because Europe's energy decoupling with Russia has proceeded at a heretofore unimaginable pace — coming at a high economic cost — Europe might avoid further actions that risk harming existing Chinese investments and European long-term security, including vis-à-vis China. Paradoxically, the war in Ukraine has caused China to simmer down its intimidation of Europe, mainly to avoid further solidifying the trans-Atlantic axis.

Absent Russia's war against Ukraine, the United States would have pressed its European allies to devote more attention in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept to the threat China poses. Even so, the document calls out the ways in which China's "stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our [NATO's] interests, security and values," citing a range of tools Beijing uses and arguing that the China-Russia strategic partnership has created "mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order."¹³ NATO members met with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea at the June 2022 summit in Madrid, signaling the importance of the relationship between the alliance and key Indo-Pacific partners. Meanwhile, Chinese efforts to strengthen investment ties across Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe through its "17+1" initiative have been largely unsuccessful, with several nations recently exiting this institutional framework.¹⁴

China-India

Even before the war in Ukraine, China-India ties were, as a former Indian ambassador to China and foreign secretary noted, "at the lowest point since the 1962 [Sino-Indian] war."¹⁵ This is because, in 2020, a border dispute fueled tensions once again, with India accusing China of attempting to use force to unilaterally change the territorial status quo. The crisis involved the first fatal clash between the two militaries in 45 years and is ongoing. It has been an inflection point in the relationship, hardening Indian views of China and leading to changes in India's domestic and foreign policy. New Delhi has deep-

ened ties with partners, such as the United States, that can help balance Chinese power and influence and help build capabilities.

New Delhi has been long concerned about China-Russia relations, but with the potential for escalation in the Sino-Indian crisis, a particularly acute problem would be if Russia went from a neutral stance to a pro-China stance.

The border crisis has also shaped New Delhi's perception and approach toward the Russia-Ukraine war. One concern has been the impact on India's military readiness, given that a significant amount of its frontline military equipment and components comes from Russia and Ukraine. A second concern has been the war's impact on Chinese behavior in Asia, particularly vis-à-vis India; in other words, would Beijing use the moment when the world's attention was on Europe to escalate the Sino-Indian conflict at the border, or would it seek to stabilize relations with India? A third concern has been the war's effect on the Sino-Russian relationship; for instance, would a Russia potentially more beholden to China act at Beijing's behest in ways that adversely affect India? New Delhi has been long concerned about China-Russia relations, but with the potential for escalation in the Sino-Indian crisis, a particularly acute problem (especially given Indian dependence on Russia for defense supplies) would be if Russia went from a neutral stance to a pro-China stance. Therefore, New Delhi has been careful not to do anything that would push Moscow more firmly to Beijing's side. Another concern has been whether the U.S. focus on the European theater would lead to less attention and

resources being devoted to the Indo-Pacific. Finally, the economic impact of the war has implications for India's budget and the capabilities it can acquire to deter or respond to its China challenge.

Regarding the second concern, within a month of the Russian invasion, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi traveled to India.¹⁶ This was seen in part as an attempt to (1) stabilize ties with India given Western criticism of China's backing of Russia and the upcoming 20th Party Congress, (2) fuel — or take advantage of — India's differences with the West on Russia, and (3) urge India to speak with "one voice" along with China and Russia. After all, India, like China, has had concerns about sanctions, having been at the receiving end of them, and about Western weaponization of interdependence.¹⁷ Whatever Beijing's motivations, however, apparently they were not sufficient enough to compel China to attempt to resolve its border crisis or other differences with India.

One oft-asked question is whether a Chinese offer to resolve the border crisis would result in a return to business as usual in the China-India relationship. There is little doubt that the Indian government would like a more stable border situation. It would enable Prime Minister Narendra Modi to focus on the Indian economy, buy time to enhance Indian military capabilities and border infrastructure, host the G20 next year, and avoid the border crisis becoming an issue in his 2024 reelection campaign. However, a sustainable stabilization of the relationship would at the very least require not just disengagement at all the 2020 friction points but also deescalation; and it is unlikely that China would agree to dismantle the infrastructure it has built up near the border in the last two years. Moreover, even if this occurred, New Delhi would not trust Beijing to never again try to change the territorial status quo. Finally, even if India and China were to manage the boundary dispute, New Delhi's concerns about Beijing extend beyond the crisis; the countries have different visions for the region — India believes that China wants a unipolar Asia, and India wants a multipolar one.

Policy implications for the United States

The Biden administration's 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy have defined China as America's "pacing challenge."¹⁸ The NSS states that U.S. foreign policy goals include "out-competing China and constraining Russia."¹⁹ Left to be fleshed out is the administration's management of the potential tension between competing with China while at the same time seeking cooperation on shared challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. These two strategic tracks (competition and cooperation) will shape each other in ways not yet well understood.

Since February 2022, the United States has used sanctions, diplomacy, and military assistance to punish Russia economically, isolate it diplomatically, and weaken it militarily, so that, in the words of U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, "it can't do the kinds of things that it has done in invading Ukraine."²⁰ While talk of weakening Russia does not resonate well in the Global South, the United States and its allies will continue to seek to contain the threat Moscow poses to European security.²¹ If Putin is replaced, any possibilities of creating fissures in the Russia-China relationship through outreach to a new government in Moscow will depend on the nature of the regime that replaces him. While skepticism of any post-Putin government claiming to want to pursue rapprochement with the West would be warranted, there might be an opportunity in that instance to pull Russia away from its alignment with China. Absent a change in government, Putin has tied himself as closely to China as he can, and there is not much scope for altering that fact unless China seeks to pull away from a weakened Russia. If China were to be interested in pulling away, perhaps this would give the United States an opportunity to create a divide between the two countries, although Washington's need to defend of its core interests in the Indo-Pacific would limit what is possible.

Shared, albeit not identical, concerns about China have strengthened U.S.-India ties in recent years, particularly in the defense and security domain. The 2020 border crisis accelerated that trend, and Washington should continue to explore ways to deepen cooperation with India in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. The United States and India will, however, need to ensure that their differences on Russia do not become a major obstacle to this cooperation. For instance, Washington needs to recognize that New Delhi is not going to jettison its ties with Moscow, and New Delhi needs to understand that steps that seem to support or endorse Russia's invasion will heighten concerns in Washington. The two governments should also frankly discuss their assessments of China-Russia relations and the implications for the Indo-Pacific.

The United States should also honestly discuss its China policy with European partners and address their concerns. Washington needs to alleviate any lingering fear that aligning with the United States means joining a policy toward China that is excessively tough and that could potentially provoke a conflict in the Indo-Pacific or unnecessarily harm European economic interests. The Biden administration has done an admirable job working with allies in 2022 after rifts emerged in 2021 over the chaotic Afghanistan withdrawal and the fallout with France over its absence from AUKUS, the trilateral security deal, between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Europeans were relieved that the tone of the U.S. NSS was more nuanced than they feared prior to its release. They have also reacted positively to the administration's success in working with allies to support Ukraine and revitalize NATO and to its renewed use of the term "rules-based order." However, Europe remains nervous about future U.S. policy, given the potential for changes in Congress and the presidency that could weaken bonds across the Atlantic once again and undermine U.S. efforts to build a more coherent trans-Atlantic approach to the China challenge.

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