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**A Comprehensive View of the  
Russia-China Strategic Partnership**

## A Comprehensive View of the Russia-China Strategic Partnership

### Abstract:

The Russia–China strategic partnership has established itself in this century as one of the most significant alliances on the international stage. It is a pragmatic and solid relationship, yet not without vulnerabilities.

It emerged after the dissolution of the USSR and is grounded in the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence', encompassing multiple dimensions: political, energy-commercial, and military-technological. On the political level, both countries coordinate positions in international organisations such as the UN, BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, seeking to promote an alternative to the West. In the energy and trade sphere, Russia has found a market for its hydrocarbons in China, especially after the sanctions imposed by the West in response to the conflict in Ukraine, while Beijing secures supplies and diversifies its sources. Military cooperation takes the form of joint exercises and technology transfers, although it is marked by Russian caution regarding China's growing capacity to compete in the defence systems market.

Nevertheless, the partnership also faces vulnerabilities stemming from historical rivalries, asymmetries of interdependence, divergent strategies towards the West, and regional tensions. From NATO's perspective, this alliance represents a direct challenge to the rules-based liberal international order.

### Keywords:

Russia, China, strategic partnership, international cooperation, asymmetric interdependence.

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## Introduction

The subject of this document is the international relations between Russia and China, currently known as a strategic partnership. In this regard, we ask the following question: what does the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership consist of? In general, what is the state of international relations between the two actors in the first quarter of the 21st century?

To answer the above question, we will develop a comprehensive description of the subject of study, covering the multiple levels or dimensions to which the associative relationship between the two actors extends. However, as we aim for a comprehensive description, we will also study and compile the challenges facing the partnership and the perception of it by third parties, mainly NATO. As our main support tool, we will resort to a literature review, using primary bibliographic sources, such as treaties between the two powers or communiqués from official institutions, as well as secondary sources, such as think-tank analyses, academic studies (journals, monographs, etc.), and the media.

Both the discourse of the powers involved and the current global geopolitical situation have led us to frame the relationship between Russia and China as one of the international partnerships that arouses the most interest in the rest of the world, not only in purely academic terms, but also in the political, commercial-economic and technological spheres, as well as in the field of security and defence. These are precisely the areas of analysis in this paper, with the aim of providing as comprehensive an overview as possible of the link between these two countries.

Despite the many mutual benefits behind each of the levels/dimensions of the Russian-Chinese partnership, the main motivation behind it is to promote an alternative to the world order, which they consider to be imposed by the United States and the West. The partnership between these two countries transcends the mere Asian dimension, which is significant but not decisive, and has the potential to change the world order as we know it.

## Political Dimension

### ***Beginning of diplomatic relations***

Before delving deeper into the analysis of other aspects of the Russian-Chinese partnership, it is important to begin with when these relations began, which brings us to the political dimension and the cooling of tensions experienced during the Cold War, giving rise to the first political agreements.

After decades of high tension between the then Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China — tensions that we will discuss later — a turning point took place that completely changed the relations that had existed until then: the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, giving rise to a new federal republic of Russia and the end of the Cold War. The People's Republic of China saw this as an opportunity to ease the tensions that had built up over the decades, and in 1992, they signed a joint declaration initiating the restoration of diplomatic relations, this time with the new Russian Federation<sup>1</sup>. This marked the beginning of a decade characterised by multiple visits by the presidents of both countries to their respective allies and the signing of ongoing strategic cooperation agreements<sup>2</sup>, thus demonstrating their interest in fostering harmony between them and the beginning of an alliance that has not only lasted to this day without apparent tensions, but which, as events unfold, strives to show that it is growing stronger.

Their cooperation is based on what are known as the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence"<sup>3</sup>: respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each country; mutual non-aggression; non-interference in the internal affairs of other states; equality in relations; and mutual benefit.

By adopting these principles, both countries have managed to enter into a non-conflictual political situation based on cooperation and mutual benefit and not directed against third

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<sup>1</sup> QIMAO, Chen, "Sino-Russian relations after the break-up of the Soviet Union". In G. Chufirin (Ed.), *Russia and Asia: The emerging security agenda*, Oxford University Press, 1999. Available at: <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/books/SIPRI99Chu/SIPRI99Chu.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs China, "Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation", July 2001. Available at: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/qb/202405/t20240531\\_11367098.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/qb/202405/t20240531_11367098.html)

<sup>3</sup> The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence did not arise in the Sino-Russian context, but were established to lay the foundations for India-China relations, and from there China has applied the same model to its relations with various powers, making it one of its main foreign policy instruments.

COLVILLE, Alex, "The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence". China Media Project, 2024. Available at: [https://chinamediaproject.org/the\\_ccp\\_dictionary/five-principles-of-peaceful-coexistence/](https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/five-principles-of-peaceful-coexistence/)

countries, the latter point being of utmost importance, especially from the Chinese perspective. In tangible terms, the application of these five principles can be seen through the following mechanisms<sup>4</sup> :

Firstly, annual political meetings between heads of state and government, and regular meetings between ministers, to follow up on issues of mutual interest. A direct Beijing-Moscow telephone line has also been established between the heads of state. It is worth noting the good personal relationship between Xi Jinping and Putin, which appears to go beyond the political sphere. Xi Jinping has referred to Putin as "his best friend and comrade", and this is demonstrated by the remarkable number of occasions on which the two have met, far exceeding the number of meetings with any other world leader<sup>5</sup> .

**Xi Jinping's Meetings with Select Foreign Leaders**

Country	Leader(s)	Meetings
Russia	Vladimir Putin	41
India	Manmohan Singh, Narendra Modi	19
USA	Barack Obama, Donald Trump, Joseph Biden	17
Germany	Angela Merkel, Olaf Scholz	15
France	François Hollande, Emmanuel Macron	13
Japan	Abe Shinzo, Kishida Fumio	12
Canada	Stephen Harper, Justin Trudeau	6
Italy	Matteo Renzi, Paolo Gentiloni, Giuseppe Conte, Giorgia Meloni	6
UK	David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Rishi Sunak	6

*Note: Includes only one-on-one meetings through March 20, 2023. Excludes telephone calls but includes virtual meetings.*

**Figure1** . Number of meetings between Xi Jinping and world leaders up to March 2023. **Source:** CSIS China Power Project, What Are the Key Strengths of the China-Russia Relationship?, 9 November 2023. Available at: <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-russia-relationship-strengths-benefit/>

The second mechanism would be bilateral coordination for joint work in all other areas (economic, energy, trade, etc.). Coordination is also found in alignment on international issues, offering a coordinated stance and avoiding overlap or contradiction between the powers.

Thirdly and finally, there is the creation of the Chinese-Russian Committee for Friendship, Peace and Development, a non-governmental institution created to deepen the bond

<sup>4</sup> YI, Wang, Ministry of Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China, "A mature and stable China-Russia relationship represents a pioneering effort in forging a new model of major-country relations", 2025. Available at: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbxhd/202503/t20250307\\_11570111.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbxhd/202503/t20250307_11570111.html)

<sup>5</sup> CSIS China Power Project, "What Are the Key Strengths of the China-Russia Relationship?", 9 November 2023. Available at: <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-russia-relationship-strengths-benefit/>

between Chinese and Russian society. They are currently developing economic projects related to the business world and humanitarian projects<sup>6</sup>.

### ***Cooperation in international organisations***

Russia and China share membership in numerous international organisations, ranging from political and economic bodies to those focused on security. As mentioned above, one of the pillars of the partnership between the two countries is to coordinate their stance on international issues, achieving an aligned position that conveys coherence and unity, something that is most evident in the performance of both powers in the international organisations in which they are both present.

Among the organisations in which Russia and China are present, the following three stand out for their relevance and influence both internationally and regionally: the UN, BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

#### *United Nations*

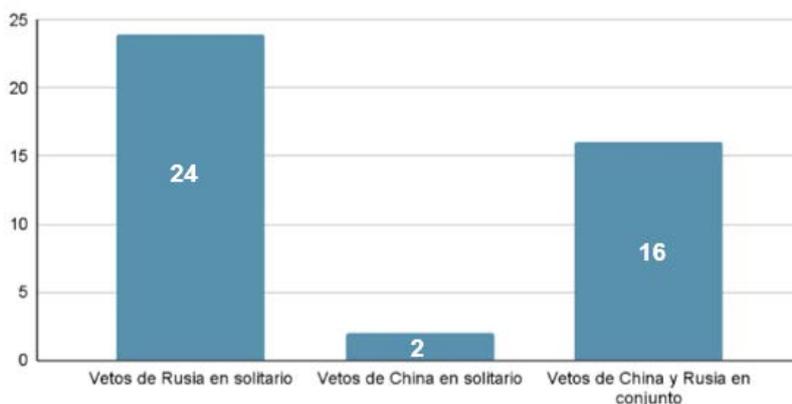
The relevance of their membership lies in their status as permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. Russia and China maintain friendly cooperation and maximum alignment on the issues addressed by the Council. As an example, neither has vetoed a resolution proposed by the other since they joined the forum, yet they frequently vote against other resolutions proposed by the United States (16 times as of February 2025). The following graph shows that China has only exercised its veto twice without Russia, while Russia has exercised that power alone on 24 occasions up to February 2025.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Russian-Asian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RAUIE), "Russian-Chinese Committee for Friendship, Peace and Development", n.d., Available at: <https://raspp.ru/en/company/partnery-i-chleny/russian-chinese-committee-for-friendship-peace-and-development/>

<sup>7</sup> Peace & Security Data Hub, "Security Council Data – vetoes since 1946", 2025. Available at: <https://psdata.un.org/dataset/DPPA-SCVETOES>

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**Graph1** . Figure 2: Occasions on which Russia and China have exercised their veto in the Security Council. **Source:** own elaboration based on data from Peace & Security Data Hub, "Security Council Data - vetoes since 1946", 2025. Available at: <https://psdata.un.org/dataset/DPPA-SCVETOES>

Many of the joint vetoes have been on security issues of great geopolitical interest to one of the two powers, as can be seen in the repeated vetoes on the Syrian issue or on Myanmar.

Date	Record	Record URL	Topic	China	France	United Kingdom	United States	USSR/Russian Federation
24/02/2025	9866		Ukraine	○	○	○	○	⊗
18/11/2024	9786		Sudan and South Sudan	○	○	○	○	⊗
24/04/2024	9616		Non-proliferation	○	○	○	○	⊗
28/03/2024	9591		Non-proliferation/DPRK	○	○	○	○	⊗
22/03/2024	9584		Middle East, including Palestinian question	⊗	○	○	○	⊗
25/10/2023	9453		Middle East, including Palestinian question	⊗	○	○	○	⊗
30/08/2023	9400		Mali	○	○	○	○	⊗
11/07/2023	9371		Middle East (Syria)	○	○	○	○	⊗
30/09/2022	9143		Maintenance of peace and security of Ukraine	○	○	○	○	⊗
08/07/2022	9087		Middle East (Syria)	○	○	○	○	⊗
26/05/2022	9048		Non-proliferation/DPRK	⊗	○	○	○	⊗
25/02/2022	8979		2014 Letter from Ukraine (Ukraine)	○	○	○	○	⊗
13/12/2021	8926		Maintenance of international peace and security	○	○	○	○	⊗
10/07/2020	S/2020/681		Middle East (Syria)	⊗	○	○	○	⊗
07/07/2020	S/2020/657		Middle East (Syria)	⊗	○	○	○	⊗
20/12/2019	8697		Middle East (Syria)	⊗	○	○	○	⊗
19/09/2019	8623		Middle East (Syria)	⊗	○	○	○	⊗
28/02/2019	8476		Venezuela	⊗	○	○	○	⊗
10/04/2018	8228		Middle East (Syria)	○	○	○	○	⊗
26/02/2018	8190		Middle East (Yemen)	○	○	○	○	⊗
17/11/2017	8107		Middle East (Syria)	○	○	○	○	⊗
16/11/2017	8105		Middle East (Syria)	○	○	○	○	⊗
24/10/2017	8073		Middle East (Syria)	○	○	○	○	⊗
12/04/2017	7922		Middle East (Syria)	○	○	○	○	⊗
28/02/2017	7893		Middle East (Syria)	⊗	○	○	○	⊗
05/12/2016	7825		Middle East (Syria)	⊗	○	○	○	⊗
08/10/2016	7785		Middle East (Syria)	○	○	○	○	⊗
29/07/2015	7498		2014 Letter from Ukraine (Ukraine)	○	○	○	○	⊗
08/07/2015	7481		Bosnia and Herzegovina	○	○	○	○	⊗
22/05/2014	7180		Middle East (Syria)	⊗	○	○	○	⊗
15/03/2014	7138		2014 Letter from Ukraine (Ukraine)	○	○	○	○	⊗
19/07/2012	6810		Middle East (Syria)	⊗	○	○	○	⊗
04/02/2012	6711		Middle East (Syria)	⊗	○	○	○	⊗
04/10/2011	6627		Middle East (Syria)	⊗	○	○	○	⊗
15/06/2009	6143		Georgia	○	○	○	○	⊗
11/07/2008	5933		Peace and security in Africa (Zimbabwe)	⊗	○	○	○	⊗
12/01/2007	5619		Myanmar	⊗	○	○	○	⊗
21/04/2004	4947		Cyprus	○	○	○	○	⊗
25/02/1999	3982		FYR Macedonia	⊗	○	○	○	○
10/01/1997	3730		Central America	⊗	○	○	○	○

**Figure2** . List of vetoes by Russia and China in the United Nations Security Council. **Source:** Peace & Security Data Hub, "Security Council Data - vetoes since 1946", 2025. Available at: <https://psdata.un.org/dataset/DPPA-SCVETOES>

## *BRICS*

Sino-Russian cooperation within the BRICS takes on another dimension with regard to the Security Council. While being part of the club of permanent members of the Security Council, Russia and China achieve a direct blockade of the United States and the West, through BRICS they create a parallel forum to the Western bloc represented in the G7. They represent emerging economies in the pursuit of a new global economic order alternative to the prevailing one.

Within the BRICS forum, Russia and China are able to exert direct power over emerging economies, including traditional members — Brazil, India and South Africa — and newcomers — Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Russia's goal, according to statements by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov, is to promote, together with China, the forum's authority as a mechanism for global governance<sup>8</sup>. Two key aspects can be deduced from these words: the 'self-appointed' leadership role of Russia and China within BRICS, and the ambition to make BRICS a player important enough to talk about a 'global governance mechanism'.

## *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)*

This organisation is the regional forum par excellence shared by Russia and China together with India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In fact, it was one of the main foundations for the beginnings of their strategic partnership, which is undoubtedly the driving force behind the organisation's functioning. Both powers, Russia and China, control the decision-making bodies of the SCO, which are composed in proportion to those members that contribute the most to the budget, China and Russia<sup>9</sup>.

The SCO has served to coordinate regional policy in Central Asia and neighbouring regions between the two powers, acting as a counterbalance to regulate competition in the area, as well as a mechanism for resolving tensions over the interests of each of them in the region<sup>10</sup>. Originally, the organisation was designed to address security issues,

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<sup>8</sup> TASS, "Russia, China equally interested in boosting cooperation within BRICS — senior diplomat", 2024. Available at: <https://tass.com/politics/1859451>

<sup>9</sup> ARIS, Stephen. "A new model of Asian regionalism: Does the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation have more potential than ASEAN?", Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

proving highly relevant in mitigating separatist aspirations in many areas of both Russia and China, combating terrorism, and conducting multilateral military exercises<sup>11</sup> .

However, over the years, this cooperation has been replicated in other areas, also encompassing economic, cultural, and humanitarian cooperation. Following the main line of this paper, it can be seen once again that one of the aims of this cooperation is to forge an alternative to the West in the region, offering the members of the organisation a system of international rules, but without being completely limited by them<sup>12</sup> .

### ***War in Ukraine: Perseverance of the partnership***

On 4 February 2022, Putin attended a meeting with President Xi Jinping held in China. A few days before the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, both countries confirmed in a joint statement that "the friendship between the two countries has no limits, there are no prohibited areas of cooperation, and the strengthening of their strategic cooperation is not directed against any third country or affected by the changing international landscape"<sup>13</sup> .

As noted above, one of the principles that define Chinese foreign policy is non-aggression, motivated by the principles of peaceful coexistence. Since the start of the war, China's position has been subject to scrutiny by the rest of the world, demanding that the parties apply diplomatic mechanisms such as negotiation, mediation and dialogue, which it has always advocated<sup>14</sup> .

The reality has been more complex than the application of principles that can be interpreted as theoretical. On the one hand, China has not provided military support to Russia during these years. However, on the other hand, China has not only failed to condemn Russia at any time for its actions, but has even condemned NATO and the United States for provoking Russia<sup>15</sup> . It is in this intermediate position, theoretically complying with its principles of non-interventionism, but close to a fine line of supporting

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<sup>11</sup> CSIS China Power Project. *Op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> ARIS, Stephen. *Op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Kremlin, "Joint statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on international relations entering a new era and global sustainable development", 2022. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>

<sup>14</sup> KHAN, Mehran. "China's five principles of peaceful coexistence", *Modern Diplomacy*, 5 October 2024. Available at: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/10/05/chinas-five-principles-of-peaceful-coexistence/>

<sup>15</sup> FONG, Clara, and MAIZLAND, Lindsay. "China and Russia: Exploring ties between two authoritarian powers", Council on Foreign Relations, 20 March 2024. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-russia-relationship-xi-putin-taiwan-ukraine>

Russia, that China has found the perfect way to ensure continued cooperation with Russia without jeopardising its role as a global negotiator.

In 2023, China released a 12-point plan, which they called a peace plan, that Ukraine and the United States rejected<sup>16</sup>. This plan was preceded by a tour of Europe, ending in Russia, by then-Foreign Minister Wang Yi, suggesting that the publication of the plan was merely a response to China's interest in maintaining its image as a negotiator and silencing Western criticism of its lack of positioning<sup>17</sup>.

Despite China's ambiguous stance, both powers seem to have found a point of strategic convenience in their relationship. Proof of this can be found in the constant statements by official Chinese and Russian government media, as well as the phone calls and meetings between Putin and Xi Jinping, reaffirming the relationship between them, regardless of the international circumstances surrounding this fruitful partnership<sup>18</sup>.

### **Energy-Trade Dimension**

The energy and trade sectors play a key role in the fabric of bilateral relations in the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership, in which complementary interests predominate: Russia, as one of the leading powers in hydrocarbon production, has found in China a strategic partner for the export of gas and oil, while China, with its growing demand for energy and its position as the world's second largest economy, has consolidated Russia as a key supplier.

In turn, bilateral trade has grown steadily, driven by strategic agreements and joint infrastructure projects. In this context, energy and trade cooperation has not only strengthened their economic ties, but has also had significant geopolitical implications for the global balance of power.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> GABUEV, A, "A fortress Russia with Chinese characteristics: a slow-motion geopolitical earthquake", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin meet with the press", 2025. Available at: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202505/t20250509\\_11618129.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202505/t20250509_11618129.html)

### ***Energy cooperation: Gas and oil-***

Energy cooperation has been one of the fundamental pillars of the Russia-China relationship, encompassing a wide range of agreements and collaborative projects in oil and gas supply, nuclear energy and other forms of energy. The Russian Federation, as one of the world's largest producers of hydrocarbons, has found in China a key partner for diversifying its energy market and reducing its dependence on Europe, in a context of Western sanctions and damage to its supply infrastructure in Europe. The Kremlin has even surpassed Saudi Arabia as China's main oil supplier, increasing its exports by 50% compared to 2021<sup>19</sup>. The state-owned Rosneft plays a key role in this relationship, supplying crude oil through long-term agreements with China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC)<sup>20</sup>.

Russia is looking to Asia, and particularly China and India, for gas and crude oil exports. One of the projects that most clearly exemplifies this "friendship" is Power of Siberia, the largest gas pipeline in eastern Russia, covering approximately 3,000 kilometres and requiring an investment of approximately £48 billion to build<sup>21</sup>. According to the agreement signed in 2014 between Gazprom and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), the pipeline will supply 38 billion cubic metres of its 61 billion cubic metre annual capacity to China for 30 years<sup>22</sup>.

In recent years, the increase in Russian gas supplies to China has intensified as a strategy to offset losses in the European market due to Western sanctions. According to recent reports, Gazprom has significantly increased the volume of gas transported through the Power of Siberia pipeline, further consolidating the energy relationship between the two countries<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Columbia University Centre on Global Energy Policy. "Russia surpasses Saudi Arabia as China's top oil supplier", March 2023, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-surpasses-saudi-arabia-chinas-top-oil-supplier>. Date consulted: 31 March 2025.

<sup>20</sup> Le Grand Continent. "Russia becomes China's largest oil supplier", March 2025. Available at: <https://legrandcontinent.eu/es/2025/03/27/economia-rusa-el-gigante-del-gas-gazprom-perdio-12-000-millones-de-euros-el-ano-pasado-casi-el-doble-que-en-2023/>. Date consulted: 15.03.2025.

<sup>21</sup> TRENIN, Dimitri. "US' dual China, Russia containment won't work; governance is key, not ideology," Global Times, March 2021. Available at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1219627.shtml>. Date consulted: 1 April 2025.

<sup>22</sup> MILOSEVICH-JUARISTI, Mira. "Bear and dragon: the strategic link between Russia and China in the post-unipolar international order", EICano Royal Institute, Document ARI 1/2019, 4 January 2019, available at <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/oso-y-dragon-el-vinculo-estrategico-entre-rusia-y-china-en-el-orden-internacional-post-unipolar/>

<sup>23</sup> El Periódico de la Energía. "Gazprom increases gas supplies to China to compensate for losses in the European market," 4 March 2025. Available at: <https://elperiodicodelaenergia.com/gazprom-incrementa-el-suministro-de-gas-a-china-para-resarcir-las-perdidas-del-mercado-europeo/>. Date consulted: 25.03.2025.

Another key project in this cooperation is Power of Siberia 2, which is expected to have a capacity of 50 billion cubic metres per year, increasing the interdependence between the two countries. However, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), China has been reluctant to move forward quickly with this project, prioritising other energy suppliers and ensuring more competitive prices<sup>24</sup>.

Russia, for its part, seeks to increase its exports to the Asian giant to offset the reduction in its sales to Europe following the sanctions imposed for the invasion of Ukraine. In addition, with this second gas pipeline, Russia is strengthening its role as one of China's main gas suppliers at a time when the Asian giant is seeking to diversify its energy matrix.

The third major energy infrastructure project is the Eastern Route gas pipeline, which is currently under development and seeks to further expand Russian gas supplies to China. This infrastructure will increase energy flows through an eastern connection that will strengthen China's energy security and consolidate Russia's position as a key supplier in the Asian market. This project, together with the Power of Siberia and Power of Siberia 2 pipelines, is part of a long-term strategy to ensure energy cooperation between the two countries in a context of geopolitical transformation.

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<sup>24</sup> Global Energy Monitor. "China is rightly delaying the Russian Power of Siberia 2 pipeline," May 2024, available at: <https://globalenergymonitor.org/es/report/china-is-rightly-dragging-its-feet-on-russias-power-of-siberia-2-pipeline/> Date consulted: 31 March 2025.



Figure3 . Map of Power of Siberia 2 and other major gas pipelines. **Source:** Global Gas Infrastructure Tracker, Global Energy Monitor. 2024. <https://globalenergymonitor.org/es/report/china-is-rightly-dragging-its-feet-on-russias-power-of-siberia-2-pipeline/>

In addition, the Arctic has become an important area of energy cooperation between the two countries. Russia has promoted the exploitation of the region's vast energy resources, such as liquefied natural gas (LNG) on the Yamal Peninsula, with financial and technological support from China, as its continental reserves are depleted. Chinese companies such as the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and the China Import and Export Corporation (CEXIM) have invested in projects such as Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG 2, consolidating their presence in Arctic energy development. This cooperation is strategic, as it allows China to secure new energy sources while Russia gains access to alternative investments and markets in the face of Western sanctions<sup>25</sup>.

### ***Energy cooperation: nuclear energy and other forms of energy***

<sup>26</sup>In addition to hydrocarbons, energy cooperation between Russia and China extends to the field of nuclear energy. Russia has been involved in the construction of the Tianwan

<sup>25</sup> KNIPP, Kersten. "China, the United States, Russia and the race for the Arctic". DW. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/es/china-estados-unidos-rusia-y-la-carrera-por-el-%C3%A1rtico/a-72069333>. Date consulted: 01.04.2025.

<sup>26</sup> IBÁÑEZ, Fernando. Nuclear cooperation between Russia and China: Tianwan Project. Global Energy Magazine, 12(4), pp. 67-74.

7 and 8 reactors, developed by Rosatom, which highlights the diversification of energy cooperation beyond hydrocarbons ; and there are currently ongoing projects to strengthen this collaboration.

In recent years, there has also been growing interest in cooperation on renewable energy, hydrogen energy, energy storage and carbon markets<sup>27</sup> . Agreements and joint communiqués in 2024 have reiterated the intention of both countries to deepen collaboration in these sectors, leveraging Russia's potential in renewable energy and China's strength in manufacturing green technologies. While hydrocarbons remain dominant, this diversification indicates a long-term vision for energy cooperation, aligned with global energy transition trends.

### ***Expansion of bilateral trade***

Over the last decade, trade between Russia and China has grown exponentially, reaching record levels. As Milosevich-Juaristi points out, this increase is the result of a mutually beneficial strategy: Russia gains access to machinery, equipment, vehicles, electronics and, increasingly, high-tech and dual-use products, while China secures a stable supply of raw materials, including crude oil, coal, natural gas, timber and metals. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, there has been an increase in Chinese exports of electronic components and other items that could have military applications.

Since 2021, trade between the two countries has increased significantly, exceeding £240 billion in 2023<sup>28</sup> . This growth represents an increase of 26.3% between 2022 and 2023. While the figures for 2024 also indicate a high volume (around £237 billion - £244.8 billion), the growth rate appears to have slowed compared to the previous year<sup>29</sup> .

Trade has benefited from the growing use of the yuan in bilateral transactions, which has reduced dependence on the dollar and mitigated the impact of sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union<sup>30</sup> . In addition, the opening of new trade corridors,

<sup>27</sup> Interfax. "Energy exports from Russia to China up 4% to \$46 billion in H1 – Sechin", July 2024. Available at: <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/104494/>.

<sup>28</sup> Council on Foreign Relations. "China-Russia Relations," January 2025, available at: <https://www.cfr.org/article/china-russia-relations-january-2025>. Fecha accessed 15 March 2025.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> ADJINACOU, Luc José. "China and Russia achieve record trade of €240 billion." Cointribune, January 2025. Available at: <https://www.cointribune.com/es/china-y-rusia-alcizan-un-record-comercial-de-240-000-millones-de-euros/> Date consulted: 25.03.2025

such as the Blagoveshchensk-Heihe cross-border bridge, has reduced transport times and facilitated trade.

Despite the growth in trade, certain asymmetries persist. While Russia mainly exports raw materials, China dominates the export of manufactured goods and advanced technology, i.e. those with higher added value. This situation has raised concerns in the Kremlin about a possible asymmetry in the trade balance.

### ***Benefits and challenges of the energy and trade partnership***

Energy cooperation brings significant, albeit asymmetrical, benefits to both countries. China gains access to energy supplies that are crucial to its growing economy, often at competitive prices, thereby improving its energy security. Participation in Russian projects also gives it access to strategic resources and routes, such as the Arctic. For its part, Russia secures a vital export market for its vast energy resources, especially in the context of restrictions imposed by Western markets, providing it with crucial revenue. Chinese investment and technology are also important for the development of Russian energy projects, particularly in remote regions such as the Arctic.

However, this energy cooperation also faces challenges. There are concerns that China may exploit Russia's dependence to obtain more favourable terms. China's cautious stance on some projects, such as Power of Siberia II, suggests that it prioritises its own strategic and economic interests<sup>31</sup>.<sup>32</sup><sup>33</sup> China's long-term energy transition towards renewable sources could reduce its dependence on Russian fossil fuels, posing a challenge to the long-term sustainability of Russia's energy export strategy. The asymmetry of economic power could also create tensions and challenges in the negotiation of agreements and the distribution of benefits.

Added to this is China's strategy of diversifying its energy suppliers, which seeks to avoid excessive dependence on a single partner. Beijing is not renouncing its agreements with

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<sup>31</sup> MILOSEVICH-JUARISTI, Mira. "Russia and China: a strategic relationship in the 21st century." *Journal of International Studies*, 41(3), 90-110.

<sup>32</sup> RŮŽIČKA, Martin and ROD, Zdeněk. "Sino-Russian military nexus: new strategic shifts. Central European Institute of Asian Studies", January 2025. Available at: <https://ceias.eu/sino-russian-military-nexus-new-strategic-shifts/>. Date consulted: 21.03.2025.

<sup>33</sup> MURRAY, Philip and KEIFER, Daniel. "Russia's China Gamble. Strategic Implications of a Sino-Russian Energy Economy". *Military Review*, November 2021. Available at: <https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/ari128-2024-milosevich-las-raices-de-la-actual-cultura-estrategica-de-rusia.pdf>. Date consulted: 1 April 2025.

countries in the Middle East and Latin America to ensure its medium- and long-term energy security.

The impact of Western sanctions on Russia has also been a determining factor in energy and trade relations. Although China has increased its imports of Russian energy, it has been cautious not to openly violate the restrictions imposed by the United States and the European Union, which could limit the growth of long-term cooperation<sup>34</sup>.

In response to this challenge, the Crink Axis, a coalition between Russia, China, Iran and North Korea, has recently been formed to strengthen the strategic relationship between these countries in response to Western sanctions<sup>35</sup>. This bloc seeks to consolidate an alternative economic structure that reduces dependence on Western financial systems, encouraging trade in national currencies and promoting strategic energy agreements. In this context, Iran and Russia have increased their collaboration with China, ensuring a stable supply of oil and gas to Beijing, while North Korea has found in these allies a way to circumvent the economic isolation imposed by the West<sup>36</sup>. In addition, the use of national currencies in trade has reduced dependence on the dollar, strengthening the economic autonomy of the axis members.

Despite this, the relationship is based on pragmatic interests rather than true long-term strategic convergence. While the four countries mentioned seek to challenge Western dominance, they also maintain independent positions on various fronts of international politics, weakening the future viability of the new axis. In another section, we will continue to delve into the different strategic positions held by Russia and China, as well as their asymmetrical interdependence.

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<sup>34</sup> NG, Kelly and MA, Yi. "How China became the lifeline of Russia's economy after the start of the war in Ukraine," BBC News Mundo, 16 May 2024, available at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cy0l0rrnk8no>. Date consulted: 25.03.2025.

<sup>35</sup>Euronews. "Crink Axis: This is the new coalition that has emerged from the war in Ukraine and Western sanctions," March 2025. Available at: <https://es.euronews.com/2025/03/29/eje-crank-la-nueva-coalicion-en-contra-de-eeuu-y-las-sanciones-occidentales>. Date consulted: 31.03.2025.

<sup>36</sup> WISHNICK, Elizabeth. "Russia-China-North Korea Relations: Obstacles to a Trilateral Axis", Foreign Policy Research Institute, 25 March 2025. Available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/03/russia-china-north-korea-relations-obstacles-to-a-trilateral-axis/>. Date consulted: 01.04.2025.

## Military-Technological Dimension

### *Defence agreements*

There is no formal mutual defence treaty between Russia and China or a full alliance as exists between Western allies within NATO. However, there are some key agreements and collaborations that define their defence ties, which we will discuss below.

#### *Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation (2001)*

It was with this treaty that both parties declared their relationship to be a "strategic partnership," marking the official beginning of the alliance. The treaty also emphasises the five points of Chinese diplomacy mentioned above: respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each country; mutual non-aggression; non-interference in the internal affairs of other states; equality in relations; and mutual benefit. Although it is not an exclusively military agreement, it lays the foundations for broader cooperation, including in defence, with Articles 7 and 9 of the agreement being of particular interest in this regard.

Article 7:

*In accordance with the current agreements, the contracting parties shall adopt measures to increase trust between their militaries and reduce military forces in the border areas. The contracting parties shall expand and deepen confidence-building measures in the military field so as to consolidate each other's security and strengthen regional and international stability.*

*"The contracting parties shall make efforts to ensure their own national security in accordance with the principle of maintaining reasonable and adequate weapons and armed forces."*

*The military and military technology cooperation of the contracting parties carried out in accordance with the relevant agreements are not directed at third countries.*

Article 9:

*"When a situation arises in which one of the contracting parties deems that peace is being threatened and undermined or its security interests are involved or when it is confronted*

*with the threat of aggression, the contracting parties shall immediately hold contacts and consultations in order to eliminate such threats"*<sup>37</sup> .

These articles demonstrate the importance that both States attach to defence, especially measures of mutual trust, transparency and information exchange, border demilitarisation, and military technology transfer, in order to build their relationship of friendship and good neighbourliness. These articles have been implemented over time through joint exercises and sales or transfers of technologies for weapons systems or critical components, resulting in greater military training for both countries and thus actively contributing to the defence of both China and Russia.

Another example of the implementation of this agreement is the strategic security consultations that have been held annually since 2005, where issues of mutual interest are addressed and bilateral military cooperation is strengthened, contributing to enhanced communication between their defence ministries and the coordination of their defence strategies<sup>38</sup> .

### *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)*

Although, as explained above, the SCO is currently primarily a political and economic organisation, it has had a focus on security and defence since its inception. Both Russia and China, as key members, collaborate on various security issues, such as the fight against terrorism, regional stability and arms control. The organisation also promotes military cooperation through joint exercises and intelligence sharing.

### *Joint military exercises*

As stated above, Russia and China regularly conduct joint military exercises, the scale and complexity of which have increased over time. These exercises typically involve land, air and naval forces and aim to improve interoperability between their militaries. These joint operations not only strengthen the interoperability of their armed forces, but also

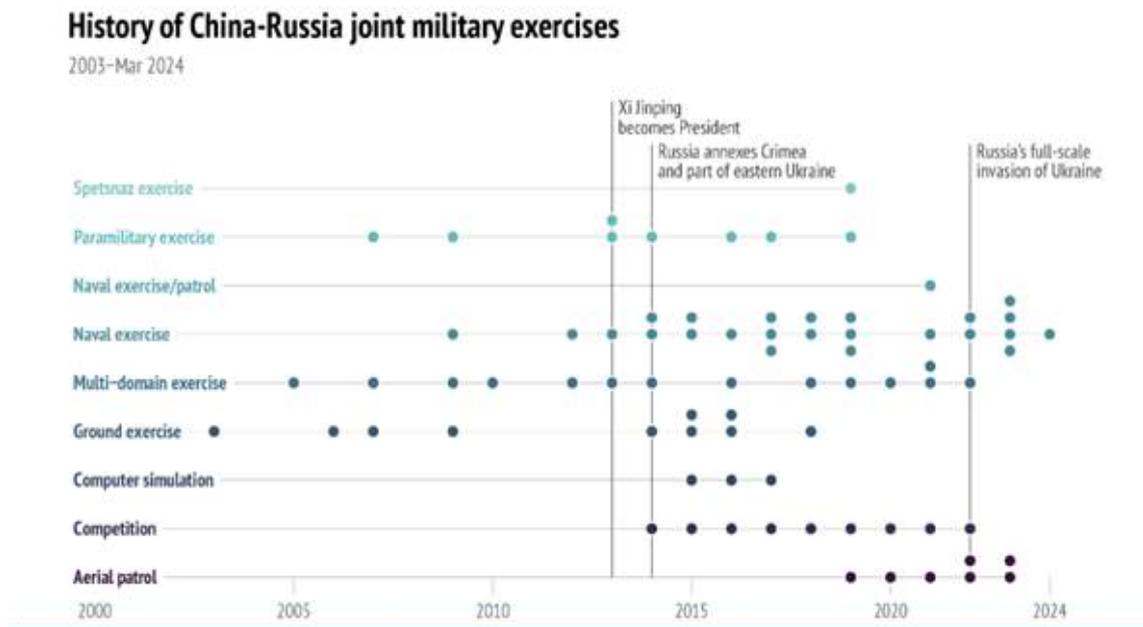
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<sup>37</sup> Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, 24 July 2001, arts. 7 and 9. Available at: <https://constitutii.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/treaty-of-good.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Xinhua. "China, Russia hold annual strategic security consultation," China Daily, 12 November 2024, available at <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/hk/article/597570>.

send clear geopolitical messages to adversaries such as the United States and its Western and Asian allies<sup>39</sup>.

Analysis by the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) shows a clear increase in both the number and complexity of these exercises. Figure 4 shows a break with the previous trend, with a clear increase in the number of exercises coinciding with Xi Jinping's rise to power and, on Russia's part, the annexation of Crimea. On the other hand, there has been a gradual increase in the complexity of the exercises, moving from basic exercises to more integrated joint operations, with the use of mutual air bases or advanced military equipment and regional war simulations.



**Figure 4**. Joint exercises between Russia and China in the period from January 2003 to March 2024. **Source:** European Union Institute for Security Studies, based on various Chinese and Taiwanese media outlets. 3 July 2024, available at <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/rehearsing-war-china-and-russias-military-exercises>.

In recent years, these manoeuvres have shifted to more sensitive regions closer to rivals, such as the South China Sea, the Sea of Japan and, more recently, near Alaska. Beyond the military sphere, these exercises serve as tools of deterrence and strategic pressure, and as such have been used to challenge Western presence in the Asia-Pacific and regions such as the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, as well as to strengthen cooperation with other partners such as Iran and South Africa. China's participation in

<sup>39</sup> ONDREJ DITRYCH, Alice Ekman. "Rehearsing for War. China and Russia's military exercises", European Union Institute for Security Studies, 3 July 2024, available at <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/rehearsing-war-china-and-russias-military-exercises>.

these exercises demonstrates a continued interest in developing military capabilities alongside Russia, especially at a time when the United States and its allies are strengthening their coordination in the region. Although Russian-Chinese forces do not yet reach NATO's level of interoperability, the increase in the scale and scope of their exercises could lay the groundwork for even deeper military cooperation in the future<sup>40</sup> .

### ***Russia-China military-technical cooperation***

Military cooperation between Russia and China in the field of aeronautics dates back to the Second World War, when the USSR supplied China with fighter planes to counter the Japanese invasion. After the communist victory in 1950, this collaboration intensified with the delivery of MiG aircraft and the granting of licences for local production. However, tensions between the two countries in the late 1950s led China to develop its own version of the MiG-21 (J-7) without Soviet authorisation. It was not until the 1990s, after the collapse of the USSR, that relations were re-established with China's purchase of Su-27 and Su-30 fighters, once again consolidating its dependence on Russian technology in military aviation<sup>41</sup> .

Between 2000 and 2011, Russia supplied China with approximately 180 Su-27 and Su-30 fighters, as well as several batches of Su-30MKK and Su-30MK2. In 2015, China signed a £2.5 billion contract to purchase 24 Su-35 fighters, becoming the first foreign buyer of this model. At the same time, in 1996 China obtained a licence to manufacture 200 Su-27SK fighters at the Shenyang plant, built with Russian support. However, only 105 units were assembled before China cancelled the contract, arguing that it had developed its own version, the J-11. Despite this, Russia continued to provide spare parts and technical support for these aircraft.

The export of aircraft engines has been a key pillar in the military relationship between the two countries. Between 2005 and 2016, Russia supplied China with hundreds of RD-93, D-30KP-2 and AL-31F engines for various aircraft, including JF-17 fighters, H6

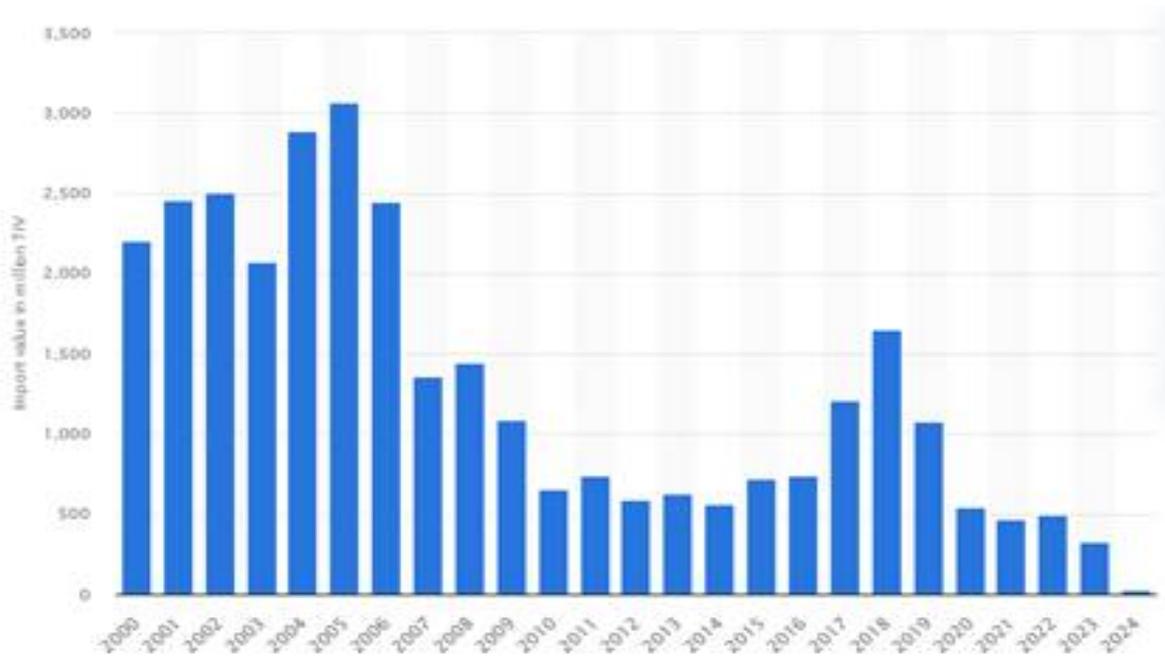
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<sup>40</sup> GORENBURG, Dmitry. (2020). "An Emerging Strategic Partnership: Trends in Russia-China Military Cooperation", George C. Marshall European Centre for Security Studies, 29 April 2020.

<sup>41</sup> KOSHKIN, Roman. "Export of Aviation Equipment In the Russian-Chinese Military-Technical Cooperation", New Defence Order Strategy, 20 August 2021, available at <https://dfnc.ru/en/analytics/export-of-aviation-equipment-in-the-russian-chinese-military-technical-cooperation/>

bombers and Il-76 transporters. In 2012, engines accounted for 90% of Russian military exports to China, consolidating the Chinese aviation industry's dependence in this area. In 2016, cooperation was expanded with an agreement for the supply of spare parts and technical services, valued at more than \$65 million, demonstrating the importance of the military aerospace sector in the relationship between the two countries.

Russian military exports to China declined after 2006, as can be seen in Figure 2, due to several factors: China's dissatisfaction with Russian prices and the poor quality of system maintenance, as well as Russia's concern about China's tendency to copy its technology for its own use and export. Although sales rebounded slightly after 2011 and grew after the Ukraine crisis with the sale of S-400 systems and Su-35 aircraft, military cooperation



**Graph2** . Estimated value of Russian arms imports to China between 2000 and 2024 (in millions of VAT).  
**Source:** Statista 2025 in collaboration with the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

between the two countries has focused more on strategic agreements than on arms sales

Russia currently faces the dilemma of selling advanced technology to China despite the risk of copying or losing sales on the international market while China develops its own systems. Russia's strategy of selling second-tier technology has become obsolete, as Chinese industry has reached a comparable level and now seeks only the most advanced

weapons. In the long term, China will not only further reduce its dependence on Russian weapons, but also become a strong competitor in the global arms market.

This increase in China's national training comes as a result of its interest in reducing its dependence on foreign technology in the defence sector, focusing on domestic production of equipment such as aircraft engines and radars, traditionally imported from Russia, as well as promoting the development of dual-use technologies such as artificial intelligence and semiconductor manufacturing. Xi Jinping's strategy of integrating strategic national systems seeks to foster collaboration between the civilian and military spheres to drive innovation and self-sufficiency in disruptive technologies. To this end, China has strengthened government oversight of strategic sectors and has also created the Central Science and Technology Commission to coordinate innovation development, in line with previous programmes such as *Made in China 2025* and the *2017 Artificial Intelligence Development Plan*.

In addition, the country is promoting cooperation between universities, industries and research centres to accelerate the practical application of research results, especially in defence. Despite restrictions imposed by the United States in its attempt to slow China's advance in high technology, China continues to increase its investment in R&D, with spending exceeding 3 trillion yuan in 2022 and an investment plan of \$1.4 trillion in critical technologies by 2025.

However, this Chinese strategy does not prevent there still being room for collaboration with Russia on defence technologies, as both have overlapping interests and can benefit each other. While China benefits from Russia's extensive experience and knowledge in traditional military technologies, such as combat aviation, air defence systems and submarines, Russia could benefit from technologies in which China has a more dominant position, such as quantum satellite communications, cybersecurity, unmanned aerial vehicles and artificial intelligence<sup>42</sup>.

### **Vulnerabilities and Problems in the Strategic Partnership**

In the previous sections, we have seen a growing strategic partnership between Russia and China that extends to multiple dimensions. Notwithstanding the above, it should be

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<sup>42</sup> RŮŽIČKA, Martin and ROD, Zdeněk. *Op. cit.*

noted that this partnership is not without vulnerabilities and problems. Understanding and assessing the vulnerabilities and problems facing the partnership will give us a more comprehensive view of it, as well as more elements to assess its strength.

In this regard, we would like to highlight that the vulnerabilities and problems we will refer to have been echoed in academic circles. They are often included in analyses of Russian-Chinese relations and serve to support the existence of certain limits to the achievement of a full, unrestricted alliance<sup>43</sup>. In fact, there is a more sceptical academic current regarding the strategic partnership between the two states, which affirms its fragility by highlighting the weaknesses and problems it faces<sup>44</sup>. This sceptical current contrasts with the mainstream current that advocates for a growing strategic partnership, highlighting the potential of common interests and strategic links.

Below, we will outline the vulnerabilities and problems of the strategic partnership, grouping them into four main areas to help us present them in a more orderly fashion.

### ***First area: Historical rivalry and the border issue***

The strategic partnership is a matter of the present rather than the past, because looking back, rivalry predominated. This rivalry was intense during the Cold War years and had ideological overtones, but its roots lie in the era of unequal treaties in the mid-19th century, which gave rise to Chinese territorial claims against Russia.

The term 'unequal treaties' is the name given by historians to the international treaties signed by the Chinese Empire with various industrialised Western powers from 1840 onwards, which, under military coercion, were advantageous to the Western powers and unfavourable to China, including the cession of territory, the settlement of foreigners and commercial concessions, to the point of leaving China in a "semi-colonial" regime<sup>45</sup>. The Russian Empire was a party to those treaties with the Chinese Empire. Taking advantage

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<sup>43</sup> FONTAINE, Richard. "Taking on China and Russia", Foreign Affairs, 18 November 2022, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/taking-china-and-russia>.

<sup>44</sup> MILOSEVICH-JUARISTI, Mira. 2019, *Op. cit.*

BLACKWILL, Robert D. and FONTAINE, Richard. "No Limits? The China-Russia Relationship and U.S. Foreign Policy," Council on Foreign Relations, Council Special Report 99, December 2024, available at <https://www.cfr.org/report/no-limits-china-russia-relationship-and-us-foreign-policy>.

<sup>45</sup> RAMÍREZ RUÍZ, Raúl, "Historia de China Contemporánea" (History of Contemporary China), Síntesis, Madrid, 2018.

of the weakness of the Qing dynasty after the Second Opium War, in 1860 it acquired 1.5 million km<sup>2</sup> in the Amur River region, as well as a series of other concessions.



Figure5 . Map of territories acquired by the Russian Empire at the expense of China after the Unequal Treaties. **Source:** PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José, "The Chinese-Russian strategic partnership continues to enjoy good health", Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Analysis Document 03/2023, available at <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/the-chinese-russian-strategic-partnership-continues-to-enjoy-good-health>

With the advent of the People's Republic of China in 1949, that is, Mao's communist China, Russian, now Soviet, intentions to continue exercising control over China did not disappear, attempting to turn it into a satellite state of their respective bloc in the context of the Cold War. However, Mao was not willing to fall under the Soviet sphere of influence. Moreover, he took advantage of the de-Stalinisation that began in 1956 to accuse the USSR of revisionism and rival it for the ideological leadership of the communist bloc<sup>46</sup>. Among other things, he did not accept Khrushchev's thesis of peaceful coexistence with capitalism and initiated separate diplomatic relations, attracting communist states such as Albania and Cambodia to his side.

China's rebellious nature on the ideological front, coupled with a series of public statements by Mao in 1964 rejecting the borders between the USSR and China as the result of unequal treaties, gave rise to Soviet fears of a possible Chinese land invasion<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> VIANA, Israel. "The lost island of China that almost triggered World War III in 1969," ABC Archive, 2 July 2021, available at [https://www.abc.es/archivo/abci-isla-perdida-china-casi-desata-tercera-guerra-mundial-1969-202106172035\\_noticia.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.abc.es%2Farchivo%2Fabci-isla-perdida-china-casi-desata-tercera-guerra-mundial-1969-202106172035\\_noticia.html](https://www.abc.es/archivo/abci-isla-perdida-china-casi-desata-tercera-guerra-mundial-1969-202106172035_noticia.html?ref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.abc.es%2Farchivo%2Fabci-isla-perdida-china-casi-desata-tercera-guerra-mundial-1969-202106172035_noticia.html). Accessed on 21/05/2025.

<sup>47</sup> ANGUIANO ROCH, Eugenio. "Diplomacy of the People's Republic of China," in *Contemporary China*, E. Anguiano Roch (ed.), pp. 179-284, Colegio de México, 2001.

. Moscow then decided to militarise the border by sending nearly 300,000 soldiers, increasing China's misgivings and creating a real security dilemma between the two actors. Tensions grew, culminating in a series of border incidents, notably the March 1969 clash on Zhenbao Island in the Ussuri River, which formed the border between China and the USSR in the Amur region, resulting in hundreds of Chinese casualties<sup>48</sup> .

During those incidents, there was a real risk of war between China and the USSR, even involving the threat of nuclear weapons. For its part, the disunity between China and Russia was exploited by Nixon's United States to apply the triangular diplomacy designed by Kissinger and win China over to its side. The normalisation of relations between Beijing and Moscow did not take place until the end of the Cold War in 1989, and the border dispute was resolved with the 1991 border agreement, which consolidated the status quo and clarified certain areas under dispute, granting China sovereignty over Zhenbao Island<sup>49</sup> . The resolution of this incident laid the foundation for the subsequent joint declaration of 1992 and for successive agreements, such as that of 2001.

Thus, since the early 1990s, the border dispute has been resolved on paper, but that does not mean that the wound has completely healed. The Chinese Communist Party is first and foremost a nationalist force<sup>50</sup> and believes in historical irredentism, on the basis of which it seeks to recover territories alienated by unequal treaties or that belonged to it in the past<sup>51</sup> . Examples that illustrate this idea are China's efforts to reintegrate Hong Kong and Macao, or China's claim to the archipelagos and islands of the South China Sea based on the historical argument of the 9-point line. For its part, Russia perceives its north-eastern border as particularly vulnerable given the demographic and economic inequality on either side of the border with China<sup>52</sup> . For all these reasons, the border issue may continue to represent a historical stumbling block for the strategic partnership. This issue may even resurface in times of diplomatic crisis.

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<sup>48</sup> VIANA, Israel. *Op. cit.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> RAMÍREZ RUÍZ, Raúl. *Op. cit.*

<sup>51</sup> FUSTER LEAL, Rubén. "The State of the Borders of the People's Republic of China in the Current Context of the New Silk Road," Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Opinion Paper 58/2019, available at: <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=7264355>

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13.

### ***Second axis: Unequal levels of interdependence***

Among the most notable challenges for the strategic partnership is the imbalance between the two actors. Russia remains a power in many respects, but its gap with China is notable at various levels, such as demographic, economic and military<sup>53</sup>. As the 2022 US National Security Strategy points out, China is the only power capable of competing with the United States on an equal footing<sup>54</sup>.

As noted above, the asymmetry between the two is particularly noticeable in the economic and commercial sphere. Economically, while China is a major global power, Russia is only a medium-sized power<sup>55</sup>. China is the world's second largest economy and has businesses and trading partners on a global scale. In contrast, Russia has an economy similar to that of Italy and its commercial influence was mainly based in the EU with the sale of hydrocarbons and raw materials, so that, following the invasion of Ukraine and the barrage of Western sanctions, its foreign trade has been clearly reduced. Since the invasion of Ukraine, in order to overcome the economic and financial siege imposed by the West, it needs China and other emerging economies such as India, with the trade-off of increased dependence on them<sup>56</sup>. Thus, reflecting unequal levels of interdependence, since 2023, China has been Russia's largest trading partner, while Russia is China's sixth largest trading partner<sup>57</sup>.

Focusing on China, its dependence on Russia in other critical areas is not so acute. As indicated, the strategic partnership with Russia is a plus for China's energy security, providing energy resources at affordable prices and with a stable supply, delivered through channels that do not pass through blockable points such as Malacca or Suez. However, China has well-diversified energy sources and suppliers. Although Russia became China's main oil exporter in 2023, 55% of the country's energy is still produced

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<sup>53</sup> BAQUÉS QUESADA, Josep. "The strategic relationship between Russia and China: A geopolitical perspective", *Revista General de Marina*, 274 (5), 2018, pp. 721–730.

<sup>54</sup> The White House, "National Security Strategy", 2022, pp. 8, available at <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/8-November-Combined-PDF-for-Upload.pdf>

<sup>55</sup> CALDUCH CERVERA, Rafael. "Relations between China and Russia: two different strategies and a shared interest," *Strategy Notebooks* (212), 2022, pp. 99-122.

<sup>56</sup> GARCÍA-HERRERO, Alicia and MILOSEVICH-JUARISTI, Mira. "China and Russia. Nationalism, economy and geopolitics", *ICE Journals* (935), 2024, pp. 51-62.

<sup>57</sup> NG, Kelly and MA, Yi. *Op. cit.*

from coal<sup>58</sup>. In terms of crude oil sales, Russia, despite being its number one seller, only supplied 19% of the total crude oil consumed by China in 2023<sup>59</sup>. In short, Russia is just another alternative and one of many suppliers.

On the other hand, Russia needs large quantities of microelectronic components (semiconductors) and other dual technologies, which are so necessary for its defence industry, that it can only obtain them through China. Thus, in the context of the war in Ukraine, 90% of the microelectronic components imported by Russia come from China<sup>60</sup>.

In the field of innovation and development, in sectors where Russia is not so advanced, it has also become exclusively dependent on China, as the West has denied it access to its knowledge. For example, Russia lacks *expertise* in *offshore* hydrocarbon exploitation, which complicates Russian fossil fuel production in regions such as the Arctic<sup>61</sup>. Access to the necessary knowledge and technology for this purpose is currently limited to China alone, due to sanctions imposed by the European Union and other Western partners, which have been in place since 2014<sup>62</sup>.

Therefore, Moscow's strategic autonomy with regard to China is questionable, to say the least. If it deepens its strategic relationship with China, there is a high risk of becoming its junior partner, something that is clearly not in the Kremlin's interests.

### ***Third axis: Same objective, different strategies***

As highlighted at the beginning of this document, China and Russia have a common strategic objective that strengthens their partnership: the revision of the rules-based international order dominated by the United States and the resulting rivalry with American hegemony. However, the fact that the objective is the same does not mean that the

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<sup>58</sup> International Trade Administration, "China Country Trade Guide: Energy," 7 April 2023, available at: <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/china-energy>. Accessed 21/05/2025.

<sup>59</sup> ROCA, José A. "China imported record amounts of crude oil in 2023," *El Periódico de la Energía*, 17 April 2024, available at <https://elperiodicodelaenergia.com/china-importo-cantidades-record-de-crudo-en-2023/>. Accessed 21/05/2025.

<sup>60</sup> NG, Kelly and MA, Yi. *Op. cit.*

<sup>61</sup> VAN DEN BEUKEL, Jilles and VAN GEUS, Lucia. "Russia's Unsustainable Business Model: Going All In on Oil and Gas," The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 19 January 2021, available at <https://hcss.nl/report/russias-unsustainable-business-model/>.

<sup>62</sup> FUSTER LEAL, Rubén. "Russian-Chinese collusion in the Arctic: explanation of the Polar Silk Road", Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Opinion Paper 128/2021, available at <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=8536495>.

strategy for achieving it is the same for both actors. In fact, they differ to the point of being contradictory.

China bases its global position on economic power, while Russia is strategically important at the global level thanks to its nuclear arsenals and military activity<sup>63</sup>. Beijing exerts influence through trade, investment in infrastructure and logistics, the purchase of foreign debt, and the global expansion of its multinationals. It is in the economic sphere where it has made the most headway in reversing the pre-existing order, promoting the de-dollarisation of the global economy, dominating or proposing alternatives to international financial institutions, and replacing the West in emerging markets. For its part, Moscow maintains a dialogue of equals with the United States thanks to nuclear deterrence, as well as guaranteeing spheres of influence in its immediate environment and extending its power to other international scenarios, such as the Middle East and Africa, by using military means.

From the nature of both powers and their respective strategies, different levels of tolerance for military risk can be deduced. In the case of China, this tolerance is low<sup>64</sup>. It is averse to instability and any surprises caused by war, trying to keep it at bay<sup>65</sup>. China depends on international trade to achieve its strategic objective and even for its own survival, as it cannot afford shortages in its domestic market and population centres. International conflicts cause direct cost overruns (such as sanctions, supply chain failures, lack of raw materials, etc.) and indirect contractions in the global economy (inflation, economic recession, etc.), which can negatively affect foreign trade and the economic development of economies such as China. Furthermore, China's nuclear arsenal is still small, limiting its political and military influence to its regional environment<sup>66</sup>.

In contrast, Russia has a greater tolerance for military risk. The Russian authorities' willingness to use the armed forces, together with a simple decision-making process and

<sup>63</sup> CALDUCH CERVERA, Rafael. *Op. cit.*

<sup>64</sup> BLACKWILL, Robert D. and FONTAINE, Richard. *Op. cit.*

<sup>65</sup> PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José, "The Chinese-Russian strategic partnership continues to enjoy good health", Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Analysis Document 03/2023, available at <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/the-chinese-russian-strategic-partnership-continues-to-enjoy-good-health>

<sup>66</sup> CALDUCH CERVERA, Rafael. *Op. cit.*

clear objectives, boost Russian leadership and give it an advantage over its adversaries<sup>67</sup>. Military interventions are another tool in Russia's strategy of re-imperialisation of its immediate environment and have ultimately guaranteed Russia's presence in places such as Georgia, Syria and Ukraine<sup>68</sup>. Furthermore, such interventions are backed up by the exercise of nuclear deterrence, deterring military interference by third parties, as has been seen in Ukraine.

In short, the strategies of the two states are disparate and, at times, contradictory. Russian military interventions may affect China's economic expansion interests in the short to medium term<sup>69</sup>. It is therefore unlikely that Beijing will be attracted to or directly involved in any of Moscow's military adventures. See the war in Ukraine, in which China, despite not condemning Russia and providing it with supplies to reinforce the strategic partnership, has declared itself neutral and defended Ukraine's territorial integrity. However, it has not missed the opportunity to criticise NATO's expansionism<sup>70</sup>.

#### ***4th axis: Regional competition***

The last of the most notable challenges facing the strategic partnership will be competition between the two actors for certain regions. The expansion of China's global influence has reached regions such as Central Asia and the Arctic, which have historically been within Moscow's sphere of influence.

Focusing on Central Asia, in the group of former Soviet republics such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, we can point out that China has burst onto the scene in the region through powerful economic investments in infrastructure, transport services and the energy sector. In fact, the land-based version of the One Belt, One Road project begins its route in these countries. Pardo Delgado summarises China's interests in Central Asia as follows: "a) a strategic corridor for sending its products to Europe, b) a market for its

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<sup>67</sup> LABORIE IGLESIAS, Mario. "The National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (December 2015)", Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Opinion Paper 25/2016, available at: [https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2016/DIEEEO25-2016\\_ESN\\_Rusia\\_MLI.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2016/DIEEEO25-2016_ESN_Rusia_MLI.pdf).

<sup>68</sup> MILOSEVICH-JUARISTI, Mira. "The process of 're-imperialisation' of Russia, 2000-2016", EICano Royal Institute, Working Paper 11/2016, 15 July 2016, available at <https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/dt11-2016-milosevichjuaristi-proceso-reimperializacion-rusia-2000-2016.pdf>.

<sup>69</sup> CALDUCH CERVERA, Rafael. *Op. cit.*

<sup>70</sup> RÍOS, Xulio (2022). "China in the face of the Russian invasion of Ukraine," *Nueva Sociedad* (301), September–October 2022.

products and construction and engineering companies, and c) a key source of energy resources"<sup>71</sup>.

For its part, Russia is the main provider of security in the region, especially when it comes to ensuring the survival of the authoritarian regimes in those countries. In this regard, see the Russian military intervention, under the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which took place in Kazakhstan to quell the mass riots that occurred in January 2022. Likewise, the hydrocarbons produced in this region are transported to consumer markets via old Soviet infrastructure that runs through Russian territory<sup>72</sup>. For this reason, Russia also exerts economic influence over the countries of Central Asia by controlling hydrocarbon exports.

However, the influence of China and Russia has not come into direct conflict, as there has been an informal division of roles between the two countries, with China acting as a provider of investment and commercial opportunities and Russia as a provider of security<sup>73</sup>. However, there is no joint strategy for Central Asia. In fact, there have been clashes between the two countries, such as Russia's opposition to China diversifying its gas pipeline networks.

With regard to the Arctic, Russia is a dominant power, among other reasons because of the space it occupies in the region (approximately 50%), its Arctic tradition, and its position with regard to the Northern Sea Route, which it controls de facto. Likewise, Russia, together with Canada, has been the most zealous of the states with regard to its sovereignty in the region. Until 2013, it blocked China's entry as an observer to the Arctic Council due to the latter's criticism of the closed regional governance regime<sup>74</sup>. China's change of strategy, renouncing criticism in favour of exercising soft power through economic investment and participation in local businesses and scientific projects, favoured a rapprochement with Russia and the other Arctic states.

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<sup>71</sup> PARDO DELGADO, José Miguel. "Geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia. Cooperation and competition between China and Russia", Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, Opinion Paper 13/2023, pp.5, available at <https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2267304/Din%C3%A1mica+geopol%C3%ADtica+en+Asia+Central.+Cooperation+and+competition+between+China+and+Russia.pdf>.

<sup>72</sup> MILOSEVICH-JUARISTI, Mira. 2016. *Op. cit.*

<sup>73</sup> PARDO DELGADO, José Miguel. *Op. cit.*

<sup>74</sup> PERREAULT, Francois. "The political tug-of-war over Arctic governance: China's journey to Permanent Observer status," in *Security and Defence Documents 66. Arctic Geopolitics. Two complementary visions. Spain-Singapore*, I. García Sánchez (Ed.), Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies, pp. 35-63.

The current circumstances, in which Russia has been isolated from the other Arctic states due to its actions in Ukraine, have further favoured its rapprochement with China. The ultimate expression of Russian-Chinese collusion in the Arctic is the projection of the Chinese Silk Road onto the Northern Sea Route controlled by Russia, creating an Arctic version of One Belt, One Road<sup>75</sup>. However, despite the current joint projects in the Arctic, Russia is trying to prevent them from falling under China's exclusive control, demanding its own dominant participation<sup>76</sup>.

From the experience described in both regions, it can be deduced that, for the time being, Russia and China can coincide and exert simultaneous influence in them, but Russian suspicion of Chinese interference has not disappeared and will be a challenge to manage in the future.

### **The Russian-Chinese Strategic Partnership and NATO**

The strategic partnership between Russia and China, viewed from the perspective of Western security, represented by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), has undergone constant evolution, in line with the geopolitical changes that these two countries have experienced on the international political stage. It has become increasingly important and in recent years has been considered a potential threat. For its part, the strategic partnership has also been affected and invigorated by the implications for its national security of the actions of NATO and its respective allies, above all the United States.

For Moscow and Beijing, there have been several reasons for their rapprochement in the field of security and defence. These include NATO and EU expansion towards the East, the so-called colour revolutions sponsored by the West, the unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the 1972 anti-ballistic missile agreement, and the deployment of a new US ABM system on the periphery of Russia and China, which they view as threats to their security.

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<sup>75</sup> FUSTER LEAL, Rubén. 2021. *Op. cit.*

<sup>76</sup> PECHKO, Kiel. "Rising Tensions and Shifting Strategies: The Evolving Dynamics of US Grand Strategy in the Arctic," The Arctic Institute, 7 January 2025, available at <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/rising-tensions-shifting-strategies-evolving-dynamics-us-grand-strategy-arctic/>. Accessed 21/05/2025.

However, the final trigger for this partnership was the breakdown in relations between Russia and the Western bloc as a result of the Crimea crisis in 2014, preceded by Ukraine's rapprochement with NATO countries, making the convenience of such an understanding between Russia and China a top priority. In the words of Stronski, "Both powers share a desire to challenge the principles governing the Western-style liberal international order. However, their relationship, marked by great mistrust, remains complex"<sup>77</sup> .

That is why the influence of the United States, at the head of NATO, has been the main driving force behind the development of this understanding between the two countries, so that, while Russia has sought in China a counterweight to NATO and the EU, for China "understanding with Russia was essential to gain strategic depth and avoid a containment encirclement of its economic and military development by the US"<sup>78</sup> . Similarly, the Russian Federation has been key to the modernisation of China's armed forces in recent decades.

However, it should be remembered that, to date, the US still has the most powerful military force in the world, which means that neither Russia nor China wants a direct conventional military confrontation with the American giant.

Nevertheless, according to the *Strategic Survey 2018*, both Russia and China have opted for a different form of geostrategic confrontation, known as *tolerance warfare*, i.e. a form of geopolitical confrontation based on challenging the international *status quo* through a persistent effort to test tolerances in the face of different forms of aggression against states. To this end, various techniques are used, such as attempting to push back lines of resistance and, in general, probing the weaknesses of the rival country, for example, by gaining tactical advantages against opponents who are not determined to take definitive action against them<sup>79</sup> , as in the case of China's expansion of its territorial waters in the South China Sea or Russia's influence through the Wagner Group in various African regimes.

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<sup>77</sup> STRONSKI, Paul and NG, Nicole. "Cooperation and Competition. Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East and the Arctic". Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018.

<sup>78</sup> PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José. "The Chinese-Russian Strategic Partnership", Strategic Panorama 2019. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. 2019.

<sup>79</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies (2018) "Strategic survey 2018", The Annual Assessment of Geopolitics, 2018.

In response to this strategy, the United States and its Western allies have been working to thwart the ambitions of their geopolitical antagonists through two different approaches. On the one hand, a mainly economic response has been developed against China, through sanctions and tariffs on imports of certain Chinese manufactured products; while, on the other hand, a broad-spectrum response combining diplomatic, economic and military measures has been used against the Russian Federation<sup>80</sup>.

In short, the United States has come to perceive that a China that has become the world's leading commercial power and a Russia engaged in a "hybrid" war against the West pose its main geostrategic threats, conveying this perception to the rest of its allies through NATO in order to avoid losing the international hegemonic position it has enjoyed since the end of the Cold War.

This was reflected in NATO's 2022 New Strategic Concept, signed in Madrid, which expressly outlined this paradigm shift, specifically in its definition of the "Strategic Environment", as we shall see below.

On the one hand, section 8 of the aforementioned "Strategic Environment" already identifies Russia as the main threat to the Alliance's security, stating that:

*The Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to the security of the Allies and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area. It seeks to establish spheres of influence and direct control through coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation. It uses conventional, cyber and hybrid means against us and our partners. Its coercive military posture, rhetoric and proven willingness to use force to achieve its political objectives undermine the rules-based international order."*

However, it then emphasises the Alliance countries' intention not to enter into direct confrontation with the Eurasian country, limiting themselves to continuing with international pressure techniques, stating in section 9 that:

*"NATO does not seek confrontation or pose any threat to the Russian Federation. We will continue to respond to Russia's threats and hostile actions with unity and responsibility. We will significantly strengthen the deterrence and defence of all Allies, improve our resilience to Russian coercion, and help our partners to counter malicious interference*

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<sup>80</sup> PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José. 2019, *Op. Cit.*

*and aggression [...] However, we remain ready to keep channels of communication open with Moscow to manage and mitigate risks, prevent escalation and increase transparency. We aspire to achieve stability and predictability in the Euro-Atlantic area, as well as between NATO and the Russian Federation."*

On the other hand, paragraph 13 clearly identifies the other source of tension for the alliance members, namely China, expressly recognising that:

*"The stated aspirations and coercive policies of the People's Republic of China (PRC) challenge our interests, security and values. The PRC uses a wide range of political, economic and military tools to expand its presence in the world and project power, while keeping its strategy, intentions and military rearmament opaque. The PRC's malicious hybrid and cyber operations and its confrontational rhetoric and disinformation are directed against the Allies and undermine the security of the Alliance."*

But it does not stop there. Once the two main geopolitical threats to the Atlantic Allies have been identified, it makes a clear and unequivocal reference to the risk posed by the new collaborative relationship that has emerged between the two Eastern powers, clearly warning that:

*"The deepening strategic partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, and their mutual attempts to undermine the rules-based international order, run counter to our values and interests"<sup>81</sup> .*

Therefore, in one of its most important international texts, which sets the agenda for the organisation and the political and military efforts of its member states, the Alliance has identified the strategic partnership between Russia and China as one of the main subversive elements of the Western international order and a threat to its interests and values. This perception has been maintained following the Vilnius Summit in 2023, which reaffirmed in paragraph 25 of its final communiqué that:

*"The growing strategic partnership between the People's Republic of China and Russia, as well as their attempts to undermine the rules-based international order, are contrary to our values and interests. We call on the People's Republic of China to play a constructive role as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, to condemn Russia's*

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<sup>81</sup> New NATO Strategic Concept, Madrid, 29 June 2022. Available at: [https://www.defensa.gob.es/Galerias/main/nuevo\\_concepto\\_estrat\\_gico\\_de\\_la\\_otan.pdf](https://www.defensa.gob.es/Galerias/main/nuevo_concepto_estrat_gico_de_la_otan.pdf)

*war of aggression against Ukraine, to refrain from supporting Russia's war effort in any way, to stop amplifying Russia's false narrative blaming Ukraine and NATO for Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and to adhere to the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter. We call on the People's Republic of China in particular to act responsibly and refrain from providing any lethal assistance to Russia."*<sup>82</sup> .

As we can see, the Alliance's rhetoric has evolved since the adoption of the previous text, now focusing on the importance of China's support for Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine, urging it to cease its collaboration, which highlights that both the strategic partnership remains in force and that the threat it poses remains in the Alliance's view. Therefore, NATO is aware of the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership, as well as the relationships that are generated within it, and is gradually incorporating it into its rhetoric, pointing to it as one of the new and most serious threats to the values and interests that this Alliance represents.

## Conclusions

From this document, which has provided a comprehensive description of the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership, covering its various dimensions or levels, as well as its vulnerabilities and problems and the perspective of third parties such as NATO, we can draw the following six conclusions:

Firstly, political cooperation between the two actors is strong thanks to the similarity of their objectives (they are revisionist powers). This cooperation affects the governance of international institutions, where collaboration between the two actors guarantees the balance of power wherever Western powers are present, while also creating new parallel organisations that rival the leading forums and organisations of the pre-existing international order.

Secondly, bilateral trade is one of the main vectors of the strategic partnership, feeding on the complementarity between the two economies, although Russia's exports of hydrocarbons and raw materials pose problems for the future and ensure an imbalance in the trade balance in China's favour.

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<sup>82</sup> Vilnius Summit Communiqué issued by NATO Heads of State and Government, 11 July 2023, paragraph 25. Available at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_217320.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm)

Thirdly, the war in Ukraine has strengthened the strategic partnership and provided China with an opportunity to improve its political and economic position. On the downside, Russia's dependence on China has grown.

Fourthly, in the military-technological sphere, although their relationship is marked by mistrust in certain areas and exchanges have been reduced, it remains beneficial in a context of growing rivalry with the West, with potential areas for collaboration in key areas such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and air defence. Military-technological cooperation has been accompanied by greater cooperation in defence, expressed in combined military exercises. The armies of both countries have improved their interoperability and their exercises continue to send a clear message of unity to the West, although it should be remembered that Russia and China are not yet part of any military alliance nor do they have a mutual defence treaty, and are possibly far from having one.

Fifthly, NATO's advance is a threat shared by Russia and China. For its part, NATO perceives the Russian-Chinese partnership as an increasingly significant threat to its values and interests.

Sixth and finally, although the strategic partnership between the two actors is currently at its peak, there are challenges and vulnerabilities that must be addressed in order for it to deepen and consolidate. These challenges and vulnerabilities, grouped into four main areas (historical mistrust, unequal levels of interdependence, disparate strategies and regional competition), open the door to third parties, such as the United States, to dissolve the partnership.

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