



## Introduction

The growing military cooperation between Russia and the People's Republic of China through technological exchange, manoeuvres and combined exercises is evident, especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. However, this mutual relationship transcends the realm of security and defence to also encompass trade, energy resources, finance and their projection in various areas, from the Arctic to cyberspace and outer space.

It is noteworthy that China has become an essential partner for Russia, providing political, economic and technological support in the context of the war in Ukraine, although there are supposed limits on the direct supply of weapons, focusing instead on the transfer of dual-use materials and equipment, as well as key components, which are enabling Russia to sustain its war effort in the face of Western sanctions and military aid to Ukraine<sup>1</sup>.

There are multiple factors that explain this partnership, but they are not part of an ideological alignment, but rather of mutual interests, except for the shared perception of the United States as the main strategic threat to both Russians and Chinese<sup>2</sup>, the mutual benefits of an increasingly expansive economic and trade relationship, and the gradual elimination of old historical mistrust, thanks to the efforts, demonstrated in their meetings, of two strong leaders such as Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. Despite the intensification of this cooperation, China and Russia have avoided creating a formal political and military alliance<sup>3</sup>.

As discussed below, it is true that both countries have proclaimed a "friendship without limits" and have deepened their energy, military and diplomatic ties, but it is also true that both Putin and Xi have reiterated that they do not intend to form a military bloc directed against third parties. They maintain divergent worldviews, based on a historical trajectory

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<sup>1</sup> KENDALL-TAYLOR, A. and LOKKER, N. "Russia-China Defence Cooperation," *Working Paper*. Centre for a New American Security (CNAS), 2023. Available at: <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/russia-china-relations>  
Note: all links in this document are active as of 22 January 2026.

<sup>2</sup> In this regard, see the recent article by BADOS NIETO, V. *Neither enemy nor vassal: reflections on Spain's strategic outlook in the context of U.S.-China rivalry. Theoretical frameworks for its understanding*. IEEE Analysis Paper 79/2025 and the extensive bibliography cited therein. Available at: [https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/3041071/ni\\_enemigo\\_ni\\_vasallo\\_2025\\_dieeee79\\_eng.pdf/](https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/3041071/ni_enemigo_ni_vasallo_2025_dieeee79_eng.pdf/)

<sup>3</sup> See this debate in HUIYUN, F. and KAI, H. "Why will China and Russia not form an alliance? The balance of beliefs in peacetime", *International Affairs* 5. 2024. Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/100/5/2089/7733388>

in which tensions between the two powers were more common in the past than the agreements signed to date<sup>4</sup>. So how did this situation of increasingly expanded Russian-Chinese cooperation come about? The origin lies in the early 21st century, when, in 2000, the newly elected President Putin decided to move away from the image of two separate powers with their backs turned on each other. Xi's consolidation at the helm of China since November 2012, in turn, led to a renewed Chinese interest in promoting a partnership based on mutual interests. Thus, Russian-Chinese cooperation predates the outbreak of war in Ukraine, dating back at least to Putin's first terms in office, and grew *steadily* until it led to the current alliance, which is not without its imbalances.

### **Russian-Chinese relations from 2001 to 2022**

After decades of rivalry and mistrust, including border disputes<sup>5</sup>, the evolution of political relations between Russia and China since the late 1990s has not been linear. After 1991, Russia inherited the status of a defeated superpower, while China gradually emerged as a rising power. During the early post-Soviet years, under Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999), the Kremlin prioritized its relations with the West and relegated China to the background, sustained by political statements, some diplomatic coordination and Russian arms sales, but with limited economic ties<sup>6</sup>.

In fact, the Yeltsin governments' policy towards China corresponded to the final Soviet period (1985-1991) when Mikhail Gorbachev promoted a doctrinal shift towards greater common security, the unilateral reduction of border forces and a normalization of bilateral relations in a 1991 agreement, a first treaty that delimited much of the common eastern border and included the withdrawal of border troops. These measures brought decades of confrontation to an end and laid the foundations for lasting cooperation that would continue after the Soviet collapse. Yeltsin and his Foreign Minister, Yevgeny Primakov, disappointed by the limited benefits of their alignment with the United States, began to

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<sup>4</sup> PONTIJAS CALDERÓN, J. L. *Las distintas visiones de Rusia y China sobre la multipolaridad*. Documento de Opinión IEEE núm. 91/2024. Disponible en:

[https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2024/DIEEE091\\_2024\\_JOSPON\\_Rusia-China.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2024/DIEEE091_2024_JOSPON_Rusia-China.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> LAIRD, R. "Russian Geopolitical Challenges: A Window into Sino-Russian Territorial Tensions," *Defence.info*. 22 July 2025. Available at: <https://defence.info/global-dynamics/2025/07/russian-geopolitical-challenges-a-window-into-sino-russian-territorial-tensions/>

<sup>6</sup> LUBINA, M. *Russia and China: A Political Marriage of Convenience—Stable and Successful*. Leverkusen-Opladen, Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2017. Available at: <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=24e54336-d004-3ac8-a3d7-60e46592543a>

consider closer ties with Asia and, in this context, the partnership with China took on a utilitarian character focused on military-industrial cooperation, the supply of advanced weaponry and, above all, growing strategic coordination in the face of US hegemony in a world that seemed unipolar<sup>7</sup>.

In this context, in April 1996, during a bilateral summit held in Beijing between Chinese leader Jiang Zemin and President Yeltsin, a "strategic partnership" was established. A few days later, Jiang and Yeltsin flew to Shanghai to meet with the presidents of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, where they signed an agreement on "building confidence in the military sphere in border areas", a coalition that would evolve into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). A year later, in 1997, during another visit by Jiang to Moscow, the "Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World" was signed, which aimed to establish a new international order<sup>8</sup>.

### **Putin's arrival to the presidency and the beginning of closer relations**

In August 1999, Yeltsin appointed Putin as prime minister; on 31 December, he became acting president and, in May 2000, he consolidated his position after winning the presidential elections. Once in power and driven by Russian disappointment with the West and NATO's progressive expansion towards the East, although initially without abandoning the US orbit, he worked with Primakov to promote a definitive rapprochement with China under the banner of a renewed Eurasianism<sup>9</sup>. The first milestone was the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation of July 2001, which resolved border disputes, explicitly recognizing the inviolability of borders and renouncing the use of force. In addition, it placed both powers on a shared path to advance a new multilateral framework, which made it possible to launch the SCO that same year and begin to talk about regional stability and rejection of the US unipolar order.

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<sup>7</sup> JACOBSEN, C. "Russia-China: The New 'Strategic Partnership'," *European Security* 4. 1998, pp. 1-11. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09662839808407381>

<sup>8</sup> MORALES, J. «La "asociación estratégica" ruso-china: desafíos, oportunidades e implicaciones para la seguridad regional», *UNISCI Discussion Papers*. Mayo, 2024. Disponible en: <https://www.ucm.es/data/cont/media/www/pag-72536/Javier5.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Its most prominent intellectual exponents today are Alexander Dugin and Sergey Karaganov, who enjoy the favour of the Kremlin.

Between 2004 and 2008, the final delimitation and demarcation agreements were signed, definitively closing the border issue. The most sensitive point was the distribution of several river islands in the Amur and Ussuri rivers, which was resolved by sharing approximately half of those territories, in what was a highly symbolic gesture that the Chinese government interpreted as the official end of the legacy of unequal treaties and the beginning of a new era of friendship and cooperation.

The 2008 financial crisis gave further impetus to the deepening of mutual relations, at that time expressed once again in arms trade, but with certain Chinese cautions about its technological dependence and the existence of divergent interests, which for China were the need for stability in order to grow, and for Russia, the perceived redress of its international status and vindication vis-à-vis the West. At that time, the break-up of the G8 group (the world's leading Western economies plus Russia), which had been formed in 1998, was significant. The Sino-Russian side promoted the G20, which was elevated to the level of a summit of heads of state and became the center of gravity of global economic governance, reflecting a reality in which the West could no longer act alone<sup>10</sup>.

Another step forward came in June 2009 with the summit establishing the BRIC (later BRICS) group in Yekaterinburg with Brazil, Russia, India and China, where the Chinese and Russians have played the leading role since its inception. For China, it offered a flexible multilateral framework from which to project its growing economic weight without yet assuming clear leadership, while for Russia it provided a more geopolitical and strategic dimension against Western hegemony.

In 2010, the agreement between Norway and Russia on Bear Island symbolized the transition from historical antagonism to reliable partnership, setting a precedent for compromise in the Arctic that China and Russia could apply as a model for other regions such as Central Asia, where they have achieved functional coexistence: the former dominates the economic and energy spheres, while the latter retains primacy in security, avoiding open competition<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> ESTEBAN RODRÍGUEZ, M. and MARTÍN RODRÍGUEZ, R. «Política exterior», *Introducción a la China actual*. Alianza, 2024, pp. 145-191.

<sup>11</sup> See KACZMARSKI, M. "Russia-China Relations and the West", *Russia and the West: Reality Check*. Working Paper. Centre for Transatlantic Relations, March 2017. Available at: [https://archive.transatlanticrelations.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/RBSG-Ostpolitik-2-track-2-book-Kaczmarski-final\\_website2.pdf](https://archive.transatlanticrelations.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/RBSG-Ostpolitik-2-track-2-book-Kaczmarski-final_website2.pdf)

## The beginning of an unbalanced relationship

Since the second decade of the 21st century, the Russian-Chinese rapprochement has only increased, driven increasingly by a shared perception of rejection of US hegemony and the values and norms promoted by the West. It was precisely the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West since 2014, as a result of Russia's annexation of Crimea and its involvement in the Ukrainian civil war, that accelerated this convergence but now based on the need for and search for international support, even though China does not recognize the annexation of Crimea or other territories. The Kremlin accepted significant concessions to China in exchange for greater cooperation and trade agreements<sup>12</sup>. Thus, they signed a \$400 billion energy agreement over thirty years, which guaranteed stable revenues for the Russian budget during a period of gradual conflict with the West.

Bilateral cooperation intensified in multiple dimensions, from political, military, technological and economic to diplomatic, in a process parallel to the deterioration of relations between both powers and the United States and its allies, whom they consider increasingly hostile. During the period leading up to the outbreak of war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, defence cooperation increased: Russia provided China with advanced weapons systems and operational expertise. Meanwhile, China provided capital, access to open markets (particularly the energy market, where it became the main importer of gas and crude oil) and technology, with both countries cooperating to reduce their dependence on the West in cyberspace and accelerate innovation in areas such as artificial intelligence, 5G and biotechnology, areas that are also related to the internal control of their regimes, while projecting influence towards third countries. Consequently, the Kremlin opted to deepen cooperation with an emerging China rather than trying to balance it, for which it lacked the capacity<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> In KIRCHBERGER, S, SINJEN, S. and WÖRMER, N. *Russia-China Relations. Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?* Springer, 2022. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-97012-3>

<sup>13</sup> See KENDALL-TAYLOR, A. and SHULLMAN, D. *Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership*. CNAS, January 2021. Available at: <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/navigating-the-deepening-russia-china-partnership>

## **Relations from 2022 to the present**

From late February 2022 to the present, bilateral relations have been marked by a rapid rapprochement on Russia's part, aimed at obtaining not only political support but also economic and financial backing from China to sustain its war effort in Ukraine. Russian initiatives and proposals have been articulated through successive bilateral summits, the rapport between Putin and Xi Jinping, and the signing of important agreements on priority issues.

These meetings reached their peak during the Beijing summit on 2 September 2025, with the signing of the agreement to build the new Power of Siberia-2 gas pipeline, followed the next day by the recognition of the close Russian-Chinese (and also North Korean) friendship during the celebrations of the 80th anniversary of victory in the Pacific War. These are strategic messages that both sides exploit in accordance with their interests.

At the same time, they have continued to strengthen their partnership in the multilateral forums in which they participate, from the UN Security Council to regional organizations in which they share interests and maintain common positions, seeking to attract more countries from the Global South and presenting themselves as benevolent powers by denouncing centuries of Western domination policies<sup>14</sup>. In this way, they advocate a supposed new process of second decolonization, which would aim to create a more balanced international order in which their interests are recognized.

## ***Start of the war in Ukraine***

Twenty days before the invasion of Ukraine began, President Putin made an official visit to Beijing for the opening of the Winter Olympics. In a meeting with Xi on 4 February 2022, they laid the foundations for future relations with a joint statement entitled 'Entering a new era and sustainable development'<sup>15</sup>. In addition, they signed sixteen intergovernmental agreements covering everything from trade in goods and services, investment, customs and financial operations to aerospace cooperation and the complementarity of the GLONASS and BeiDou satellite navigation systems. They also

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<sup>14</sup> This is the long-term objective of the Russia-Africa summits and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, where they manage to bring together all African countries, also highlighting that China and Russia are the main suppliers of arms.

<sup>15</sup> Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67712>

signed four other contracts between Russian energy giants Gazprom and Rosneft and their Chinese counterparts. The signing of these agreements sent a strong political and strategic message in the context of the increasingly deteriorating security situation on the Russian-Ukrainian border.

Thus, after two and a half years without face-to-face meetings due to restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Putin and Xi resumed their regular meetings: two in 2022 (4 February and 15-16 September), two in 2023 (20-22 March and 17-16 October), three in 2024 (16-17 May, 3 June and 22-24 October) and two in 2025 (8-9 May and 31 August to 3 September). In all cases, they were accompanied by important government and business delegations, demonstrating their personal closeness, the intensity of bilateral relations and China's decisive political support in sustaining a struggle against the West in the context of the war in Ukraine<sup>16</sup>.

Due to the West's attempts to isolate Russia internationally and as a result of an arrest warrant issued against the Russian president by the International Criminal Court, he delegated his representation in international organizations and on certain trips to his Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, one of the officials who has been with Putin the longest in his role. However, when it came to visits to strategic countries such as India or China itself, or meetings of forums such as the SCO, it was the Russian president himself who travelled personally.

### ***Development of political relations***

It cannot be said for certain that President Putin revealed his war plans to his Chinese counterpart during his visit to Beijing, but it is very significant that, one day after the invasion, on 25 February 2022, Xi expressed his support for Russia, not only by failing to condemn the aggression, but also by declaring that he respected Russia's actions in the Ukrainian crisis<sup>17</sup>. He also offered his mediation to achieve an immediate ceasefire, followed by a negotiated solution and a proposed peace plan, a position he has

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<sup>16</sup> There were also several meetings between Xi and Russia's main ally, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko (2 March 2023 and 4 December 2023, 4 June and 3 September 2025). Meetings between the defense ministers of both countries also intensified, and in July 2024, the first combined exercise between forces from both countries took place on Belarusian territory.

<sup>17</sup> Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67868>

maintained until now, but without practical results. Shortly afterwards, in a vote in the United Nations Security Council, which received eleven votes in favour out of fifteen, the Chinese representative abstained on a draft resolution condemning the aggression, which in any case did not go ahead due to the Russian veto<sup>18</sup>.

A month later (24 March 2022), China was the only member of the Security Council to vote in favour of a draft resolution presented by the Russian representative on humanitarian aid in the Ukrainian conflict. For his part, on 12 June 2022, Chinese Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe, who would leave office in 2023 on corruption charges, denied during a conference at the Shangri-La Security Forum in Indonesia that his country was providing material support to Russia, rejecting the idea that sanctions would help resolve the conflict and expressing his support for direct negotiations between the parties, a position completely contrary to the Western view that Russia should be defeated.

This approach was reaffirmed in a telephone conversation between Putin and Xi on 15 June 2022. In an extensive final communiqué, in addition to references to mutual support in international forums and organizations and increased technical and military cooperation, the Chinese side noted "the legality of the actions taken by Russia to protect its fundamental national interests in the face of challenges to its security created by external forces"<sup>19</sup>. The Kremlin communiqué emphasized that bilateral relations had reached an unprecedented level.

For the second time in 2022, Putin and Xi met during the SCO summit in Samarkand on 15-16 September. The Russian president publicly thanked China for its "balanced" position on the Ukrainian conflict and responded with a statement of support for the one-China principle, following US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei in August<sup>20</sup>. This support was reiterated by Putin at the Valdai Security Forum on 27 October 2022<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> At: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/02/1112802>

<sup>19</sup> Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68658>

<sup>20</sup> During the opening of the 20th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress on 16 September 2022, President Xi declared: "We will continue to seek peaceful reunification with Taiwan. But we will never promise to renounce the use of force. And we reserve the right to take all necessary measures." He also announced the acceleration of military modernization plans. The congress ended with his re-election to a third five-year presidential term. Available at: <http://20th.cpcnews.cn/english/index.html> In March 2023, Xi appointed his former chief of staff in Zhejiang province, Li Qiang, as prime minister, as well as new foreign and defence ministers, in an attempt to strengthen personal loyalty in key positions. However, the latter two were dismissed from their posts after six and eight months on charges of corruption.

<sup>21</sup> Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69695>

These statements came at a time when Russia's military situation in Ukraine was deteriorating<sup>22</sup>.

In 2023, Putin welcomed Xi to Moscow from 20 to 22 March on his first foreign visit since his re-election to a third presidential term and almost four years after his last visit to Russia in June 2019. President Xi reiterated that China was ready to play a constructive role in seeking a political solution to the Ukrainian crisis<sup>23</sup>. The summit concluded with a joint statement on comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation, with a chapter dedicated to arms control and nuclear stability, as well as the signing of two trade agreements<sup>24</sup>.

Another summit took place in Beijing on 17 October 2023, on the occasion of Putin's attendance at the Third Belt and Road Forum, where new agreements on hydrocarbon supplies were signed, ensuring the flow of revenue needed to continue financing the war in Ukraine<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, a clear pattern can be observed: after each bilateral summit, Russia reinforces Chinese support in exchange for securing energy supplies to the Asian giant, the application of preferential prices and payments in national currencies, circumstances that gradually separate them from the dollar and make them more immune to Western sanctions. However, the relationship is becoming increasingly asymmetrical, and Russia's strategic survival in its struggle with the West is becoming increasingly dependent on this friendship<sup>26</sup>.

In 2024, a new summit was held in Beijing on 16-17 May. Putin stated that bilateral relations were in the interests of both countries and, at the same time, promoted global stability in a new multipolar world order<sup>27</sup>. They also discussed successful cooperation in international organizations and agreed to continue working on mechanisms to combat

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<sup>22</sup> See PARDO DE SANTAYANA, J. *Sino-Russian strategic partnership continues to enjoy good health*. IEEE Analysis Paper 3/2023. Available at:

[https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2023/DIEEEA03\\_2023\\_JOSPAR\\_Asociacion\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA03_2023_JOSPAR_Asociacion_ENG.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> On 24 February 2023, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a document with its proposal for a political solution to the crisis in Ukraine. Available in Spanish at:

[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/zxxx/202302/t20230224\\_11030757.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/zxxx/202302/t20230224_11030757.html)

<sup>24</sup> Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5920>

<sup>25</sup> The Russian defence budget rose from \$66 billion in 2021 to \$149 billion in 2024 (SIPRI data).

<sup>26</sup> Thus, on 4 December 2025, the president of the state-owned VTB bank, Andrey Kostin, proposed establishing a mechanism for Indian operators to pay for Russian oil using the yuan as an intermediary currency. Currency exchange transactions for rupee-ruble-yuan pairs would be carried out through VTB India and VTB Shanghai in a closed system, and the deposited yuan would be used to pay for Russian imports from China. These are agreements that seek to escape the trap of Western sanctions.

<sup>27</sup> Putin emphasized this issue during his speech at the St Petersburg International Economic Forum on 7 June 2024 and again at the 2025 edition, during his speech at the plenary session on 20 June.

Western sanctions. The meeting concluded with the signing of ten bilateral cooperation agreements.

A second meeting took place during the SCO summit in Astana on 3 July 2024<sup>28</sup>, at which Putin reiterated that bilateral relations were at their best level ever, highlighting the growth in bilateral trade and cooperation on international issues. For his part, Xi spoke of an agenda focused on priority areas and the development of the agreements signed to date.

From 22 to 24 October 2024, they met for the third time at the BRICS summit in Kazan, where Putin had the opportunity to address common issues in Russian foreign policy since the start of the war in Ukraine, such as the recognition of mutual interests, sovereignty, the emergence of a new multilateral order and the creation of financial mechanisms to circumvent Western sanctions<sup>29</sup>. For his part, Xi made a new statement on the need to achieve a negotiated end to the Ukrainian conflict as soon as possible.

In 2025, President Xi visited Moscow on 8 and 9 May to mark the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe. The bilateral meeting focused on economic issues of priority to Russia, with Putin highlighting the expansion of Chinese automotive, electronics and microelectronics companies in the Russian market. At the end of the meeting, they issued a joint statement on global stability, calling for an end to Cold War policies, appealing for the peaceful resolution of conflicts and stressing the need to ensure stability in the Arctic<sup>30</sup>.

The second meeting was the longest of the period analyzed, as it coincided with three successive events in China. The first was the SCO summit in Tianjin on 31 August and 1 September, where Putin and Xi discussed negotiations with the United States to end the Ukrainian conflict. The second was the Sino-Russian summit in Beijing on 2 September, where Putin spoke of "two powers, two friends, alone"; Xi praised their "full strategic cooperation" in the common goal of building a more just international order with global governance, and important energy agreements were signed<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74461>

<sup>29</sup> See PÉREZ GIL, L. *Russian foreign policy towards the BRICS in the context of the war in Ukraine*. IEEE Analysis Paper 60/2025. Available at: [https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2907072/la\\_politica\\_exterior\\_rusa\\_2025\\_dieeea60\\_eng.pdf/](https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2907072/la_politica_exterior_rusa_2025_dieeea60_eng.pdf/)

<sup>30</sup> Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/76870>

<sup>31</sup> Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/77902>

In the political-strategic sphere, it served to confirm the validity of the Russian-Chinese pact on an independent Mongolia as a buffer zone between the two powers, as well as the guarantee of that status, originally imposed by the Soviet Union on China. In addition, the Chinese government announced that it would unilaterally abolish visas for Russian citizens, a measure that was approved shortly afterwards by the Russian side in reciprocity<sup>32</sup>. Finally, the third event was the military parade in Beijing to mark the 80th anniversary of China's victory over Japan in 1945 (3 September)<sup>33</sup>, where Xi gave a place of honour to both Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un<sup>34</sup>.

Beyond these meetings between presidents, senior officials from the Russian regime have held bilateral meetings with their Chinese counterparts in Russia, China and third countries to develop the agendas agreed at the bilateral summits. There were also visits by parliamentary delegations from both the Duma and the Federation Council, led by their respective presidents, Viacheslav Volodin and Valentina Matviyenko, as well as from the Chinese National People's Assembly.

Furthermore, on the Russian side, on 13 September 2022, Putin appointed the then Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Igor Morgulov, as the new ambassador to China, replacing Andrey Denisov, with the aim of strengthening the political nature of his mission. Zhang Hanhui has been Chinese ambassador to Russia since August 2019.

### ***The economic-energy sphere***

During a telephone conversation on 15 June 2022, Putin and Xi stated that they expected a record figure in annual trade. In September, Putin declared at the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok (the second most important in the country, after St Petersburg) that a short-term target of \$200 billion had been set<sup>35</sup> and that Russia would fulfil its hydrocarbon supply obligations regardless of pressure from the West. In other words, the increase in bilateral trade was linked to the rapid expansion of Chinese imports of Russian

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<sup>32</sup> This was announced by Putin during Prime Minister Li Qiang's visit to Moscow on 18 November 2025.

<sup>33</sup> At the parade, the Chinese Armed Forces displayed all components of their nuclear triad for the first time.

<sup>34</sup> See PÉREZ GIL, L. "Nuevos modelos de visibilidad y legitimidad internacionales en un mundo complejo e inestable", *Blog Política y Derecho Internacional*. October 2025. Available at: <https://ullderechointernacional.blogspot.com/2025/10/nuevos-modelos-de-visibilidad-y.html>.

<sup>35</sup> In 2018, for the first time, Sino-Russian trade reached \$100 billion.

hydrocarbons, which were seeking new markets and customers in the face of sanctions by the United States and its allies.

On 16 November 2022, the director of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, Kirill Dmitriev, announced that bilateral trade had exceeded \$150 billion, compared to a total of \$140 billion in 2021. Ambassador Zhang Hanhui raised that expectation to \$180 billion, but the result exceeded expectations, reaching \$190.172 billion<sup>36</sup>, 29.3% more than the previous year.

For 2023, they set a target of \$200 billion, but the year ended with a volume of \$240.110 billion, an increase of 26.3%. Russian exports amounted to \$129.13 billion (+12.7%) and Chinese exports totaled \$110.97 billion, with an extraordinary increase of 46.9% and a favourable balance for Russia of \$18.16 billion. The Russian government stated that around 92% of transactions were formalized in the respective national currencies<sup>37</sup>. In this way, the Kremlin had the resources to continue financing its war thanks to its ability to circumvent sanctions by selling gas and oil on a massive scale, especially to China and India, its two main customers. In 2024, trade amounted to \$244.8 billion (+1.9% compared to the previous year), with Russian exports totaling \$129.3 billion and Chinese exports \$115.8 billion, giving Russia a surplus of \$13.8 billion.

In 2025, after three years of rapid growth, total trade amounted to \$228.1 billion, a decrease of 6.9%; Russian exports stood at \$124.79 billion (-3.9%) and Chinese exports at \$103.3 billion (-10.4%), bringing the balance back in Russia's favour to \$21.49 billion. Authorities from both powers have stated that this was due to market circumstances and, although there are still no official figures for the end of the year, the Russian side explains it as being due to the fall in oil prices on the international market<sup>38</sup>, while the Chinese side attributes it to weaker domestic demand from Russian consumers and businesses, which reduced their purchases of goods from abroad. However, it is necessary to continue monitoring the data in order to draw the appropriate conclusions<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> The data comes from the Chinese General Administration of Customs.

<sup>37</sup> During the summit held in Moscow from 20 to 22 March 2023, they approved an agreement to use their own national currencies backed by their gold reserves. This is understood to be the statement by the Bank of Russia on 23 March 2023 on the accumulation of gold worth \$135.6 billion. As of January 2026, the balance was 326.5 billion (in 2025, the price of gold increased 1.7 times).

<sup>38</sup> A 23.8% drop in oil revenues is estimated (provisional data from the Russian Ministry of Finance).

<sup>39</sup> According to data from January 2026, Russian GDP grew by 0.9-1% (in 2024 it was 4.3%), the budget deficit was 2.6% and international reserves reached \$763,9 billion. Meanwhile, energy consumption fell by 1.1% for the first time in four years, indicating a decline in overall activity.

Thus, on 28 March 2025, President Putin highlighted during a government meeting that Russia had surpassed all European economies, reaching fourth place in the world in terms of GDP PPP, behind only China, the United States and India<sup>40</sup>. This is an extraordinary achievement considering the gloomy forecasts that had been made in 2022<sup>41</sup>.

On 2 September 2025, during the Russian-Chinese summit in Beijing, Xi and Putin signed, together with Mongolian President Ukhnaagiin Khurelsuk, a highly significant governmental agreement that launched the Soyuz-Vostok and Power of Siberia-2 gas pipeline projects<sup>42</sup>, which are expected to double the capacity of gas supply by pipeline to volumes almost equivalent to those of the Nord Stream gas pipelines, which have been inoperative since 26 September 2022<sup>43</sup>. Gazprom and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) signed a long-term cooperation agreement, and VEB.RF announced plans to invest in the oil, gas, chemical, timber and logistics industries.

To achieve these objectives, work has been done to improve logistics infrastructure, such as the opening of the first railway bridge over the Amur River on the Nizhneleninskoye-Tongjiang border in November 2022, and in June 2025 new lines were opened for transporting minerals from Khabarovsk to Fuyuan and cement from Tongjiang to Denisovka.

During Xi's visit to Moscow in March 2023, the Russian government declared China as its main partner for the development of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), an area in which it has continued to increase its influence with the aim of establishing an additional global logistics route outside Western control<sup>44</sup>. Thus, on 26 November 2024, the bilateral commission for the NSR met for the first time in Murmansk, while on 15 October 2025, the second meeting was held in Harbin<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Confirmed by reports from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

<sup>41</sup> See PÉREZ GIL, L. *Russian military capabilities and the war economy in the conflict in Ukraine*. Analysis Paper IEEE 48/2024, which analyses the Russian budget from 2024 to 2026 in a scenario of prolonged war. Available at: [https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2024/DIEEEA48\\_2024\\_LUIPER\\_Ucrania\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2024/DIEEEA48_2024_LUIPER_Ucrania_ENG.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/77901>

<sup>43</sup> The agreements include increasing the transfer capacity of Power of Siberia from 38 billion to 44 billion m<sup>3</sup> per year, plus the construction of Power of Siberia-2, which will contribute 50 billion m<sup>3</sup> per year, to reach 94 billion m<sup>3</sup> per year by 2030.

<sup>44</sup> See *in full* ROMERO JUNQUERA, A., AZNAR FERNÁNDEZ-MONTESINOS, F. and PÉREZ GIL, L. "El Ártico como espacio de conflicto", *Panorama geopolítico de los conflictos 2025*. Madrid, Ministry of Defence, 2025, pp. 203-236. Available at: <https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/panorama-geopolitico-de-los-conflictos-2025-revistas-pdf.html>

<sup>45</sup> On the same day, a Chinese ship completed the first transit of containers from China to Europe via the RMN. It left Ningbo on 23 September 2025 and arrived at the British port of Felixstowe.

In terms of energy cooperation, until 2022 the main projects were the Power of Siberia gas pipeline and Chinese participation in the Yamal gas project. During Putin's visit to Beijing on 4 February 2022, contracts were signed for the supply of 10 billion m<sup>3</sup> of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and 100 billion tons of oil over a period of ten years. As a result, Russian gas and oil exports to China increased by 44.5% and 8.2% respectively in 2022.

In October 2023, the signing of a contract between Gazprom and CNPC to increase Russian gas supplies via the Power of Siberia pipeline was announced, and progress was reviewed on the Soyuz-Vostok pipeline project through Mongolia and the Power of Siberia-2 pipeline, with a capacity equivalent to that of Nord Stream-2. Russia thus went from supplying 4.1 billion m<sup>3</sup> of gas in 2021 to 31.12 billion in 2024<sup>46</sup>, to which must be added 8.3 million tons of LNG transported by ship<sup>47</sup>. There are also plans to reach 85 billion m<sup>3</sup> in 2030.

In fact, Russian ships increased the transfer of LNG and oil from the loading terminals in Saint Petersburg and Sabetta to Chinese ports via the RMN. In 2024, Russian oil exports to China reached a record volume of 108.5 million barrels (an average of 2.17 million barrels per day)<sup>48</sup>. As a result, Russia has become the main supplier of oil and the third largest supplier of natural gas to China.

Chinese companies are also actively collaborating in the construction of gas processing infrastructure on the Gydan Peninsula in Yamalo-Nenets; vessels for Russia's new floating nuclear power plants, which will support the exploitation of the giant Baimskaya mining basin in Chukotka; and polar-capable tugboats for operation in the Arctic Ocean. There are also plans to participate in the exploitation of the Kolmozerskoye lithium deposit in Kola.

In the nuclear field, Rosatom is participating in the construction of the Chinese nuclear power plants in Xudapu and Tianwan (the largest in the world), which are equipped with Russian VVER-1000 and VVER-1200 reactors. Both projects are progressing at a good pace and have not been affected by sanctions, thanks to the compensation mechanisms created during this period. In November 2022, Rosatom and the China National Nuclear

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<sup>46</sup> Russian gas supplies via pipeline began in 2019.

<sup>47</sup> The 2025 data are not recorded because they are provisional at the time of writing.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

Corporation (CNNC) signed eight contracts worth \$572 million in Shanghai, and in March 2023, an intergovernmental agreement on technological cooperation was signed in Moscow during the bilateral summit. In 2023, China became the second largest importer of Russian enriched uranium, with 470 tons destined for the production of fuel for its nuclear power plants (the first being the United States)<sup>49</sup>.

### ***Military cooperation***

Russia and China are nuclear-weapon states and maintain a bilateral declaration of September 1994 on the non-first use of nuclear weapons between them, as well as a commitment not to target each other with these weapons. For its part, China is working to build a credible nuclear triad and is gradually increasing its nuclear arsenal<sup>50</sup>.

On 30 December 2022, Putin stressed that military cooperation activities had continued to increase, despite significant efforts by the West to isolate Russia<sup>51</sup>. At the ministerial level, there is also constant exchange between the defence ministers, with the Russian side regularly reporting on the situation in Ukraine<sup>52</sup>. In addition, the respective chiefs of staff, deputy defence ministers and army chiefs hold regular meetings, especially the navy commanders, who exchange visits on naval exercises.

Russian and Chinese ships participate in bilateral exercises such as "Maritime Interaction" in the China Seas and the Pacific Ocean, with regular stopovers at the naval bases in Vladivostok and Qingdao<sup>53</sup>. They also participate in multilateral manoeuvres with navies from other countries and in areas as far away as the Arabian Sea, with Iran and Pakistan<sup>54</sup>, and the southern Indian Ocean, with South Africa<sup>55</sup>. In this way, the Chinese Navy has been gaining experience in combined operations in distant areas that involve greater logistical effort in all areas, including navigation in the Bering Sea, near Alaska,

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<sup>49</sup> See NIKITIN, A. and GORCHAKOV, D. *Rosatom in the war years of 2023 and 2024. Main events, projects, decisions, facts and problems*. Vilnius, Bellona Foundation, 2025. Available at:

[https://network.bellona.org/content/uploads/sites/3/2025/04/ROSATOM\\_report\\_2025\\_ENG.pdf](https://network.bellona.org/content/uploads/sites/3/2025/04/ROSATOM_report_2025_ENG.pdf)

<sup>50</sup> On this point, see KRISTENSEN, H. et al. 'Chinese nuclear weapons, 2025', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 2. 2025, pp. 135–160. Available at: <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2025-03/chinese-nuclear-weapons-2025/>

<sup>51</sup> Available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70303>

<sup>52</sup> In *Interfax*. 31 January 2024. Available at: [https://www.interfax-russia.ru/military/news\\_eng/403857](https://www.interfax-russia.ru/military/news_eng/403857)

<sup>53</sup> This naval exercise was first held in 2012 and has been integrated into the Russian Navy's annual training plan. Chinese ships also joined the Russian naval exercise Okean-24 in the Pacific.

<sup>54</sup> Maritime Safety Belt Exercise with Iran (16 to 18 March 2023; 11 to 15 March 2024; 9 to 12 March 2025).

<sup>55</sup> The first exercise took place in South African waters in November 2019. The MOSI-23 exercise was held from 12 to 27 February 2023. Will for Peace 2026 exercise took place from 9 to 16 January 2026.

and in the Aleutian Islands. The exercises involve the most powerful and best-equipped ships from both countries, including cruisers and anti-aircraft destroyers, and, for the first time, in August 2025, two conventional Kilo II-class submarines joined in. Finally, on 25 April 2023, an agreement on maritime security cooperation was signed, providing for the implementation of combined coastguard exercises.

In the air, strategic bombers carry out combined flights in the Pacific area, escorted by their own fighters and other support aircraft (tankers, command and control aircraft), even flying over the Bering Sea<sup>56</sup>. These operations provide valuable experience for Chinese strategic planning, because until now they lacked the capacity to carry out very long-range bombing missions, in which, in the event of conflict, they would use nuclear weapons. Here, Russian capabilities are fundamental to the operational development of Chinese strategic aviation, the least prepared component of the Chinese nuclear triad<sup>57</sup>.

For their part, Chinese ground units participate in the large-scale military exercises carried out by the Russian Armed Forces in September, during the final phase of their annual training plan. Chinese contingents have worked on the lessons learned on the Ukrainian front.

Defence companies have attended the respective military fairs, where the arms export corporation Rosoboronexport leads Russian initiatives<sup>58</sup>. However, no information has been disclosed about the signing of contracts, due to the application of operational security measures (OPSEC) in the current war context. On 2 June 2024, Admiral Dong Jun, the current Chinese Minister of Defence, denied that China was supplying weapons in the conflict in Ukraine, despite evidence of the presence of civilian equipment and resources with military applications on the Russian-Ukrainian front (drones, electronic equipment, vehicles).

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<sup>56</sup> The first combined flight took place in July 2019, followed by annual flights in December 2020 and November 2021, and biannual flights from 2022 onwards.

<sup>57</sup> Lessons learned during their recent "Justice Mission 2025" exercise around the island of Taiwan from 29 to 30 December 2025, involving 130 aircraft, 28 ships and seven ballistic missiles. See MAHADZIR, D. "China Launches Blockade Drills Around Taiwan in Protest of U.S. Arms Sales," *USNI News*. 29 December 2025. Available at: <https://news.usni.org/2025/12/29/china-launches-blockade-drills-around-taiwan-in-protest-of-u-s-arms-sales>

<sup>58</sup> Especially at the Zhuhai Air Show, in its 2022 and 2024 editions.

### ***Multilateral relations***

In 2022, the 14th BRICS summit was held by videoconference on 23 June, under the Chinese presidency, where Xi condemned Western sanctions against Russia<sup>59</sup>. On 15-16 September, Putin and Xi met at the SCO summit in Samarkand, where the Russian president highlighted the role of regional power centers that no longer accept rules imposed from outside.

In 2023, the SCO summit was also held online on 4 July, under Indian chairmanship, and was attended for the first time by the Iranian president, thanks to Chinese and Russian support. By that time, Iran had become an important partner in Russia's war effort, thanks to massive supplies of unmanned aerial vehicles and artillery ammunition to Russian forces in Ukraine. At the 15th BRICS summit in Johannesburg from 22 to 24 August 2023, Lavrov led the Russian delegation. Russia's main proposal was the creation of payment systems that would allow it to circumvent sanctions. For his part, Xi declared that this summit would be a milestone, increasingly showing greater leadership in the forums in which he participates.

In 2024, during the SCO summit in Astana on 3 June, both leaders demonstrated the level of agreements reached, while declaring themselves open to cooperating with all countries that aspire to a mutually beneficial relationship based on the principles of equality, mutual interest and respect for sovereignty.

Putin did preside over the 16th BRICS summit in Kazan from 22 to 24 October 2024. The main points of his speech were his commitment to a multilateral international order, respect for sovereignty and internal political regimes, and recognition of mutual interests in the face of Western efforts to maintain its hegemony. He also insisted on the need to create an alternative payment system that would prevent the United States from continuing to use the dollar as a political weapon. For his part, Xi spoke of BRICS as a forum for promoting stability, peace and conflict resolution<sup>60</sup>. The most notable results were that, despite being held in Russia, government delegations from thirty-six countries,

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<sup>59</sup> Available at: <https://brics2022.mfa.gov.cn/eng/>

<sup>60</sup> Precisely thanks to Putin's mediation, the Chinese and Indian governments adopted measures to reduce tensions over the border territory of Ladakh in the Himalayas, where in May 2020 a clash resulted in 76 casualties on the Indian side and an unknown number of Chinese casualties.

heads of state and government from all CIS countries, and UN Secretary-General António Guterres attended; in addition, thirteen countries were granted partner status.

In 2025, neither Putin nor Xi attended the 16th BRICS summit in Rio de Janeiro on 6-7 July, chaired by Brazil, which focused on long-term political issues, which clash with Russia's short-term interests on the international stage. During the final session, the US decision to impose tariffs on countries supporting BRICS was announced. Although it was presented as a measure aimed at curbing proposals regarding the dollar, everyone understood that it was directed against China and Russia for their plans to undermine US global power<sup>61</sup>.

Meanwhile, from 31 August to 1 September, the SCO summit was held in Tianjin, attended by twenty heads of state and government and representatives of ten international organizations, the largest number of participants since its inception. This summit saw the famous meeting between Xi and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, at Putin's behest, which highlighted a renewed rapprochement between three of the four major powers that make up the new multipolar international order, perhaps in an attempt to ensure that the normalization of Sino-Indian relations followed the Russian-Chinese model of the 1990s. Putin and Xi's support for India's historic aspiration to occupy a permanent seat on the UN Security Council should also be interpreted in this light.

The SCO's Tianjin Declaration called for the principles of non-interference in internal affairs, non-use of force (somewhat contradictory to what is happening in Ukraine), sustainable development of inter-state relations and opposition to unilateral sanctions. In addition, the organization's objectives for the next ten years were set out, with an emphasis on economic and financial integration. The conflict in Ukraine was also mentioned, which was not included in the resolution of the previous summit<sup>62</sup>.

### Relations in perspective

On 28 December 2025, Lavrov stated in an interview that Russia is prepared to support China in the event of a worsening of the situation in the Taiwan Strait<sup>63</sup>. These statements

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<sup>61</sup> See more details in PÉREZ GIL. *Russian foreign policy towards the BRICS in the context of the war in Ukraine*. *Op. cit.*

<sup>62</sup> Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/6376>

<sup>63</sup> Interview in TASS, 28 December 2025. Available at: <https://tass.ru/politika/26036509>

raise an interesting point, because Russian political and strategic support would have significant implications in conflict scenarios in Southeast Asia, the Korean peninsula or Japan. Although the 2001 Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation does not contain any mutual assistance clause similar to that in the Russian-North Korean strategic partnership agreement, the weight of Russia's nuclear arsenal could be a major deterrent to prevent an escalation into open conflict in the event of a crisis between China and the United States. The war in Ukraine has shown that all combinations of scenarios are possible, even those that are considered less likely a priori.

The year 2026 will mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation and the thirtieth anniversary of the declaration of Sino-Russian strategic relations (significantly, it will also mark the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the United States). Given the current complex and unstable international scenario, this will be a crucial moment to test the strength of bilateral relations, which, as mentioned above, have evolved significantly over the last three decades, starting with the resolution of the border issue.

The establishment of a deeper strategic relationship could serve to generate stability at the global level and in regional areas where they have complementary interests. Despite the existence of potential situations of rivalry, the recognition of mutual interests will tend to increase their cooperation, both bilaterally and in multilateral forums, but in a relationship that is increasingly tilted in China's favour. In any case, it seems unlikely that Russia and China will formalize a military alliance, except perhaps in the event of a serious structural change, such as a prolonged war or a direct escalation with the United States, which could open the door to such a future coalition.

## **Conclusions**

Russia and China share a realistic approach to international relations. Both perceive global governance as a Western imposition designed to protect its interests, but they also have important differences. China is actively involved in global economic affairs, although it is reluctant to accept binding rules on security. Russia, on the other hand, has been more willing to participate in security and defence, while remaining skeptical about global economic governance due to sanctions.

Furthermore, both powers avoid explicitly supporting their respective territorial claims (Crimea, South China Sea) and, ultimately, present different visions of global governance, with China as a more constructive actor and Russia as a disruptive power.

Since 2022, the war in Ukraine has led to a gradual strengthening of bilateral relations, particularly in the economic and energy spheres. Furthermore, China's political support, which has translated into a position of benevolent neutrality in favour of Russia, allows it to sustain the war effort in a context of massive sanctions and attempts at isolation which, ultimately, thanks mainly to this support and that of other powers in the Global South, have not achieved the desired success, which was to prevent the continuation of the aggression against Ukraine.

From the Western perspective, the expansion of these relations means increasing the risks of confrontation amid the Western retreat from areas where traditionally imposed itself and dominated, such as Africa and Southeast Asia. Others, such as the Mediterranean and Latin America, seem to be firmly anchored to the Western bloc, as emphasized by the recent US national security strategy. An agreement on peaceful coexistence between major powers will entail the recognition of regional spheres of influence, with the big question being how they will coordinate with each other in the multilateral institutions in which they participate.

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