

# How Does China see Russia? A Glimpse into the PRC Official Position and the Surrounding Academic Outlooks

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## Abstract:

This essay aims to assess the perception of Russia in the foreign policy establishment thinking of the People's Republic of China, specifically looking at the most recent developments following the Russian invasion into Ukraine, by examining speeches, statements, and meeting readouts of the PRC's top foreign policy actors, complemented with an assessment of Chinese academia. The first section of the essay gauges the role of Russia in China's foreign policy outlook. The second section provides an analysis of selected PRC academic publications after the beginning of Russia's attack on Ukraine. The essay concludes that the PRC's policy vis-a-vis Russia is not that of an allied power, but of an interest-based pragmatic neighbour. Consequentially, while the Chinese foreign policy establishment promises deep and integrated cooperation, the PRC foreign affairs academic debate contains a strong motif of a limited support doctrine in relation to Russia.

**Key words:** China-Russia, Political discourse, Academic discourse, Ukraine

## Introduction

Russia and China share many characteristics, and both sides are falling back on these similarities to benefit their relationship. There is the institutional memory and likeness that is a legacy from the high point of the Sino-Soviet relationship of the 1950s. Simply put, many practices share the same roots and are easily understood by the other side. Even for structures that are obsolete or reformed beyond recognition, such as the Communist Party rule and role in Russia or the relationship between the state and private capital in China, there is a muscle memory, especially among the leadership generation, of the systemic mechanisms underlying the counterpart's decision making. This muscle memory trickles down to institutional, managerial,

and technological operations, facilitating cooperation in various sectors, including, crucially, the military.

Still, historic commonalities aside, the two powers are also drifting apart. The policy mistakes that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union from within were a warning to China, but also served as proof to China that it had chosen the better approach to localising Marxism – China had adopted, reformed, and ultimately transformed the Soviet model. (孔寒冰, 项佐涛) The failure of (Soviet) Russia juxtaposed to the rise of China has bred condescending attitudes towards Russia.

Furthermore, the institutional cultures of the last three decades have very little overlap, and while both share the goal of countering US domination, it is not being accomplished through mutual integration, but rather via increased sovereignty-building and silo-ing on the national levels. Given the current emphasis on sovereignty in both Moscow and Beijing, it would be hard to imagine any scenario of integration akin to that of the first decade of the People's Republic of China. Even if Russia's sovereignty is severely undermined as an outcome of a coordinated Western punishment for Russia's war in Ukraine and the country is forced to accommodate China's interests as a result, the level of institution-building *ex nihilo* that took place in 1950s China would not happen in contemporary Russia. With these factors in mind, it is important to investigate the Chinese position, approach, and plans for Russia.

Since the upgrade of the Sino-Russian relationship to the “Russia-China comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era” in 2019, and even more so since the beginning of Russia's war in Ukraine, much attention has been paid to the position of China vis-a-vis the Russian worldview. The Chinese position has been called ambiguous (Wolf and Malyarenko, 2022) balancing (McGuirk, 2022) contradictory, and even “solidly pro-Russia.” (Feng, 2022) During a Bush China Foundation US-China Strategic Policy Dialogue on Ukraine event in cooperation with Peking University's Institute for Global Cooperation and Understanding that brought together academics and former diplomats from the United States and PRC (Leung, Shan and Yu, 2022) in April 2022, Yu Hongjun, Vice President of the Chinese People's Association for Peace and Disarmament, and former Deputy Minister of the International Liaison Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, currently affiliated with Peking University, summed up a position many consider to be mainstream among PRC official and academic circles alike: “So, I think, NATO forced

Russia to fire the first shot. It is an indisputable fact that the war was started by Russia first, but this is a ‘special military operation’ that NATO forced Russia to start first, or Ukraine lured Russia into starting the war first.” (Yichao, 2022) On one hand, this position places the blame on NATO and, most often, the United States. On the other hand, it cannot avoid admitting that it was Russia that started the war – a war that has implications globally and affects China’s foreign policy strategy directly.

“China always respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries. At the same time, we have also seen that the Ukraine issue has its complex and special historical circumstances, and we understand Russia’s legitimate concerns on security issues,” (Xinhua News Agency, 2022) stated PRC’s minister of Foreign affairs Wang Yi in a 24 February 2022, phone call with his Russia counterpart Sergei Lavrov – on the day that Russia invaded Ukraine. Later that same day, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying responded to a Bloomberg question “Can you say then China considers Russia’s action an invasion?” during the regular press conference with “We have stated China’s principled position on the Ukraine issue. There is a complex historical background and context on this issue. The current situation is the result of the interplay of various factors.” (MFAPRC, 2022) The statements balancing keywords “sovereignty” with “concerns” and “context”: arguably were meant to project vagueness, yet yielded the opposite result, casting China as a supporter of Russia in the eyes of the US and wider Western policymaker and foreign policy communities. (US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2022)

Seven months later, during the meeting with Xi Jinping on the side-lines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, it was Vladimir Putin’s turn to refer to “concerns,” (Putin, 2022) this time, acknowledging Chinese unease regarding the situation in Ukraine. Coming out as a rhetorical supporter of Russia during the first stages of Russia’s war in Ukraine, the People’s Republic of China has ended up in a complicated position due to its comprehensive strategic partner’s failures on the front line.

Against the backdrop of such complex, ambiguous, and even contradictory signals at times, the essay is an attempt to gauge the Chinese approach to the PRC’s relationship with the Russian Federation, its strategic considerations, perceived risks, and preferred outcomes, by examining the most recent developments in speeches, statements, and meeting readouts of the PRC’s top foreign policy actors, complemented with an assessment of

Chinese academia's understanding of its partnership with Russia. Methodologically placed in the field of discourse analysis, the essay applies source analysis of Chinese and Russian official foreign policy actors' statements as well as recent academic publications with relevant keywords retrieved from the China National Knowledge Database (CNKI.net). Source languages include Mandarin Chinese, Russian, and English.

### **Big Country Diplomacy: The Role of Russia in China's Foreign Policy Outlook**

According to the Xi Jinping Thought of Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, China's "new type of international relations" is subdivided into several categories: Big Country Diplomacy, Regional Diplomacy, Developing Country Diplomacy, and Multilateral Diplomacy. (China Internet New Center, 2022) The relationship with Russia falls into the most important category of the four: the Big Country Diplomacy, along with China-US and China-EU relations. Moreover, China pursues cooperation with Russia also via the Multilateral Diplomacy outlet, as Russia is a member of all three organisations PRC prioritises under this category – the United Nations, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the BRICS. Russia, one can deduce, is an unavoidable presence in the Chinese foreign policy agenda, because all China's foreign policy foci overlap with it; Russia is a major power, a regional presence, and a multilateral partner. Moreover, as an "upper middle income" state according to World Bank (Hamadeh, Rompaey, Metreau, Eapen, 2022) Russia is also seen as a "developing" country by the Chinese classification.<sup>1</sup>

The relationship also has an internal emotional aspect. China is sympathetic towards Russia's push against what both countries see as US

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview with a Chinese diplomat in September 2022, the diplomat stated that "Russia is doing well in providing certain social services, including medicine and all levels of education, to its population. From an economic perspective, however, it is not a developed country." This view is supported by a 2004 publication by Peng Gang and Guan Xueling, which states that "today, with economic globalization deepening with each passing day, the so-called developed and underdeveloped economies practically refer to the developed and underdeveloped market economies. Russia is obviously an underdeveloped market economy." This perspective is also reflected in the online Chinese encyclopedia Baidu Baike, which lists Russia among the major developing countries: "发展中国家", Baidu Baike, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/发展中国家/652451>.

hegemony. However, the perception that China's leadership is willing to unambiguously draft itself as a supporter of the Russian position solely to counter US supremacy is flawed. Close cooperation and the messaging of national leadership messaging on the "friendship with no limits and no forbidden areas of cooperation" (Xinhua News Agency, 2022) has practical interests behind it. Even Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelenskyy is careful not to lock China into the Russian worldview: "As for now, China is balancing and indeed has neutrality and, I will be honest, this neutrality is better than China joining Russia ... It's important for us that China wouldn't help Russia," (McGuirk, 2022) he expressed during an online address to Australian university students in August 2022. Indeed, with the curious exception of Li Zhanshu, the Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, the third most powerful official in the Communist Party hierarchy, stating to Vladimir Putin that "We fully understand the necessity of all the measures taken by Russia aimed at protecting its key interests, we are providing our assistance," (The State Duma, 2022) Chinese officials are normally trying to avoid any allegiance in their signalling towards Russia.

Russia, in its turn, routinely portrays Chinese diplomatic actions as expressions of support for the Kremlin. Case in point: the contradictory signalling of the importance of the Putin-Xi meeting during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Samarkand.

The first stopover meeting during Xi Jinping's Central Asia tour, which also was the first in-person visit of the PRC leader since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, was not Xi's conversation with Vladimir Putin, but his visit to Nur-Sultan for a Sino-Kazakh bilateral with Kassym-Jomart Tokaev. "China highly values its relations with Kazakhstan, and firmly supports Kazakhstan in safeguarding national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and in taking reform measures to preserve national stability and development. China will always be a trustworthy and reliable friend and partner of Kazakhstan," (MFAPRC, 2022) reads a PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement following the formal talks of Xi Jinping and the president of Tokayev on 15 September 2022. Aside from the traditional Chinese diplomatic lingo, the meeting overall, as well as the statement in particular, are quite remarkable, not just because of the bilateral implications of the Sino-Kazakh relations, but because they again allow us to gauge the complexity of the Chinese official position towards Kazakhstan's northern neighbour – the Russian Federation.

China did not choose Moscow as the primary destination for China's president. Instead, it chose to express solidarity with a country whose positioning in the war has not been the same page with Russia; Kazakhstan has opened its borders to Russian citizens fleeing conscription, and in more recent displays, even demonstrated readiness to directly contradict Russia, rejecting a "demand by Russia's Foreign Ministry to expel Ukraine's ambassador to Kazakhstan, Petro Vrublevskiy, over his comments in August about killing Russians." (Tapaeva, 2022)

In sum, what Russia broadcasted as a bilateral Putin-Xi meeting against the backdrop of a Central Asian venue (Russian News Agency, 2022), China presented as a Central Asia-oriented multilateral Chinese show of strength, a "revival of the ancient Silk Road," with meetings with Vladimir Putin and other leaders on the side. In this setting, it is understandable why Xi Jinping did not announce the meeting with Vladimir Putin first; the declaration had been made by the Kremlin.

When the Chinese minister of Foreign Affairs and State Councillor Wang Yi briefed the accompanying journalists on the outcomes of the visit, Russia was merely an afterthought, first mentioned only two-thirds into the statement: "President Xi Jinping also held bilateral meetings in Samarkand with the leaders of 10 countries attending the SCO Summit at their request and attended the trilateral meeting between China, Russia and Mongolia." (MFAPRC, 2022) Arguably, the result of the Putin-Xi meeting still contained language of encouragement as the "two heads of state positively evaluated the fruitful strategic communication maintained between the two countries this year, and said that they will continue to strongly support each other on issues concerning each other's core interests." (*ibid*) The messaging followed the Chinese contradictory or ambiguous approach.

Of course, one should not underplay the cooperation and mutual support between the two countries, including in the realms of defence and security. On 19 September 2022, the 17th round of the China-Russia Strategic Security Consultation took place, chaired by Yang Jiechi, a member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the CPC Central Committee, co-chaired by Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Nikolai Patrushev. The format has been active since 2005, and the statement again spelled many commonalities in security outlooks: "The two sides ... exchanged in-depth views on maintaining global strategic stability, the situation in the Asia-Pacific region, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and other

international and regional issues of common concern.” (MFAPRC, 2022) The commonalities in global security worldview, namely, the shared willingness to resist US-led security architecture, translate into practical projects as well. A recent example of the anti-US cooperation and an illustration of the military and dual-use cooperation between the two powers is the Russia and China deal on mutual deployment of GLONASS and Beidou satellite navigation systems in their territories. (Interfax, 2022) According to the information provided by TASS, GLONASS stations will be placed in Changchun, Urumqi and Shanghai, whereas Beidou would be placed in Obninsk, Irkutsk and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. (Russian News Agency, 2022) “Used simultaneously, the Russian and Chinese systems – GLONASS and Beidou – will increase the accuracy and reliability of navigation. Therefore, we are sincerely interested in wider cooperation in using the GLONASS and Beidou systems, as well as navigation technologies based on them,” expressed Roscosmos CEO Yuri Borisov.

Still, the cooperation is not all-encompassing. China prioritizes anti-US strategies but is reluctant to support all Russia’s ventures: in the “friendship with no limits,” the words spell out partnership, but the context signals limits.

### **An Ideal Russia for China: the PRC Academic Debate**

The previous section attempted to demonstrate how Russia is exaggerating Chinese commitment to the bilateral relationship, and how Chinese official foreign policy communications carefully draw a line, presenting Russia not as *the* ideological counterpart, but merely as *one of* them, albeit an important one.

What, then, in turn, could be the function that China ascribes to Russia? Further analysis of the PRC academic publications after the beginning of Russia’s attack on Ukraine demonstrate that the analytical community of the PRC favours deepening specific cooperation with Russia when it serves at least one of two goals: to offset US domination regionally and globally, including in the Global South, and to insulate China against global economic shocks emanating from volatile energy and shipping markets. The first goal falls within the military and value domains, whereas the second one is economic.



Voicing a popular opinion among China's economic academia, Hu Zinan, Tongji University, in his article for *Asia-Pacific Economic Review*, underscores the economic opportunities for China in the "Russia-Ukraine conflict," arguing in favour of maintaining what he calls the "strategic ambiguity on Russia" rather than voicing support: "At present, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has evolved into a game of superpowers. It has significantly changed the pattern of global economy and international competition. The main changes include that the EU is becoming the biggest loser, manifested in a widening gap with China and the United States; The severe sanctions imposed by the United States and Europe on Russia are tearing the global industrial chain apart; The imbalances between the supply and demand of global energy and food are making their prices roaring; The predatory behaviour of the United States and Europe against Russia is leading to a collapse of the Western credit system. As for China, these bring both challenges and opportunities. China should keep on high alert and handle with caution, maintaining strategic ambiguity on Russia, deepening China-EU economic and trade cooperation, exploring new space for cooperation in the fields of energy and food, and accelerating the internationalization of RMB and the development of digital RMB." (胡子南, 2022) This line of thought is pragmatic and acts as an illustration of the Chinese self-serving approach in Russia's conflict with the West, not featuring any particular solidarity with Russia.

It is worth mentioning that such an approach to Russia is not necessarily seen in China as working against Russia's interests or strategies. Liu Fenghua, Head of the Russian Foreign Policy Research Department at the Institute of Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, argues that Russia's own approach to foreign policy has "has experienced the evolution process from transformation to finalization. This process can be divided into five stages: Pro-Western Diplomacy (1991–1995), 'Multi-polarization' Diplomacy (1996–2000), Pragmatic Diplomacy of Great Power (2001–2004, 2009–2013), Neo-Slavic Diplomacy (2005–2008), and Power Diplomacy of Great Power (from 2014 to the present)." (柳丰华, 2022) The current stage does not leave much space for meaningful alliances on Russia's part, in a sense, as it is conceptualized in China as a counterpart of Xi Jinping's Chinese foreign policy outlook. These domains serve Russia's current interests as well, specifically given the isolation due to sanctions. Case in point: Russia's vice prime minister Aleksandr Novak specifically played up the 'Power of Siberia 2' pipeline during the



SCO Summit in Samarkand as an alternative to replace the export market and revenue stream lost due to the shelving of the 'Nord Stream 2' pipeline to Germany, promising an agreement soon on the project with China and stating that "the gas pipeline will allow a supply of up to 50 billion cubic meters of Russian gas to China per year."

However, if interests in some projects overlap, there are fundamental differences in approach in others, acknowledged by the Chinese side. The Arctic is a pertinent example of such differences: "Security cooperation in the Arctic region is a milestone in the relations between China and Russia. As a classical theory that influences a country's foreign policy decisions, defensive realism may be used to interpret the structure and course of China Russia cooperation in Arctic security affairs. On the one hand, the current Arctic governance is moving towards the pattern of "multipolar competition" under the leadership of the Arctic Council; On the other hand, driven by economic complementarity, a shared perception to external threat, power balance, and so on, China and Russia have developed a closer security cooperation partnership, which to a certain extent has enhanced their security cooperation in the Arctic region, such as joint exploitation of resources, construction of airline infrastructure and heightened awareness of security cooperation. China and Russia are facing many challenges due to their differences in perception, the uncertainty of global climate change, and the danger of militarization of Arctic security by the United States. Therefore, identifying the core interests and demands of China and Russia in the Arctic region, acknowledging their differences, strengthening their strategic cooperation in the emerging technology sector, creating a new model of China-Russia Arctic +X cooperation, and jointly establishing the Arctic Science and Sustainable Development Fund are some of the options for the two countries to deal with the challenges." (谢晓光, 杜洞光, 2022)

Importantly, PRC academics frame the "Ukraine crisis" in the categories of impact on the "developing world," of which China considers itself to be a part and a leader (Kelly, 2018): "Due to the Ukraine crisis, the actors, organizing mechanisms, norms and rules, as well as the overarching issue of the international system have all suffered from shocks, albeit to different degrees. With both gains and losses expected, the crisis has posed more challenges than opportunities for developing countries at present," (杨洁勉, 2022) writes Shanghai Institute of International Studies' Yang Jiemian, member of the Foreign Policy Advisory Group of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In his article, he examines how the "crisis" could present an

opportunity for China to “advance the construction and reform of the international system.”

Influential PRC academics do not openly argue for disengagement with Russia; however, they point out the challenges in across-the-board cooperation and argue in favour of carefully weighing China’s own interests. The effects caused by Russia’s war in Ukraine are routinely analysed via the assessment of challenges and opportunities for China. The motif of anti-US comradery aside, the Chinese academic debate does not argue in favour of a strong Russia on China’s borders. Currently, Russia needing China because of Western sanctions is beneficial for China economically. (郭晓琼, 蔡真, 2022) An ideal Russia for China, one can presume, is an entity that is contained enough to continue needing China economically and geopolitically but functional enough not to implode.

## Conclusions

China’s academic debate includes a view of Russia as a somewhat rogue state, the bottom line of which, for the time being, can be used to China’s benefit – to counter the United States and to present an ideologically credible alternative development model to the Global South. The limitation, however, is that Russia should be limited enough in its options that it continues to rely on China, but not so limited that it implodes.

A Russia in a role of a junior partner is advantageous for China, providing benefits such as natural resources, a market for technology, ideological solidarity, and even some extent of military cooperation, implying stability along the four thousand kilometre long Sino-Russian border. Whereas a weak and disintegrated Russia is a risk factor – its regions can become a source of terrorism, extremism, and even a nationalist anti-China agenda.

Furthermore, even if they do not currently amount to unilateral land, Russia’s destabilising activities closer to China, e.g., in Central Asia, could disrupt China’s neighbourhood. Although current Russian expansionism is not a sanctioned topic for the mainland academic critique, research into the historical aspects of Russian imperialism, including the humiliating treaties, such as the “Russia-Chinese Provisional Agreement on the Fengtian Province,” (徐炳三, 2022) is alive in well.

It is consequential, then, that the PRC foreign affairs academic debate contains a strong motif of a limited support doctrine: China should take

advantage of the instability for the benefit of internationalising its financial infrastructure and expanding its economic reach, however, mainstream academia rarely contains calls for providing full support and solidarity to Russia. Without exaggerating the influence of the academic opinion on official PRC state policy, one must admit, however, that the debate, especially in the publications of influential think-tankers and analysts, provides a basis for determining the mainstream line of approach toward Russia. For this reason, Xi Jinping's government will likely continue the tradition of the "PRC's foreign policy contradictions," (Rühlig, 2021) manifested in the impossible task of keeping Russia close while hedging against it.

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