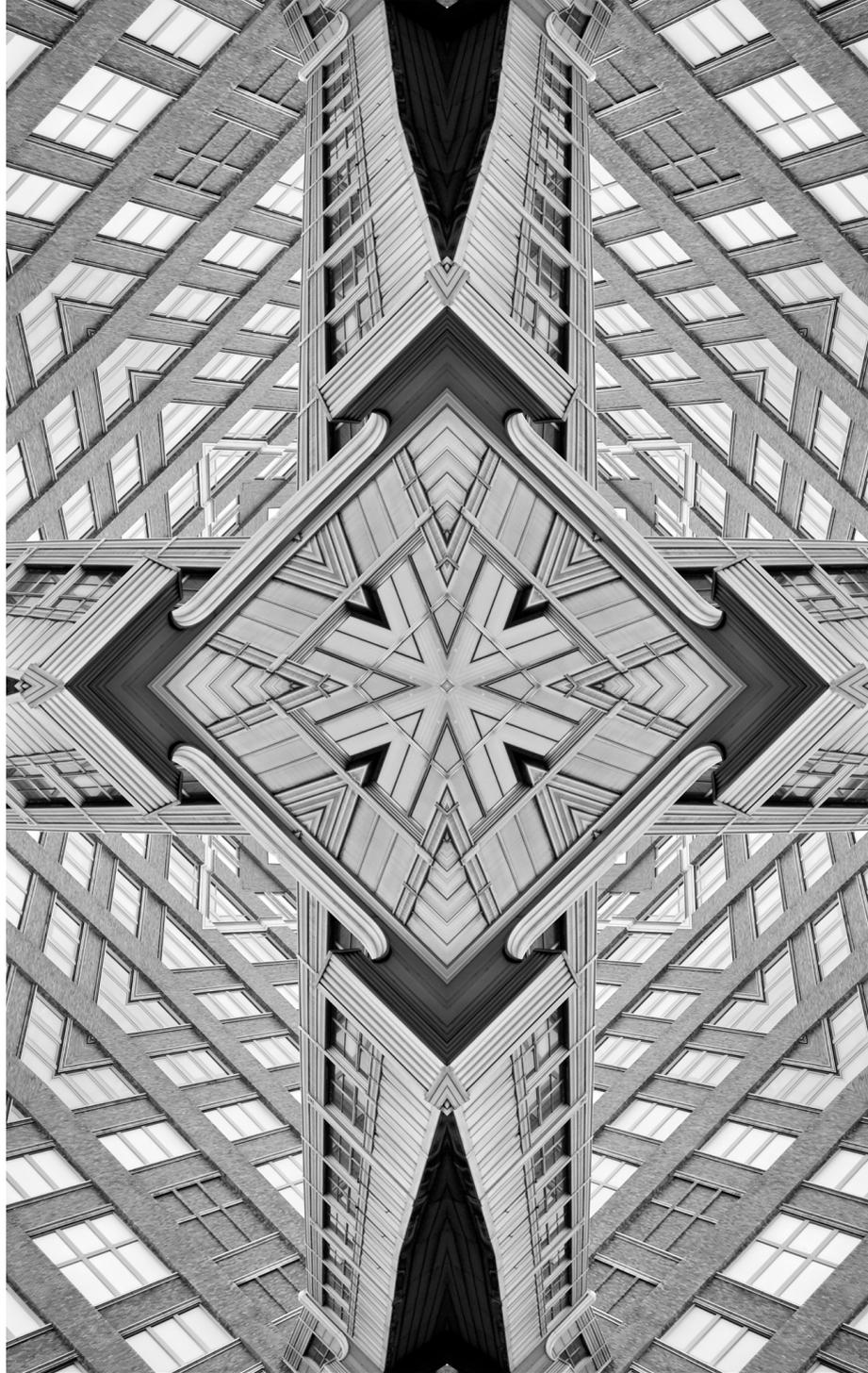


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Brief

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Enter the ‘DragonBear’: The Russia-China Partnership and What it Means for Geopolitics

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Abstract

Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine¹ follows its annexation of Crimea in 2014² and its continued direct support for separatist activities in eastern Ukraine,³ marking a new chapter in Moscow’s geopolitical approach. China’s response and its overt diplomatic, financial, and economic support for Russia was also noteworthy. This brief assesses the contours of the new geopolitical formation (the ‘DragonBear’, a term coined by this author) that is characterised by deepening ties between Moscow and Beijing in key strategic areas, and the geopolitical options it presents to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 must be analysed in the context of ongoing global transformation processes. If the period between the First and Second World War was only an interruption, the same is also true for the period between the First and the Second Cold War. Indeed, Russia's war is the manifestation of the beginning of the Second Cold War,⁴ which is evolving around numerous important trends: 1) the bifurcation of the global system; 2) the ongoing systemic competition between the US and China in all strategic areas, influenced by a mutual decoupling of the leading socioeconomic networks;⁵ 3) increasing tensions between the two Asian giants, China and India;⁶ 4) a possible US withdrawal from West Asia due to growing energy self-sufficiency and, in the long term, from Europe due to a shifting focus towards the Indo-Pacific region; and finally, 5) fluid, ad-hoc geopolitical constellations between regional powers,⁷ navigating between the US and China to avoid taking sides.⁸

The international order is in a transitional phase in which two centres of power are emerging—the US and China.⁹ Washington, through its unchallenged global power projection, has shaped both international relations and globalised socioeconomic networks since the collapse of the Soviet Union. China's impressive economic growth has caused heightened expectations of its continued rise. However, it remains to be seen whether Beijing will be able to convert its growing geoeconomic weight and geopolitical influence into global power projection in the future. Due to socioeconomic turmoil and the protracted impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, global affairs are currently at an inflection point.¹⁰ The process of increasing the bipolarisation of the networks and structures of the global order is already underway, manifesting in the intensification of the systemic rivalry between China and the US, while all major regional players and free riders (including Russia) are trying to position themselves in this new power competition.¹¹

Against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia is striving to become an indispensable power, without which neither the US nor China will be able to win the system competition against each other. To achieve this, Moscow seeks to build and consolidate its “sphere of influence” based on a union between Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, which would help it become a major player with significant power projection in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Eurasia.¹² If President Vladimir Putin manages to subjugate Ukraine, this would fulfil Russia's geopolitical ambitions to revive a post-imperial state

as a great power with a significantly improved position in global politics. In this regard, Russia's geostrategic approach pursues a vertical (north-south) extension of its geopolitical and geoeconomic interests, encompassing the Arctic Ocean and the Barents Sea, spanning its "near abroad" in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, and reaching into Eurasia, West Asia, and North Africa.¹³ The western flank of Russia, which is the eastern flank for NATO's European members, remains one of the most important geostrategic flashpoints because of the concentration of Russia's population in this area. Russia is slowly but surely shifting its centre of gravity from an interdependence with Western Europe to Eurasia, South Asia (India, Pakistan, Afghanistan), and even the Indo-Pacific region. For this reason, Putin is eager to close the chapter on the "sphere of influence" in Eastern Europe by reshaping the European security architecture once and for all, to turn his attention to the above-mentioned geopolitical and geoeconomic areas in the long run.

It is plausible that Russia needs a powerful ally after the precarious isolation by the West, while China seeks a loyal partner with regional power projection to bolster its global influence. In this context, Russia has seized the opportunity to successively build a new modus vivendi of systemic coordination with China in relevant key areas of shared geopolitical and geoeconomic interests, in what this author describes as the 'DragonBear'.¹⁴ Indeed, Sino-Russian relations have continued to deepen since 2014 under sustained US pressure and ongoing Western sanctions.

The ‘DragonBear’: A New Geopolitical Arrangement

The ‘DragonBear’ is neither an alliance or an entente nor a “marriage of convenience”, but a temporary asymmetrical relationship, in which China predominantly sets the tone but remains dependent on Russia in many ways. While China enjoys trade, economic, and financial dominance, Russia continues to rely on defence and, in many respects, diplomatic superiority through its regional power projection and successful military operations around the globe. The unequal collaboration is cemented by the shared geopolitical interest in creating a credible counterweight to US influence in international affairs based on a systemic coordination of a wide range of policies and actions.

Moreover, the ‘DragonBear’ is intensifying due to the common goal of responding collectively to major turbulences in the global economy, finance, and trade; but both countries keep in mind the rapidly changing strategic alliances and partnerships amidst the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). They assume that the global order is undergoing a systemic transformation, the outcome of which is unpredictable, but likely with a variety of unforeseen implications for Russian and Chinese interests. Thus, the ‘DragonBear’ is not a classic alliance according to Western ideas and concepts. Rather, China and Russia have tactically entered into a rapprochement to manage the uncertain transitional phase of the bifurcation without the need to announce a strategic alliance, let alone a military one.

China is evidently the stronger partner economically and financially, but it treats Russia as an equal rather than a subordinate counterpart. Mutual respect plays an exceedingly important role in this bilateral relationship, in which Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping have met 38 times. The relationship reached its culmination during the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games on 4 February 2022 in Beijing when the two leaders signed a “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development.”¹⁵

Russia has been China’s top arms supplier for decades. Key building blocks of Russian-Chinese cooperation include the delivery of S-400 air defence systems and Su-35 fighter jets to improve Beijing’s ability to attack US warships.¹⁶ Since 2019, Russia and China have been jointly developing China’s missile defence early warning system.¹⁷ In addition, Moscow is supporting Beijing’s military with technologies about which Putin has declined to provide further details. Russian scientists are working in Chinese technology and telecommunications

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companies such as Huawei. China's advanced computer chips are another way for Russia to acquire military technologies, circumventing Western sanctions. Other opportunities for cooperation, such as the joint development of satellites and the construction of a future lunar station, have also been explored. Cooperation in the area of space or the new technologies of the 4IR are particularly problematic from the perspective of Western countries due to the growing great power competition in space.¹⁸

China and Russia have also settled their long-standing territorial disputes and amicably demilitarised their common border. Therefore, neither territorial claims nor border disputes should affect bilateral relations in the long term. Although both are involved in territorial disputes with third countries, they avoid direct confrontation with each other.

In the energy sector, their interests are complementary, as Russia is the world's largest combined supplier of oil and gas, while China remains the largest energy consumer. In the future, an energy dependency similar to that between Russia and Europe could emerge, as Moscow increasingly supplies China with oil and gas through various pipelines. On the other hand, energy cooperation improves Russia profile in the Asian markets and allows it to diversify its own energy portfolio away from Europe.

The main common denominator is not only the goal of demonstrating a credible counterweight to US global power. It is also about creating a significant Eurasian connectivity in response to US maritime dominance in the Indo-Pacific region, ensuring security of supply in the event of future sea lane blockages.¹⁹

Russia and China openly share the objective of reducing US and European influence in Eurasia. Moscow's military operation with the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) to efficiently stabilise the situation in Kazakhstan,²⁰ following violent protests in January this year, has improved its regional position vis-à-vis the US and China. Russia helped Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev stay in power and gained additional political influence in the country, which has a significant volume of raw materials and plays an important role in China's Silk Road projects.²¹ Kazakhstan is also a member of the two main regional organisations of Russia (CSTO) and China (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation). Thus, Russia can be rented as a security provider and Putin has raised the price of Russia's future engagement at the invitation of authoritarian regimes that want to remain in power. After his military support for Syrian

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President Bashar al-Assad and Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko, Tokayev is now the next leader to safeguard Russian interests on the ground and beyond.

Indeed, Moscow benefits from China’s terrestrial expansion that connects Asia and Europe across the Eurasian landmass. The Chinese Silk Road embodies a horizontal geopolitical extension that stretches from the least developed parts of China to Europe, diverting China’s attention from Russia’s Far East. The Belt and Road Initiative is accentuating the need for Russia’s role in filling geopolitical gaps in those geographic points of intersection. China benefits from Russia’s projection of power in the “near abroad” and Eurasia by securing valuable access to raw materials and offering economic and financial incentives to these countries once the situation there is stabilised. Moscow is emerging as a global security provider that could act on behalf of China’s geoeconomic interests in Eurasia and other parts of the world. The ‘DragonBear’ may have discovered a successful formula of task-sharing—Russia is the security provider, and China is the financial and economic provider—that can be applied in other parts of the world.

The modus vivendi of coordination extends beyond Eurasia to South Asia. Moscow is helping Beijing stabilise Afghanistan and prevent spillover effects of terrorist activities in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.²² Many great powers have repeatedly tried, unsuccessfully, to make Afghanistan a stage for their geopolitical ambitions. The US is the latest superpower to suffer a catastrophic defeat in the country after two decades of unsuccessful occupation and state-building. China’s focus is on terrestrial connectivity (transport, trade, and energy) in conjunction with Central Asian countries as well as Pakistan and Iran. Building bridges between them is beneficial to Russian interests.

Potential points of conflict between Russia and China arise from their geographic prioritisation and overlapping geopolitical interests. Russian fears of growing Chinese influence in Central Asia, the Far East, and other traditional spheres of influence in the post-Soviet space have become entrenched. However, the general hypothesis that China and Russia currently face competing interests in Central Asia, Africa, India, and the Arctic that inhibit the modus vivendi of mutual coordination in the long term cannot be confirmed at this time.

The ‘DragonBear’ in the Aftermath of Ukraine War

China and Russia may have coordinated the timing of Moscow’s launch of the reinvasion of Ukraine to take place after the Winter Olympics held in Beijing.²³ Xi and Putin met on 4 February 2022 in a long-awaited effort to diplomatically boost their countries’ international standing, leading to the announcement of the 5,000-word joint statement.²⁴ At the bilateral summit, the two presidents declared that their “friendship has no limits”.²⁵ The document covers broad sections of the bilateral, regional and international relationship between Beijing and Moscow. The joint declaration marks a turning point in the bilateral relations. Putin would never have launched such a large-scale war against Ukraine if he had not relied on China’s financial, economic, and diplomatic support. Moreover, China was apparently surprised by the Russian military’s difficulties in the combat zones. The Chinese president was “unsettled” by the “reputational damage” that could result from the strong support for Russia, as well as the global economic consequences in light of Russian countersanctions at a time when Beijing is seeking to boost its own economic growth.²⁶

China’s support for Russia’s economy following the imposition of Western sanctions has many dimensions, stemming from mutual interests in commodity trade²⁷ and those in the strategic domains. China’s role is critical for Russia’s economy amid a threatening default scenario. China is considering buying stakes in Russian energy and natural resources companies (such as Gazprom and Rusal).²⁸ In addition, China decided to double the trading margin with the Ruble after the Russian currency crashed.²⁹ Some of the actions by the ‘DragonBear’ following Western sanctions against Russia indicate carefully planned steps in anticipation of them. For example, Russia’s state-owned Sberbank revealed plans to replace VISA and MasterCard with a new “MIR” card system in cooperation with China’s UnionPay immediately after VISA and MasterCard³⁰ announced that they would suspend operations in the country.³¹

China has also supported Russia diplomatically. China’s foreign minister Wang Yi spoke of “ever-lasting friendship” with Russia and stressed that the two countries would help bring “peace and stability” to the world.³² At the same time, China’s Foreign Ministry opposed any moves by the US “that add fuel to flames”³³ and pledged that Beijing will retaliate with a “serious response” if the US imposes sanctions on China over Ukraine. China also stressed that the moves by US-led NATO had pushed the tensions between Russia and Ukraine to a breaking point. China further stated that the US criticised its position on Ukraine to seek space to simultaneously suppress China and Russia to maintain

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its hegemony.³⁴ Furthermore, Beijing’s official statements showed unequivocal support to Russia, claiming that China will continue to cooperate with Moscow on trade and will not impose sanctions as the West did. Finally, reports of a possible request by Russia for military assistance from China caught the international community by surprise. The US also warned China of serious consequences if it helped Russia evade US sanctions.³⁵

Given its significant export shares of various commodities, Russia’s plans may also include an intention to wage a commodity war against the West. The country has already announced that grain exports to members of the Eurasian Economic Union will be banned until 31 August 2022.³⁶ With skyrocketing food and energy prices and the FAO Food Price Index reaching Arab Spring-levels in December 2021,³⁷ limited exports of grain, fertilisers or other important commodities from Russia will contribute to the further surge of these prices. This could lead to a similar risk scenario of political protests due to socioeconomic pressures and an escalation of violence in the streets, with the ultimate outcome of coups or regime changes in some countries in Africa and Asia similar to the Arab Spring in 2011.³⁸ Such a scenario could trigger a significant migration movement from these countries toward Europe, where the asylum system is already under pressure due to the Belarus migration crisis in 2021³⁹ and the Ukraine war.⁴⁰ At the same time, China has allowed imports of wheat from all regions of Russia, since it signed an agreement on 4 February that went into effect the day Russia reinvaded Ukraine. This helps Beijing secure its food supply at a time when global food prices are already near 10-year highs.⁴¹

What next?

Russia is emerging as a major free rider in the global power competition between two systemic rivals, the US and China. Moscow does not shy away from using hard power to gain more bargaining leverage or expand its projection in geographic areas of primary interest. Russia’s unrealistic demands on the US and NATO regarding the security architecture in Europe and its subsequent war in Ukraine show that Moscow is preparing for the “long game,” i.e., the new systemic competition. The Russian president is counting on the US to avoid direct military involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war because of the upcoming midterm elections in November and dwindling US geopolitical interests in Europe.

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With the show of force in Ukraine, Russia wants to demonstrate its unique geopolitical weight as an indispensable player, without which neither the US nor China can win the competition against each other in the future. Putin also sees this as a significant opportunity to test US willingness to engage in bilateral talks and to review Washington's red lines for future concessions to Moscow. If the US wants Russia to break away from China's sphere of influence in the long term, it now knows that Moscow's terms for this are the freedom to create its own, much larger sphere of influence in Europe, and to dictate the future of the European security architecture.

For the US, a *modus vivendi* between China and Russia and, thus, a two-front scenario against it, will be extraordinarily threatening. Indeed, the most important common denominator of the 'DragonBear' will remain the goal of counterbalancing the US in all relevant areas of international politics. In the long run, the US can be expected to gradually withdraw from Europe to devote itself to the Indo-Pacific region, especially because of the rise of China in East Asia. Russia could also gain significant access to the Indo-Pacific region through several geopolitical corridors.⁴² Currently, Moscow is expanding its military presence in Africa and plans to establish military bases in several African countries, including Madagascar, Mozambique, and Sudan.⁴³ In this way, Russia could gain maritime access to the Indian Ocean and, in the long term, expand its power projection in the Indo-Pacific region together with China and India.

Moreover, despite the deepening of relations between Moscow and Beijing, India remains a strategic and traditionally reliable partner of Russia. At the diplomatic level, Russia supports China's stance in the Indo-Pacific region and openly opposes geopolitical blocs such as the AUKUS (Australia-UK-US)⁴⁴ and the QUAD⁴⁵ (US, India, Australia, and Japan), which was also reflected in the joint statement with China. Moscow is also open to India's proposal for a more active role for Russia in the Indo-Pacific region. New Delhi and Moscow share a geo-economic interest in creating an alternative to China's terrestrial Silk Road connectivity in South and Central Asia, which is why they are promoting the International North-South Transport Corridor⁴⁶ as a multimodal transit route linking India with Europe, Central Asia, and Russia. Although Russia does not currently play a key role in the competition among major powers in the Indo-Pacific region, the country could become a major player in the future in the most contested geographic space.

In the great power competition between China and the US, Russia is the wild card. Following the motto, “not always with each other, but never against each other”, Beijing and Moscow have found a winning formula in their bilateral relations. The two-front diplomatic scenario, in which Russia overtly supports China’s position on Taiwan and China overtly supports Russia’s position on Ukraine, creates a new level of confrontation between the ‘DragonBear’ and the US. Accordingly, what China defines as “Russia’s strategic space” with respect to Ukraine, Russia defines as “China’s strategic space” with respect to Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Most geopolitical experts still see Russia and China as separate threats, but systemic coordination between Beijing and Moscow increasingly represents a complex “threat multiplier.” Clearly, Putin is trying to capitalise on the current geopolitical competition with the US. He currently pursues a three-dimensional approach: 1) a war against Ukraine, which threatens the country’s very existence as a sovereign state, and Russia’s new geopolitical project of a union state with Belarus and Ukraine; 2) against the European Union, which, despite the most severe sanctions against Moscow, is not a real military counterweight to Russia’s actions in Ukraine and is thus rendered geopolitically irrelevant; and finally, 3) against China and the US, in that Moscow is significantly raising the heft of its future participation in the systemic rivalry between the two countries.

The extent to which this relationship will increasingly shape the global system will depend on whether China continues its economic rise and successfully helps Russia avoid a default like the one in 2014. It is in the interest of both countries to give the outside world the impression of a stable and resilient relationship against the West. However, there are currently no clear signals of a defence alliance between the two powers. The geopolitical rapprochement appears to be more tactical than strategic. Even maintaining the status quo will probably be acceptable to both states as long as the rise of China does not pose a direct threat to Russia’s strategic interests in its own geographic “sphere of influence.”

Neither the US nor China wants a scenario in which Russia becomes part of the adversarial geopolitical bloc. From the Chinese perspective, an ad hoc partnership between Russia and the US will be the worst-case scenario. Conversely, Russia will never endorse Chinese domination in the sense of a “Pax Sinica” in Eurasia and adjacent areas in the “near abroad” (Black Sea region, Eastern Mediterranean, South Caucasus, and Eastern Europe).

Conclusion

Given the critical uncertainties and unpredictable course of Russia's war against Ukraine, Putin may turn the country into a global mercenary for China's geoeconomic interests due to increasing dependencies on the 'DragonBear'. Russia's political, economic, and financial survival will depend on China amid the country's worst isolation by the West. Indeed, Putin factored in the severe sanctions before launching the full-scale reinvasion of Ukraine. He currently has more options to diversify trade and economic ties than he did in 2014 because of the bifurcation of the global system and deepening relations with China. Even as a junior partner in the 'DragonBear', if it succeeds in Ukraine, Russia could completely reshape the European security architecture while diverting the West's attention from China's rise in the Indo-Pacific region.

The West's biggest miscalculation amid the Ukraine war is not China's comprehensive actions to support Russia, but India's stance towards Moscow. Evidently, India is pursuing its own geopolitical and geoeconomic interests amidst the biggest recalibration of the world order since 1945. Undeniably, the US needs India when confronted with the 'DragonBear' more than India needs the US when confronted with China in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁷ Against this background, Moscow will increasingly rely on international partners by expanding its relations with Asian, African, and Latin-American countries, while India will be Russia's next most-significant partner besides the 'DragonBear'. However, Russia will not focus on managing its complex relations with China and India in the Indo-Pacific until Moscow has addressed its own security challenges in Europe. ORF

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