

**IMPACT OF THE UKRAINE WAR ON
CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS (II):
THE PROSPECT OF A SINO-RUSSO
ALLIANCE**

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EAI Background Brief No. 1657

Date of Publication: 21 June 2022

Executive Summary

1. The Russia-Ukraine War has sped up or even radicalised several geopolitical and geoeconomics trends in the world, which are all trending either away or against globalisation. The world is entering an era of uncertainty and re-organisation. The possible emergence of a Sino-Russo alliance will be a major part of this process.
2. The context of China-Russia entente is America's strategic pivot to Asia and NATO's eastward expansion. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi drew a parallel between NATO's eastward expansion and America's alliance building and hedging activities in the Indo-Pacific: "The real goal of the US . . . is to establish an Indo-Pacific version of NATO". The pressure may be driving the two giants together.
3. The two states question the value assumptions of the liberal international order and the disastrous consequences of America's promotion of democracy around the world. Both are averse to liberal political correctness on issues such as racial and gender equality, same-sex marriage, homosexuality, mass immigration, and have taken draconian measures to crack down on the spread of liberal ideas domestically.
4. China-Russia relations may be called an "offensive partnership" that has the potential of developing into an alliance—not necessarily in the military sense but rather in its concerted effort to push for an alternative world order. On 24 May, Xi Jinping launched his Global Security Initiative, a major step to put into action the common views expressed by the Xi-Putin Joint Statement on 4 February.
5. Chairman of the Joint Staff General Milley labelled Russia and China "revisionist" states. In his China policy speech, Secretary of State Blinken declared China as the "most serious long-term threat to world order" and "the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to do it".

6. This fixation on China explains China's determination to strengthen ties with Russia, especially military ties, as the latter becomes more dependent on China for economics, trade and technology. An alliance cannot be ruled out or taken lightly.
7. Should they join force, they will bring together two of the most formidable ground forces in the world, the second and the third nuclear forces, two space powers, two of the largest air forces and two large and rapidly developing navies, one-quarter of the world's population, and the second largest economy and the largest resources-rich landmass in the world.
8. However, a Sino-Russo alliance would be shallow due to its racial and cultural differences. It would lack the deeper cultural identity of NATO and is unlikely to support sovereignty integration like the EU.
9. Russia and China's joint promotion of alternative constitutional principles of world order is perhaps more subversive than a formal alliance. It is the embodiment of alternatives in their joint effort and their combined capability that make their collaboration a potent force for change, with or without a formal alliance.

IMPACT OF THE UKRAINE WAR ON CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS (II): THE PROSPECT OF A SINO-RUSSO ALLIANCE

Lance L P GORE*

Reshaping the Post-Ukraine War World Order

- 1.1 Long before the war in Ukraine, the international order had been undergoing transformation driven by multiple forces. The turmoil and consecutive wars in the Middle East marked the rise of sub- and transnational social and religious forces as major players in world politics. The Trump administration set off two turning points—the United States’ dissatisfaction with its own created post-World War II liberal international order has reached a point that it is willing to dismantle it under the banner of “America First”, and the breaking up of relations between the United States and China after four decades of uneasy accommodation. The global pandemic has reinforced and sped up the fragmentation and re-alignment created by the “Trump disruption”, reshaping the global supply chains and, with it, geoeconomics whereas Russia-Ukraine War is speeding up the global geopolitical re-alignment.

- 1.2 The Russia-Ukraine War has strengthened or even radicalised several pre-existing trends—the weaponisation of economic interdependence (in the form of pervasive sanctions) and global public goods (epitomised by the cutting off of Russia from SWIFT); the “securitisation” of supply chains; the return of ideology as the foundation of world politics (in the “democracy versus autocracy” discourse) and, with it, the re-alignment of states big and small.¹ The paradigm in the global supply chains is shifting away from efficiency (‘just in time’) to greater resilience (‘just in case’). Both geo-economic and geopolitical motives favour the shortening and

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¹ The Chinese scholar Wu Xinbo summarises these trends in an article titled “Hou ewu chongtu deguojitix Jiang zouxiang hefang?” (Where is the international system evolving after the Russia-Ukraine War?). <http://m.aisixiang.com/data/134513.html>, last accessed 6 June 2022.

unbundling of supply chains, driving the separation and isolation of markets. The outcome of this development could quite possibly be rival blocs that restrict or block market access for unwanted competitors.

- 1.3 The war has revitalised NATO, ostracised Russia from much of the world (at least for a while), prompted several neutral or non-aligned states in Europe to join NATO, and is likely to strengthen the centrifugal forces in Russia's backyard—the central Asian republics that had gained independence from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Tacit pressure is on for countries around the world to choose sides between the United States on one hand, and China or Russia on the other. New trading blocs and new forms of rivalry (Eurasian Union, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership and so on) and new security arrangements (the Quad, AUKUS and so on) are emerging.
- 1.4 All these are eroding the globalisation of the post-Cold War era. Together with the weakening of global governance and increasing of big power conflicts, the world is entering an era of uncertainty and re-organisation. The possible emergence of a Sino-Russo alliance will be a major part in this process that deserves careful watching.

The Potential of a Sino-Russo Axis to Change the Prevailing Order

- 2.1 In 1992, China and Russia declared their pursuit of a “constructive partnership”; in 1996, they progressed towards a “strategic partnership”; and in 2001, they signed a treaty of “friendship and cooperation”. In 2014, the two states declared “a new stage in Russian–Chinese relations of comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction”. While a formal alliance has never been seriously discussed between the two, the mutual empathy or co-misery have reached to such a level that Xi has proclaimed that the Sino-Russo relationship is “stronger than an alliance”.² There is no shortage of voices in both Russia and China clamouring for such an alliance, but

² Cited by *The Financial Times*, “The rising costs of China’s friendship with Russia”, at <https://www.ft.com/content/50aa901a-0b32-438b-ae2-c6a4fc803a11>, accessed 24 April 2022.

the majority view in the West downplays such a possibility.³ China, Russia and the United States are big and proud nations. Only exceptional circumstances will prompt any two of them to enter a formal alliance against the third. The question is whether the two weaker powers—now Russia and China—would feel vulnerable or threatened enough to jointly counterbalance the United States and its allies as they did in the 1950s. The Ukraine war may be building up to that eventuality.

Pushed together?

- 2.2 The early euphoria in China that the war in Ukraine would divert once again US attention away from China proves problematic and short-lived. Unlike China’s relatively aloof relationship with the Middle East, China-Russia relations are more closely tied, both in history and in contemporary geopolitics and geoeconomics, as well as in their shared opposition to the United States in many areas. The West, the United States and NATO in particular, have tied the two together in the on-going conflicts in Europe, Asia Pacific and elsewhere.⁴ Wang Yi, Chinese foreign minister, drew a parallel between NATO’s eastward expansion and America’s alliance building and hedging activities in the Indo-Pacific, claiming that “The real goal of the US . . . is to establish an Indo-Pacific version of NATO”.⁵
- 2.3 China has apparently adopted a policy of strengthening security ties with Russia while salvaging economic ties with the West. In his 30 March meeting with Lavrov in Anhui, China, Wang Yi repeated the line in the Joint Statement of 4 February⁶ that China-Russia friendship “has no limits”. He asserted that the two countries are “more determined” to develop bilateral ties and boost cooperation. The two foreign ministers also condemned what they called “illegal and counter-productive”

³ For example, Francios Godement, “Introduction” to *China Analysis*, no. 195 (European Council on Foreign Affairs), 2016, at [http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_195_-_CHINA_AND_RUSSIA_GAMING_THE_WEST_\(002\).pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_195_-_CHINA_AND_RUSSIA_GAMING_THE_WEST_(002).pdf), last accessed 10 March 2022.

⁴ NATO announced that China posed a threat in its Brussel Communique on 14 June 2021. See also <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/15/china-hits-back-at-slandering-nato-claim-that-country-poses-threat-to-west>, accessed 8 June 2022.

⁵ “Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi blasts US for playing ‘bloc politics’ in the region”, *The Straits Times*, 7 March 2022, at <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/chinese-fm-blasts-us-for-playing-bloc-politics-in-the-region>, last accessed 27 April, 2022.

⁶ Full text retrievable at <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>, last accessed 23 March 2022.

Western sanctions imposed on Moscow over its actions in Ukraine.⁷ In early June, Russian ambassador to Beijing declared that Russia-China relationship had “withstood the test” and reiterated Xi’s assertion that the relationship between the two countries is “stronger than alliance”.⁸

- 2.4 The larger context of the entente between China and Russia is America’s strategic pivot to Asia and NATO’s eastward expansion, especially after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. These are long-term trends that will continue to squeeze the strategic space of both China and Russia. Hence, the pressure from both ends of the Eurasian continent may be driving the two giants together.

An offensive partnership?

- 2.5 States balance against a state or alliance of states that poses the greatest threat, instead of against the strongest as suggested by the traditional balance of power theory. They respond to changes in the balance of power only when there is a perceived increase in the threat from such changes.⁹ Conversely, the alignment of interests is a cornerstone of a stable alliance or partnership in the game of balance of power.¹⁰ These two amendments to the classic balance of power theory suggest that states’ alliance behaviour is also a response to perceived opportunities—it is as much a tool to make gains as to avoid losses. Furthermore, such gains are shaped by the extent of shared perceptions of the alternatives to the current order and the partnership in such common endeavour can be regarded as “offensive”, in the sense that it aims at altering the status quo.

- 2.6 That between China and Russia may be called an “offensive partnership” that has the potential of developing into an alliance—not necessarily in the military sense but rather in its concerted effort to push for an alternative world order. Both states

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/moscow-beijing-agreed-widen-cooperation-ifax-cites-russian-foreign-ministry-2022-03-30/>, last accessed 27 April 2022.

⁸ <https://finance.sina.com.cn/jjxw/2022-06-06/doc-imizmscu5307733.shtml>, accessed 6 June 2022.

⁹ See Stephen M Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. Cornell University Press.

¹⁰ Or “balance of interests”. See Randall L Schweller, “Bandwagoning for profit: bringing the revisionist state back in”, *International Security*, 19, no. 1 (1994): 93.

are dissatisfied with the prevailing order. In his speech announcing Russia's "special military operation" on 24 February, Putin clearly indicated that one of his objectives is to change the rules of the game in international relations. He and other top Russian officials have repeatedly spoken about ending America's domination in international affairs. The Chinese are less unequivocal about ditching the current system because it is more vested in it. Ambassador Qin Gang went out of his way to assure the West that China is a status-quo power. He wrote in his article in *The National Interest*: "The current international system is not perfect. It needs to make progress with the times, and China is committed to supporting and contributing to this process, not undercutting or wrecking it".

2.7 Clearly, the United States takes issue with this stand. General Milley labelled Russia and China as "revisionist" states.¹¹ Secretary of State Blinken declared in his recent China policy speech that China is the "most serious long-term threat to world order" and "the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to do it", he said. "Beijing's vision would move us away from the universal values that have sustained so much of the world's progress over the past 75 years".¹²

2.8 China's rapid rise on the world stage and Russia's assertive posture under Putin provided the impetus for the two countries to define and articulate an alternative vision of the world order, either jointly or independently.

A revisionist vision

2.9 Only the emerging non-Western big powers such as China, Russia and India are in a position to alter the prevailing order in fundamental ways by introducing new constitutional principles¹³ backed fully by state power. General Secretary Xi Jinping

¹¹ In his Congress testimony on 5 April 2022.

¹² Full text of the speech is available at <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>, last accessed 8 June 2022.

¹³ A constitutional order achieves dominance by best exploiting the strategic and institutional innovations of its era; the peace treaties that end epochal wars ratify a particular constitutional order for an international community of states; and each constitutional order asserts a particular basis for legitimacy. See

is most conscientious and systematic in this regard. In September 2021, he put forward his “Global Development Initiative (GDI)”, ostensibly in augmentation of the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and on 24 April 2022, right in the middle of the Russia-Ukraine War, he followed it up with a “Global Security Initiative” (GSI) in his address to the Boao Forum (China’s equivalent to the Davos Forum), which was elaborated by Foreign Minister Wang Yi the following day.¹⁴

The Global Security Initiative

2.10 The GSI is a culmination of China’s conceptual innovation in foreign policy from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao and to Xi. It contains the same old grand and lofty rhetoric such as “democratisation of international relations”, “respect the independent choices of development paths and social systems made by people in different countries”, “non-interference of domestic affairs”, “equality, sovereignty and territorial integrity for all countries”, “abiding by the spirit of the UN Charter and the centrality of UN in international affairs”, “peaceful coexistence and peaceful solution to conflict” and so on. However, the emphasis is on Xi’s innovations such as his “new security concept—common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security”, “comprehensive security”, “reject the Cold War mentality, oppose unilateralism, and say no to group politics and bloc confrontation”, “reject double standards, and oppose the wanton use of unilateral sanctions and long-arm jurisdiction” and so on.

Convergence of views and policies

2.11 While Russia would agree to all these, what accentuate the common vision between Russia and China is the “principle of indivisible security” first espoused by the Kremlin. The concept requires “staying committed to taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously”, “build a balanced, effective and sustainable security architecture” and “oppose the pursuit of one’s own security at the cost of

Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2002).

¹⁴ Respectively at <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202109/22/WS614a3c0da310cdd39bc6a868.html> and <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0424/c64387-32406880.html>, both accessed 27 April 2022.

others' security". Putin justifies his invasion of Ukraine on this ground. He believes that the security of NATO members as a result of NATO's eastward expansion is at the expense of Russia's security, ignoring the fact that Russia had agreed to it in the 1999 OSCE agreement.

- 2.12 The GSI is unusual for Beijing, which had previously focused its global ventures on issues like development and trade. An anonymous Chinese scholar advising the government indicated that the GSI was part of a broader effort by President Xi to "steer the global security order away from Cold War thinking".¹⁵ Tian Wenlin, a professor of international relations at Beijing's Renmin University, characterised the GSI as a response to a Western-dominated world order, described by both Xi and Putin as "riddled with wars and conflict". "Countries all across the world", said Tian, "particularly developing countries, are urgently clamouring for a new global security paradigm based on equality and mutual trust in the face of rapid changes in the international landscape".¹⁶
- 2.13 The GSI can also be regarded as putting into action the Joint Statement of 4 February following Putin-Xi summit at the Beijing Winter Olympics. In that statement, China and Russia are committed to jointly push for a "new security order". They oppose American "unilateralism", "Cold War mentality" and "military alliances in the balance of power tradition". They instead embrace a new multi-polar world order and call for the West to give up "funding or encouraging the activity aimed at changing the constitutional order of other states".
- 2.14 The joint communique also underlines that Russia and China, as world powers and permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, should strongly advocate the international system with the central coordinating role of the United Nations in international affairs and support countries to choose their own development model or road independently without outside interference. In the Indo-Pacific, the sides intend to develop cooperation within the "Russia-India-China"

¹⁵ See Russian official Sputnik News, "China's Global Security Initiative Could Challenge 'Barbaric & Bloody' US-led World Order: Observers". <https://sputniknews.com/20220527/chinas-global-security-initiative-could-challenge-barbaric--bloody-us-led-world-order-observers-1095833002.html>, accessed 6 June 2022.

¹⁶ Ibid.

format, as well as to strengthen interaction on such venues as the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum on Security, and Meeting of Defence Ministers of the ASEAN Member States and Dialogue Partners. Russia and China support ASEAN's central role in developing cooperation in East Asia, continue to deepen cooperation with ASEAN, and jointly promote cooperation in the areas of public health, sustainable development, combating terrorism and countering transnational crime.

Anti-liberalism

- 2.15 Most importantly and at a more fundamental level, the two sides challenge the Western dominated liberal international order. Both question the basic assumptions of the liberal international order and champion alternative “universal human values” such as peace, development, equality, justice, democracy and freedom.
- 2.16 Time and again, Xi and Putin complained that the West has forcibly imposed liberalism and anti-terrorism all over the world, resulting in humanitarian catastrophes by bringing down regimes and causing paralysis of governance in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan and other places. Hundreds of thousands have died in wars and armed conflicts, and millions have been displaced and become refugees. In Putin's words, “... the result is bloody, unhealed wounds, ulcers of international terrorism and extremism”.¹⁷ Equally tragic are the consequences of colour revolutions which they say are instigated by the West. The West provides funding to non-governmental organisations to infiltrate the political powers of the countries concerned, manipulate elections and incite violent conflicts.
- 2.17 To counter Western charges that they are autocracies, the Joint Statement argues that Russia and China as world powers with rich cultural and historical heritage have long-standing traditions of democracy, which rely on thousands of years of experience of development, broad popular support and consideration of the needs and interests of citizens. They claim that Russia and China “guarantee their people the right to take part through various means and in various forms in the

¹⁷ Putin's speech on 24 February 2022, declaring the war on Ukraine. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/full-text-putin-s-declaration-of-war-on-ukraine>, last accessed 4 April 2022.

administration of the State and public life in accordance with the law. The people of both countries are certain of the way they have chosen and respect the democratic systems and traditions of other states”.

- 2.18 Putin accused the West of using “hypocritical liberal values” to destroy other countries’ traditional values and corrupt the people from within. He believes that extreme liberal values are against human nature and, together with the political correctness they engender, have caused extensive degeneration in Western societies in the propagation of ideas such as “same-sex marriage, radical feminism, homosexuality, mass immigration” and so on, which are being “globalised” under the cover of democracy and human rights. Xi has targeted the same things when he rectified ideology and public opinion immediately after taking office.¹⁸ In the 1980s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had embarked on the “Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign” to curb liberal ideas inspired by the West. Putin has come to view himself as the global champion of Christian nationalism and is increasingly regarded as such by Christian nationalists around the world.
- 2.19 These are fundamental views on global order and human nature that resonate with the domestic political divide in many Western countries. They are likely to impact world politics by adding new dimensions to it.

China-Russia as exemplaries of new-type big power relations

- 2.20 The Joint Statement also reaffirms that the new inter-state relations between Russia and China are superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era. Ambassador Qin Gang provided the footage to it in his article in *The National Interest*, contrasting the conflict-ridden situation on the west end of the Eurasia under NATO with the peace and cooperation on the eastern end under the auspice of the Shanghai Cooperative Organisation, as well as Russia’s and China’s efforts to coordinate the developments of China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Russia’s Eurasian Union project.

¹⁸ C.f., Lane Gore. “Deciphering the two abrupt turns of the Xi regime” (*EAI Background Brief*, No. 890, January 2014).

Robustness Check

- 3.1 People tend to underestimate the breadth and depth of the China-Russia quasi-alliance that has developed steadily over the last three decades, and to exaggerate the differences between the two land giants with long joint borders. Their defence ties probably have evolved to be the deepest. In late 2021, the two organised an unprecedented joint naval exercise through the Tsugaru Strait of Japan, demonstrating a high-level deployment of naval might. At about the same time, Russian and Chinese bomber forces conducted a second joint strategic air patrol over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. Such high-level exercises involving elite forces have become routine as the bilateral security relationship has expanded beyond simpler counter-terrorism exercises in the 1990s, to encompass more complex subjects like air-borne assault and anti-submarine warfare. They are also conducting joint projects on sensitive subjects like early warning and cyber warfare.
- 3.2 On 24 May the two countries held their first joint military exercise since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, with both countries sending out nuclear-capable bombers above the Sea of Japan, East China Sea and West Pacific in a display of force during US President Joe Biden's visit to the region.¹⁹ It appears that a West united by the Russia-Ukraine War only serves to strengthen China's military ties to Russia.²⁰
- 3.3 Western companies' withdrawal from Russia after the War broke out rolled the red carpet for Chinese companies and products. Russia is set to play a bigger role in China's energy and raw material supply as well as in defence and arms sales, from China to Russia, is also expected, reversing a long trend since the 1950s. Many politicians and military personnel in the United States, Europe, Australia and Japan now describe Moscow and Beijing as the two anchors of an authoritarian axis stretching across the Eurasian continent.

¹⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/24/us/politics/russia-china-bombers-biden.html>, accessed 3 June 2022.

²⁰ <https://www.businessinsider.com/improving-china-ties-allows-russia-to-raise-ukraine-military-pressure-2022-2>, accessed 6 June 2022.

Strengths

- 3.4 China and Russia have similar victim complex, harbour similar resentment towards the West and similarly aspire to regain their past grandeur. Should they join force in an alliance, they will bring together two of the most formidable ground forces in the world, the second and third nuclear forces, two space powers, two of the largest air forces and two large and rapidly developing navies, one-quarter of the world's population, and the second largest economy and the largest resources-rich landmass in the world.
- 3.5 The geoeconomic foundation is the complementarities between the two geographically adjacent economies. South of their border is the “factory of the world” with tremendous dynamism and entrepreneurship; to the north is a vast resource base of raw material and energy supply. China has the capital, unmatched infrastructure-building capability and surplus of manufactured goods, all desperately needed by Russia, especially its Far East Region; the region's development depends on how much it can tap into the Asia-Pacific dynamism. Moscow's desire to expand energy exports intersects with Beijing's search for greater energy security. Overland supply of raw materials and energy from Russia and Central Asia will reduce China's vulnerability of its supply lines through the Indian Ocean, the narrow Strait of Malacca and the troubled South China Sea, all of which have the dominant presence of the US Navy.
- 3.6 China and Russia share a common legacy from the communist era. Many older Chinese, Xi's generation in particular, have developed a “Soviet complex” in which Russia brings up warm memories of the Soviet Union from their youths. Moscow trained many Chinese top leaders, including the patriarch Deng Xiaoping, former Premier Li Peng and CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin. Soviet films and songs are still popular in China. Russian female figure skating stars in the 2002 Winter Olympics are darlings of the Chinese public, being constantly followed in TikTok and other social media; the cultural affinity at the level of the common people is rarely observed with Western celebrities.

3.7 If the war in Ukraine and its aftermath lingers on, there will be ample events to hammer Russia and China into either a *de facto* or *de jure* alliance. China understands that there is virtually no way to return to the past constructive relationship with the United States as long as the latter deems it an existential threat. Joining force with Russia to remake the international order may be an option. The West's on-going effort to isolate or decouple from Russia and China no doubt will further reduce the external vulnerability of both and hence increase their freedom to do so.

Weaknesses

3.8 However, the two oversized states belong to two very different civilisations and carry with them very different cultural identities. Russia has always considered itself European and is proud of that cultural lineage.²¹ With the rise of China, there has been a renewed cultural pride in the Chinese that may lead to a “clash of civilisations”. There is also the issue of ego, especially on the part of Russia, on whether it could overcome resentment to what appears to be a junior partner's role, given its previous status as imperial power in the tsarist Russia and as big brother of China as the Soviet Union?

3.9 In China's popular account, tsarist Russia annexed 1.7 million square kilometres of Chinese territory and the Soviet Union under Stalin also aided Outer Mongolia in gaining independence from China. A rising China may find reasons to revisit such historical “wrongs” and attempt to redress them, despite the fact that the two states have settled their border issues in 1990s. For now at least, both reject such speculations as ghost chasing.

3.10 Compared to Xi's global ambitions, Russia's goal is more regional due to its limited defence budget and the fact its economy now is smaller than that of Guangdong province. The deterioration of its relationship with the West has in recent decades given rise to the ideology of Eurasianism, which many believe to have informed

²¹ See for example, Marlene Laruelle, “Russia's National Identity and Foreign Policy toward the Asia-Pacific”, *The Asan Forum*, 24 January 2014, at <<http://www.theasanforum.org/russias-national-identity-and-foreign-policy-toward-the-asia-pacific/>>, last accessed 4 April 2022.

Putin's decision to invade Ukraine.²² Eurasianism posits Russia as a Eurasian polity formed by a deep history of cultural exchanges among people of Turkic, Slavic, Mongol and other Asian origins, and that Russian civilisation belongs to neither the "European" nor "Asian" categories, but instead to the geopolitical concept of Eurasia, therefore making Russia a standalone civilisation.²³ Some in Russia have even suggested moving the capital from Moscow to New Siberia.²⁴ One of its chief proponent, Aleksandr Dugin, is a close adviser to President Putin. Putin has taken that message to heart. In 2013, he declared Eurasia as a major geopolitical zone where Russia's "genetic code" and its many peoples would be defended against "extreme Western-style liberalism". In July 2021 he announced that "Russians and Ukrainians are one people" and in his national address on the eve of the invasion, he described Ukraine as a "colony with a puppet regime", where the Orthodox Church is under assault and NATO prepares for an attack on Russia.²⁵

- 3.11 Meanwhile, Russia has also increasingly been pitching itself more as a Pacific nation by emphasising its Asian heritage.²⁶
- 3.12 This misalignment of objectives may create problems for the two down the line. In addition, Xi Jinping has been resurrecting communist orthodoxy while Putin seems to despise the communist episode in Russian history, a misalignment that the West could find comfort. Nevertheless, the Ukraine war means Russia's relationship with the West, the United States in particular, will remain sour for a long time to come, and the aspiration of some in the West of uniting with Russia to contain China will

²² See for example, Jane Burbank, "The grand theory driving Putin to war", *New York Times*, 22 March 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/22/opinion/russia-ukraine-putin-eurasianism.html>, accessed 6 June 2022.

²³ For a brief review, see Sarah Dixon Klump, "Russian Eurasianism: an ideology of empire" at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/russian-eurasianism-ideology-empire> and "The grand theory driving Putin to war", *New York Times*, 22 March 2022 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/22/opinion/russia-ukraine-putin-eurasianism.html>, both accessed 28 April 2022.

²⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-capital-idUSBRE86C0IC20120713>, last accessed 28 April 2022.

²⁵ Jane Burbank, "The grand theory driving Putin to war".

²⁶ See Edith W Clowes, *Russia on the Edge: Imagined Geographies and Post-Soviet Identity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

be postponed indefinitely. Therefore, the common stand against the West may keep these two strange bed-fellows in bed for a long time.

Concluding Remarks

- 4.1 Three tentative conclusions can be drawn. First, there is no unsurmountable obstacles to a Sino–Russo alliance and the war in Ukraine has removed some of them. The foundation for a potential Sino-Russo axis appears to be solid. Other disgruntled states such as Iran, North Korea, Cuba, Venezuela, Afghanistan and Syria, to name a few, may hop on board to form a loose coalition, while numerous other states, such as India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, South Africa and some ASEAN states will be welcomed to come and leave as their issue-by-issue interests dictate. The configuration will be much more fluid than the Cold War blocs, but the resulting diversity may well alter the dynamic of world politics.
- 4.2 The combined military prowess and their status as permanent members of UN Security Council (UNSC) could make them a formidable force on the world stage. Their economies are almost a perfect fit for trade and investment; their views and stance on a range of important issues in world politics are remarkably similar. They have also been coordinating their activities at the UNSC and elsewhere. Over the years, they have developed a series of joint projects and institutions that allow substantive cooperation. In sum, the geopolitical, geoeconomic and institutional foundations for a potential alliance do exist.
- 4.3 For now, however, China and Russia are likely to remain in a strategic partnership, which Xi claimed to be “stronger than alliance”, to maximise their options and better serve their distinctive national interests. Although in the long run both need the West more than they need each other for economic development (an important lesson of the Cold War is that alliance is geopolitically stable but geoeconomically sterile), but that is something out of their control. There is always the possibility that the two may be forced into a formal alliance.
- 4.4 Second, a Sino–Russo alliance, if materialised at all, would be shallow: it lacks the deeper cultural identity underpinning the NATO and is unlikely to support

sovereignty integration like the EU. Russia and China are sufficiently dissimilar from the West for a possible alliance but they are also too different from each other to form a deep-seated one. In the very long run, it is still conceivable that Russia may swing to the West if the latter stops regarding Russia as an outcast—joining the West has been a dream for Russia since the time of Peter the Great. That however will never be an option for China. Interestingly, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov appeared to have already extended an olive branch to the West. At an event in Moscow on 24 May 2022, he said, “If Western countries change their minds and propose some form of cooperation, we can then decide”.²⁷

- 4.5 Third, Russia and China’s joint promotion of alternative constitutional principles of world order is perhaps more subversive than a formal alliance. It is the embodiment of alternatives in their joint effort and their combined capability that make their collaboration a potent force for change, with or without a formal alliance. China and Russia’s non-alliance may perhaps better serve that purpose because each can attract more diverse followers. A closer and more robust Sino–Russo partnership is a significant development in world politics and the war in Ukraine has facilitated it. Its potential however depends on how much Russia is weakened by the war and how united the West is against China.

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Best regards,
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²⁷ However for now, he said, Russia will work with China. “Moscow not sure it needs resumed ties with West, will work on ties with China -Lavrov”. Reuters. <https://news.yahoo.com/moscow-not-sure-needs-resumed-205925229.html?guccounter=1>, accessed 8 June 2022.