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Will China Continue to Support Putin?



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President Xi and President Putin meeting ahead of the Winter Olympics. Image Credit: Reuters

As tensions between Russia and Ukraine and the West increased, some scholars have brought attention to China's role in all this. Present policies by the United States and the West have pushed the two countries closer together. China, a growing power with ambitious goals, formed an unexpected deeper alliance with Russia over Ukraine considering joining NATO. As Putin deploys his troops closer to Ukraine, he sought to collaborate with China to counter the Western-dominated liberal world order. China, an important regional and international power, pledged to strengthen their relationships, both economically and militarily. With this new partnership, China and Russia hoped to exert unprecedented bargaining power in international affairs especially with respect to Ukraine and Taiwan.

To understand the relationship between China and Russia in the modern era, one must look back to the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1996, China formed a mutual security agreement with Russia, as well as Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Eventually, these five nations would be known as the "Shanghai Five," linked to forging strategic military relations. Within five years, China founded the Shanghai Cooperation

Organization, with Russia as one of its key members. At the time, General Secretary Jiang ZeMin and Russian President Boris Yeltsin emphasized the purpose of creating this organization: to promote economic cooperation and peaceful relations in the Asian region. Most importantly, it promulgated military cooperation, allowing Chinese access to Russian military technology and vice versa. Beginning in 2004, the organization began to establish formal relations with the United Nations. Within this organization, Russia and China developed close ties, from participating in joint military exercises to initiating joint energy exploration projects.

Furthermore, not only did China and Russia establish new relationships with these organizations, but they also managed to resolve their previous conflicts. In 1969, China and the Soviet Union have been engaged in a half-year military conflict due to a border dispute near the Zhenbao River. Even though the conflict resulted in a ceasefire, the two nations have never sought a solution until 2008. That year, China and Russia signed a treaty officially settling the demarcation of the northeastern portion of the Chinese-Russia border. The 2000s were marked as a decade of growing cooperation and trust between China and Russia.

After a decade of mending and developing relations, Russia and China began to act more aggressively. As Xi Jinping ascended to be the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China in 2013, authoritarian countries like Russia began to feel emboldened, believing that China would shield them from international scrutiny. For instance, in 2014, Russia had successfully annexed the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine after the Revolution of Dignity broke out. Using the excuse of protecting ethnic Russians, Russia sent troops to occupy Crimea. The invasion was considered a result of the decades-long conflict between Russia and Ukraine. However, what surprised many scholars was China's reaction to it. China did not condone nor condemn Russia's actions, announcing that it "respects all countries' sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity." However, its actions spoke louder than words. The United Nations convened and planned on voting on a resolution that declared the referendum on Crimea illegitimate. Surprisingly, China, a key member of the Security Council, failed to opine on the issue by abstaining, claiming that the resolution itself would trigger more confrontation. In reality, experts argued that China abstained for two significant purposes. First, it refused to vote on the resolution because it thought that the West was more concerned about expanding its sphere of influence than helping Ukraine and it thought voting for that would encourage them to go further. Second, the affirmation vote could interfere with China's plan to retake Taiwan. China has always considered Taiwan to be an integral part of its country, and it longed to annex, or invade it. If it voted to condemn Russia's actions to

take Crimea, then an invasion of Taiwan would be seen as hypocritical, drawing international condemnation and sanctions. Regardless, China's ambiguity meant silent endorsement of Russia's efforts.

Ironically back in 2012, China's President Chinese President Xi Jinping signed a bilateral agreement with Ukraine's President Viktor Yanukovich which would provide Ukraine a nuclear umbrella protection. It declared: "China pledges unconditionally not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against the nuclear-free Ukraine and China further pledges to provide Ukraine nuclear security guarantee when Ukraine encounters an invasion involving nuclear weapons or Ukraine is under threat of a nuclear invasion." China does not comment about this treaty now, even though Russia activated its nuclear arsenal during its invasion of Ukraine.



Russian troops deployed to Ukraine to prepare for conflict. Image Credit: The Moscow Times

Presently, China and Russia continue to share that close bonds, even though China once again abstained to veto Russia's actions in the UN Security Council. As the Biden administration continues to mock and alienate Putin and Xi, the two leaders are beginning to rally behind each other to achieve their common goals. Last October, Russia and China sailed their naval forces near the Japanese Strait, sending a clear message to the world. Last month, China and Russia, coordinated together by protecting their ally in North Korea, by delaying US efforts in the United Nations to impose punitive sanctions on the North Koreans, thus demonstrating the unity that authoritarian leaders share. Furthermore, they participated in joint military exercises amid Western

pressure, showing their commitment to challenging American domination. Before the Winter Olympics opening ceremonies in Beijing, the two leaders met in a productive summit, committing to new-height cooperation. They are now in unison in their efforts to transition to possible new world order, as evidenced by their joint statement of strengthening their connection and growing their friendships with “no limits.” That being said, China’s cooperation with Russia has limits. In that joint statement, it made clear that it would support Russia only when it is faced with threats from the West and NATO. China’s goals remain clear: it will resist the West whenever it can, but it will not be entangled in foreign disputes, especially when they are generated by a nuanced history. Over time, increased collaboration between the two military powers will allow them to extract more concessions, increase their global influence, and resist the Western order.

Overall, while China and Russia have minor disagreements on small issues, the two nations enjoyed a long history of diplomacy and cooperation. As the United States braced for the Russian incursion in Ukraine, it offered Russia a diplomatic solution to the crisis. Putin started a war without real justification. As the West is beginning a punitive economic war against Russia for invading Ukraine, it must also consider its relations with China as it would be difficult to handle wars on two opposite sides of Eurasia. However, given the increasing amount of bad publicity that Putin is attracting worldwide, China may reconsider its close alliance with Russia. Support for the war in Ukraine is mixed in China, with a large majority of people against the war. Will China risk its economic relationship with the European Union and the US, its largest trading partners, over Russia? It now must continue to play a delicate balancing act as it gets its energy to fuel its economy from Russia.

The current US policy of containing Russia aggression and Chinese expansionism will be difficult, however countries around the world are joining in this effort. Western nations and international partners are punishing Russia economically while the US is slowly engaging with the nations of the Quad Alliance to contain China. The United States must demonstrate strength to create a credible deterrence in the global arena in order to bring stability for strategic allies, like Taiwan, which could be the next in line.

