



# MARSHALL PAPERS

## Best and Bosom Friends

*Why China-Russia Ties Will Deepen after Russia's War on Ukraine*

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### THE ISSUE

#### EDITORS' NOTE

*Edited by Jude Blanchette of CSIS and Hal Brands of SAIS, the Marshall Papers is a series of essays that probes and challenges the assessments underpinning the U.S. approach to great power rivalry. The Papers will be rigorous yet provocative, continually pushing the boundaries of intellectual and policy debates. The partnership between China and Russia has become one of the most critical features of the contemporary strategic relationship. Russia's war in Ukraine has created economic and diplomatic dilemmas for China, but it hasn't altered the fundamental alignment of interests and autocratic values that drives that relationship. In this Marshall Paper, David Shullman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor explain why the Sino-Russian relationship will only get deeper as a result of the war—even as it reveals strains and divisions that the United States and its allies may, eventually, be able to exploit.*

Russian president Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine has put China in a difficult position. Putin launched his war of aggression just weeks after meeting with Chinese president Xi Jinping and declaring jointly their “no limits” partnership. China's tacit backing of Russia clashes with Beijing's stated support for the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity and jeopardizes Beijing's relations with Europe. Putin's war of choice is compounding China's Covid-19-related economic challenges, causing energy and food prices to rise, and the remarkable resilience of Ukraine and strong allied response have likely prompted China to reexamine its calculus on Taiwan.

Some [analysts](#) and [policymakers](#) have posited, therefore, that Russia's war in Ukraine will arrest the trajectory of deepening Russia-China relations, weakening the countries' partnership. Indeed, there are data points that

support this hypothesis. Chinese companies and banks have pulled back from new and ongoing initiatives in the Russian market to avoid Western sanctions, and Chinese official media recently granted Ukraine uncensored space to criticize the Kremlin.

To be sure, there will be limits to the “no limits” partnership. Beijing will undoubtedly seek to avoid provoking unnecessary blowback as a result of its support for its most important strategic partner. But make no mistake, China and Russia are fundamentally aligned—Moscow and Beijing share a view of the United States as their most important security challenge, and together they seek to erode U.S. power and influence. Unless Russia escalates its tactics in Ukraine, perhaps by using chemical or nuclear weapons, Russia-China relations will continue to deepen as a result of the conflict, regardless of its outcome. The countries' growing coordination on security matters and efforts to shape a global order more favorable to their interests will increasingly complicate U.S. and

allied strategic planning and efforts to push back against resurgent authoritarianism globally.

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## **RUSSIAN AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE ALREADY A CATALYST FOR DEEPENING TIES**

Previous Russian aggression in Ukraine has been a catalyst for deepening Russia-China relations. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 significantly accelerated the slow warming of the relationship that started in the waning days of the Cold War. Convinced that it had no real economic opportunities in the West, the Kremlin turned to China for help in offsetting Western pressure. At that time, China's initial support for Moscow was tepid. Beijing was vaguely critical of the West for supposedly causing the crisis, and it never verbally supported Russian annexation, abstained on key UN resolutions, and allowed Chinese firms to abide by U.S. and European sanctions. China also took advantage of Russia's increased economic dependence to drive a hard bargain on key energy deals.

Yet Beijing eventually leaned into its partnership with Russia. While Moscow's need to diversify away from the West energized relations, Beijing also came around to recognize the utility in building a stronger relationship with the Kremlin. In particular, the China-Russia partnership crystallized around a fundamentally similar view of the United States as a primary strategic threat. Both Xi and Putin view U.S. support for democracies in their regions—and for those fighting repression and authoritarianism inside China and Russia—as an effort to extend influence and ultimately overthrow their regimes. The leaders also view the U.S. alliance network—including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Quad grouping in the Indo-Pacific—as a direct challenge to their security and to their regimes.

In the wake of 2014, these views hardened, especially as both countries' relations with the United States grew more adversarial. Moreover, Xi and Putin have noted the increasing challenges facing Western democracies and have grown more confident that the United States and the

West are in decline. They therefore view the time as ripe to challenge the U.S.-dominated global order and alliance network and hasten Washington's retrenchment from their respective peripheries. Both also expect the United States to do everything in its power to hold onto its superpower status, particularly in the face of China's rise, including coercing its allies to take actions against their own interests.

Russia and China's deepening alignment since 2014, along with the complementarity of their needs and capabilities, has fueled growing ties across all dimensions of their partnership. In the economic sphere, for example, China's share of Russia's external trade doubled from 10 to 20 percent between 2013 and 2021. Their partnership deepened most notably in the defense domain and in their common crusade against democracy and the universality of human rights. Arms sales and technical cooperation have grown, as have the frequency, scope, and complexity of their joint military exercises. In the democracy domain, Moscow and Beijing together are popularizing authoritarian governance, exporting their best practices, watering down human rights norms, backing each other up in multilateral forums, creating norms around cyber and internet sovereignty, and bolstering illiberal leaders.

Despite these developments since 2014, China is once again treading carefully in the aftermath of Russia's reinvasion of Ukraine. China has abstained from voting on key UN resolutions, and Chinese firms are tentative about maintaining operations with Russia, given their desire to avoid secondary sanctions. The key difference, reflecting the much deeper starting point of their relationship going into this crisis, has been China's far stronger rhetorical support for Russia. Senior Chinese officials not only indicated support for the Kremlin's "reasonable security concerns" about potential NATO expansion as a justification for its initial actions but have since **doubled down** on pledges to deepen ties with Russia, parroting Russian talking points about its actions in Ukraine and the culpability of the United States and NATO for the conflict's endurance. To signal their enduring close partnership, Russia and China flew joint patrols near Japanese and South Korean air defense zones in May 2022 during President Joe Biden's trip to Asia designed to rally America's U.S. Indo-Pacific allies.

If past precedent repeats, China's initially cautious support for Russia's invasion will yield to bolder backing for Moscow and efforts to deepen the partnership once the international spotlight moves away from events in Ukraine.

## **PERSONALIZED POLITICS SHAPING XI'S**

## CALCULUS ON RUSSIA

Just as in 2014, Russia will be the more eager partner. This time around, however, Russia is even more ostracized from Europe and the United States than it was in 2014, and its future economic prospects in the West are even more dire given the far more robust Western response to Russian actions in Ukraine. In other words, Russia now has no options other than China, and so it will be all in and willing to accept whatever support it can get from Beijing. Moreover, Moscow's focus on the perceived threat from the West and its substantial domestic challenges will overshadow concerns in the Kremlin about the risks of its increasingly junior partner status with China. For these reasons, Moscow will be even more invested in and eager to pursue deeper relations with China than it was after 2014.

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That puts China squarely in the driver's seat in determining the future trajectory of the relationship. The key question then becomes: how is Xi likely to respond to Moscow and the political dynamics that Putin's invasion has unleashed?

This brief posits that along with the underlying drivers of Russia-China relations discussed above, the increasing personalization of China's political system will be an ever more important dynamic shaping Xi's decisionmaking, including on Russia. Because Putin is further along in his personalization of the Russian system, lessons can be drawn from Putin's behaviors that are instructive and that offer insight into how Xi—whose dominance increasingly rivals that of Mao himself—is likely to approach his relationship with Russia. Of course, there are differences between Russia's and China's political systems. China's Leninist [system](#) is undergirded by the pervasive and mounting reach of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) across state and society and its monopoly on political organization that precludes the possibility of organized opposition. Putin's Russia, in contrast, is far more brittle, and the weakness of United Russia, the party of power that supports Putin despite him not being a member of the party, means that personalism in Russia is more pronounced. Nonetheless, there are lessons to be gleaned from the behavior of Putin's

personalist regime that provide insights into how Xi is likely to approach his closest partner.

**Upholding a strongman image defined in relation to the United States.** Putin has long sought to portray himself as a strongman whose power and influence are on par with that of the president of the United States. For Putin, part of his image as a strong leader has stemmed from his portrayal of the United States in particular as an external enemy. Indeed, the creation of threats and enemies is a tried-and-true tactic for many personalist authoritarian leaders, who use such threats to portray themselves as uniquely positioned to counter those threats, as well as to deflect blame for domestic troubles and justify their repressive measures. Putin's political reliance on sustaining confrontation with the United States and fear of looking weak or backing down in the face of Western pressure has been a consistent factor limiting what is possible in U.S.-Russia relations.

Xi is also increasingly driven by the need to maintain his strongman image, which will limit any inclination to back away from his investment in his partnership with Putin. The CCP has long painted the United States and other "foreign forces" as enemies to bolster popular legitimacy with domestic audiences. Xi's dominance within China's political system has become uniquely associated with China's drive for "rejuvenation" as a great power second to none, especially in Washington. Xi, like Putin, will therefore be unwilling to be seen as backing down to U.S. pressure, including regarding China's support for Moscow. Because the two leaders have personalized their relationship—indeed their personal rapport has been a key driver of the deepening partnership—backing away from Putin may also be seen as an admission of a faulty strategy. Xi's need to avoid the perception of either having made significant errors or acquiescing to Washington is especially acute this year, with challenges around his zero-Covid policy and a flagging economy already complicating his drive to further establish his supremacy at the 20th Party Congress this fall. Xi's amplification of the United States as an enemy and his personal investment in his relationship with Putin suggest that Xi will sustain his partnership with Moscow.

**Backing fellow autocrats.** Since 2012, when Xi assumed leadership and Putin returned to the presidency, both leaders have prioritized efforts to push back against what they view as U.S. efforts to topple unfriendly regimes. For both, countering so-called "color revolutions" has been critical not just for pushing back against what they see as unacceptable U.S. unilateralism but also for protecting

against what they assume is the ultimate goal: regime change in Moscow and Beijing.

Putin has gone to great lengths to shore up embattled dictators—including Belarus’s Aleksandr Lukashenko, Syria’s Bashar al-Assad, Kazakhstan’s Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, and Venezuela’s Nicholas Maduro—to prevent these leaders from being toppled at the hands of foreign pressure. Putin has also viewed the backing of like-minded autocrats as critical to building his image with onlooking leaders as a reliable partner willing and able to compete with Washington as a security provider.

Xi has similarly backed illiberal regimes in his periphery, including in Myanmar and Cambodia, and has complemented Russian efforts to shore up embattled leaders such as Maduro and Tokayev. The CCP—and Xi personally—have leaned into propaganda about the superiority of China’s authoritarian system and the relative weakness of democracies during the pandemic. Like Putin, Xi is driven not only by the need to defend against Western efforts to use color revolutions to weaken regime control but also the need to prevent authoritarian failures that might tarnish views of his increasingly strongman rule at home.

Xi is therefore likely to seek to prevent Putin, his closest friend and partner, from falling. Indeed, Xi would view the prospect of a collapse of Putin’s regime as a direct threat to his rule in the wake of his personal and public endorsements of the Russian leader. China’s population must not witness the popular overthrow of Putin, China’s partner in promoting an alternative vision for effective authoritarian governance and standing up to interference from the lecturing West. Furthermore, Xi does not want to set a precedent where a U.S.-led sanctions and pressure campaign among allied democracies is permitted to successfully unseat unfriendly leaders.

**Pursuing increasingly assertive foreign policies and surprises.** A robust body of political science research shows that personalist dictatorships tend to produce the most risky and aggressive foreign policies. In Russia, Putin’s personalization of the political system and dismantling of the constraints on his decisionmaking undoubtedly led to increasingly risky behavior in pursuit of his foreign policy objectives. His tight control over the media ensures that the public receives only the official narrative of foreign events, limiting his accountability to the public and providing him with the latitude for risk-taking. His elimination of competing voices within his regime not only further ensures that he faces minimal accountability for his foreign policy actions but also creates an echo chamber in which debate is

curtailed and he receives only the information that supports his preferred policies and approaches.

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In addition to his increasing propensity for risk, Putin’s personalization has made it more difficult to gauge his foreign policy calculus, as decisions are made increasingly by the whims of one man relying on often incomplete and faulty information. This creates challenges for U.S. national security analysts who often rule out certain scenarios because the costs appear to outweigh the benefits for a leader. When leaders make choices with incomplete or inaccurate information, it becomes increasingly difficult to gauge their calculus. Partially for that reason, many analysts failed to predict Putin’s decision to illegally annex Crimea in 2014 and insert forces into Syria in 2015 and predicted that Putin would not reinvade Ukraine in 2022. The growing personalization of Putin’s regime means that analysts have been regularly surprised by Putin’s actions.

In China, constraints on Xi’s decisionmaking have similarly withered, and his opinion is increasingly the only one that matters on key foreign policy issues, raising the prospect that Xi could also surprise with his actions. In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, China’s foreign policymaking system recycled messaging in line with standing guidance while waiting for indications of any change in policy from Xi himself. Propaganda within China increasingly portrays Xi as the great defender of the Chinese nation, who will right the wrongs of the “century of humiliation” and restore respect for China on the world stage. This narrative potentially ties Xi’s hands in managing a flexible foreign policy and almost compels him to take a more aggressive and recalcitrant position in international affairs.<sup>1</sup> Much of China’s “wolf warrior” diplomacy in recent years is aimed at bolstering nationalist support for Xi’s regime, even as it sours Beijing’s relations abroad. Actors in the system are increasingly unwilling to share information or critical opinions that might taint them as insufficiently supportive of Xi’s directives, creating an echo chamber that confirms the wisdom of greater risk-taking.

The Chinese public has ingested a steady stream of propaganda excusing Russia’s actions in—not invasion

of—Ukraine and blaming the United States and NATO for fanning the flames of war. This messaging is complemented by swift censorship of calls for China to reconsider siding with Russia against the West, where its most critical economic relationships exist. Citizens are primed to support Xi's unwavering support for Putin, [shielded](#) from the perspectives of others and readily mobilized by one-sided nationalistic arguments. Xi is thus able to undertake risky actions designed primarily to defend a fellow authoritarian regime rather than advance China's national interests, confident in the knowledge that the public will only receive information that confirms the wisdom of backing Russia and censors that which would highlight the cost, for example, of alienating Europe.

As Xi faces mounting economic and other challenges at home and looks to prevent the emergence of elite pushback against his policies—including the wisdom of so publicly aligning with Russia just ahead of its invasion—he may increasingly double down on aggressive policies that burnish his nationalist credentials and discredit detractors as insufficiently tough. If trends continue, he will do so without complete or accurate information regarding the costs of his actions. Therefore, it should not be surprising if Xi backs Putin in ways that do not accord with assessments of what is in China's national interests.

## **ALL PATHS LEAD TO PARTNERSHIP**

It is plausible that the trajectory of the war in Ukraine will determine the course of the Russia-China relationship. Some analysts have argued, for example, that if Putin faces a clear defeat, Xi will look to distance himself from a weakened and discredited partner. This brief posits, however, that all roads lead to partnership. Except in the still unlikely case in which Russia uses chemical or nuclear weapons, China and Russia will deepen their ties irrespective of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, leaving the two more clearly aligned in an anti-Western partnership.

Regardless of how the war in Ukraine ends, Russia will indeed emerge as a weakened and more isolated country. This result will not, however, weaken its bonds with China. Russia's new reality will make Moscow more dependent on China, and previous concerns about the growing asymmetry between the two countries—long touted as a constraint on future Russia-China relations—will be overshadowed by the Kremlin's sense of threat from the West and internal challenges. For China and Xi, meanwhile, a weakened Russia would create some urgency for China to mitigate pressure imposed on Putin that could

destabilize him internally. Chinese leaders judge that if Putin falls, the United States would be free to focus all its attention on countering China's rise and undermining the CCP's grip on power. Greater Western pressure could be even more difficult to manage if it occurs in tandem with the imperative to navigate relations with a post-Putin Russia that could adopt a less friendly approach to China and prompt newfound concerns about security along their shared 2,600-mile border. Moreover, Russia's diminished strength could be useful in that it makes Moscow even more dependent on China and, therefore, a more loyal partner in Beijing's fight against the United States.

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Critically, it remains unclear just how weakened Russia will be. Yes, Putin made a mistake in Ukraine, but it is not a fatal one. Moscow will be economically weaker and increasingly isolated, but Russia will [retain sufficient capacity and resolve](#) to threaten U.S. and European interests. To illustrate, many of the military capabilities that the United States worries about most—Russia's submarines, strategic and tactical nuclear arsenal, and cyber and electronic warfare capabilities—are untouched by the war in Ukraine. Moreover, Russia will retain the intent to challenge the West. If anything, the more devastating the defeat in Ukraine, the more dangerous Putin's Russia may become. The Kremlin has unleashed a torrent of nationalist rhetoric inside Russia. Putin will have to find opportunities to satiate those sentiments and demonstrate that Russia is a power that should still be feared. For Xi, in other words, Russia, even in a weakened and isolated state after the war, will remain a nuclear superpower that distracts the United States from the Indo-Pacific.

Similarly, for both Xi and Putin, the value of the relationship deepens whether the U.S.-led allied response continues to prove effective or ultimately appears to break down. If the allies' unity breaks down in the face of Russia's continued aggression—a seemingly unlikely prospect at this point—or even if Europe ultimately gives China a pass on its support for Russia, with key players such as Germany reducing critical rhetoric over time and resuming the deepening of economic ties with Beijing, it shows clearly the utility of partnership in fending off future U.S.-led pressure

campaigns, support for color revolutions in their periphery, and perceived efforts to undermine regime control. China will learn that it has a free hand to deepen ties with Russia, including helping it distract and counter the United States, without suffering damage to valuable ties with Europe. Putin will learn both that he can withstand NATO and U.S. pressure with Xi by his side because Europe will not take China on and that China's support mitigates Russia's isolation on the global stage, diluting Western pressure and allowing onlooking countries to hedge their bets rather than pick a side.

On the other hand, a continued strong and united U.S. and European front demonstrating to China real costs for complicity in Russia's actions would also draw the countries closer together. Rather than forcing Xi to rethink the wisdom of aligning with Russia against the West, Beijing's surprise at Washington's ability to rally European allies that China has been trying to pull away will only harden Beijing's view of the difficult struggle ahead against the United States. Xi will perceive the need to prevent Putin's failure and ensure his partnership in dealing with an emboldened United States that has demonstrated the democratic world is capable of taking strong actions. In particular, Chinese leaders will view Russia as a partner in reducing China's reliance on the U.S.-centric global financial system in the wake of the strong financial measures undertaken against Moscow. And Putin obviously has learned how much he needs Xi to survive against a surprisingly strong democratic world that wants to weaken Russia.

## CONCLUSION

A long-term alignment between Russia and China is not inevitable. If anything, Putin's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine underscores that there are fissures in their relationship. For one, Russia is clearly more risk-tolerant than Beijing. The Kremlin's comfort with instability stands in stark contrast to the CCP's strong preference for the stability that is required to protect and facilitate its economic equities and cultivate a reputation based on prudence. Yet, despite the natural fissures in their partnership, the United States has so far had little leverage to exacerbate the tensions between them. This does not mean that Washington should not try. Moving forward, U.S. policymakers should be mindful of these divisions and look for ways to pull at the seams of their relationship with the goal of limiting what each country is willing to do with or for the other.

One looming juncture in the Russia-China partnership where the United States and the West have an opportunity

to shape the trajectory will be President Putin's departure from power. Although Putin is likely to be able to weather backlash from the war in Ukraine, his hold on power is undoubtedly weaker now than it was before his invasion, meaning his departure could come sooner than would have been expected prior to the war. Leadership change in Russia provides an opportunity for the United States and Europe to take steps to limit the depth of the Russia-China partnership. Although it is likely that any future Russian leader will seek to maintain a close and stable relationship with Beijing, a future Russian leader could choose to pursue a more balanced approach to Russian foreign policy. Beijing, having grown accustomed to Russia's increasingly junior status in their relationship and reliant on its ability to divide Washington's attention, may balk at a new leader's efforts to rebalance ties. U.S. and European efforts to engage a post-Putin Russia, therefore, have the potential to mitigate the urgency with which Russia depends on China. But how should the United States and Europe approach a post-Putin Russia? What, if anything, will be on offer from the West? The answers to these questions are still unknown, but Washington and its allies should consider, among other factors, the risks stemming from sustained and deepening Russia-China relations when calibrating a transatlantic approach to a post-Putin Russia.

Finally, the historical track record of personalist regimes such as those in Russia and increasingly China shows that they are the most prone of any regime type to make mistakes. Putin's invasion of Ukraine is a devastating example of the blunders that personalist leaders can make. Although such mistakes are unlikely to disrupt the foundations of the Russia-China relationship, their missteps provide opportunities for the West to exploit. Putin's invasion of Ukraine and Xi's adherence to draconian Covid-19 policies have weakened the allure of their authoritarian models. Such mistakes are likely to be few and far between, and so the United States and its allies should be prepared to use their mistakes to grow the headwinds that Russia and China face in their efforts to undermine the United States and rewrite the global rules in ways more consistent with their authoritarian norms. It will be difficult in the foreseeable future to drive Russia and China apart. But by finding opportunities to limit the depth of their partnership and increase the headwinds they face, navigating the challenges posed by Russia-China relations becomes an infinitely more manageable proposition. ■

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Michael Schuman, David Shullman, and Joel Kesselbrenner, *Cooperation with China: Challenges and Opportunities* (Washington, DC, Atlantic Council, forthcoming).