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In the U.S. and Europe, China is seen as Russia's tacit supporter, but what do Russian experts think? This article examines recent writings and interviews with leading Russian China-watchers. My research finds that they see Russia's invasion of Ukraine as setting limits to Sino-Russian relations, despite recent declarations by Beijing and Moscow stating otherwise. They conclude that China is likely to prioritize its own interests rather than to support Russia overtly. While some Russian observers emphasize the economic and political difficulties China faces, others point to its potential economic gains. Some Russian Asia experts remain confident that Russia will succeed in avoiding over-dependence on Chinese investment, whereas others see China being in a better position to obtain long-sought economic opportunities in Russia.

China keeps reassuring Russia that their twenty-one-year-old Sino-Russian partnership remains strong. Two months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, PRC Deputy Foreign Minister Le Yucheng told Russia's Ambassador to China Andrei Denisov that the Chinese government will "continue to increase 'strategic coordination' with Russia despite 'international volatility.'"¹ In the U.S. and Europe, China is seen as Russia's tacit supporter, but what do Russian experts think? This is not easy to research given the severe penalties now in place in Russia for any critical discussion of Ukraine-related issues—up to 15 years in jail for spreading "fake news," i.e., reports that go against the official views.² Nevertheless, leading Russian experts on China and Asia have published a number of articles, some opting for social media, while others have been interviewed on blogs and in videos, providing some insights into their views. This article examines how these experts assess China's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its impact on Sino-Russian relations.

Ukraine in Russia's China Diplomacy

There is considerable speculation in Washington and other capitals about the depth of PRC support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As Russia was amassing its troops along Ukraine's

¹ "China to Increase Coordination with Russia, Says Senior Chinese Diplomat," Reuters, April 19, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-russia-cooperation-is-resilient-says-senior-chinese-diplomat-2022-04-19/>, accessed May 2, 2022.

² Robert McMahon, "Russia Is Censoring News on the War in Ukraine. Foreign Media Are Trying to Get Around That.," Council on Foreign Relations, March 18, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/russia-censoring-news-war-ukraine-foreign-media-are-trying-get-around>, accessed May 2, 2022.

borders, Russian President Vladimir Putin headed to Beijing where he and Xi signed a joint statement on February 4, 2022, outlining their shared views of international relations and sustainable development. The two strategic partners noted unspecified “serious international security challenges” and maintained that the security of states is interdependent. Ukraine is not mentioned in the text, but China stated that it “is sympathetic to and supports the proposal put forward by the Russian Federation to create legally binding security guarantees in Europe.”³ Professor Anna Kireeva of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) later comments that “What was really new was China’s support for Russia’s stance against NATO enlargement.”⁴

Another innovation in this agreement, says Igor Denisov, senior research fellow at MGIMO, is the inclusion of language jointly opposing the intervention of external forces in “common adjacent regions.” Denisov points out that Ukraine and Belarus are not a common interest for Russia and China and therefore “deeper coordination” should not be expected. He adds that despite closer military ties, the two countries are not allies that coordinate their military moves.⁵

Did Putin apprise Xi in advance about his plans to invade Ukraine? Alexander Gabuev, a researcher currently based in Istanbul and a former senior fellow at the now shuttered Carnegie Moscow Center, tells *The Financial Times* he thinks this is highly unlikely. According to Gabuev, the decision to invade Ukraine was made on February 21, more than two weeks after Putin’s visit to Moscow.⁶ This resonates with conclusions of other experts, who portray Chinese officials as surprised by the Russian invasion.⁷ Moreover, the 6,000 Chinese nationals who were living in Ukraine were not told to evacuate, also lending credence to the belief by the Chinese government that if some Russian action were to be taken, it would not significantly harm China’s interests or nationals. Considering that Chinese officials also told their nationals to display the

³ “Совместное Заявление Российской Федерации и Китайской Народной Республики Об Укреплении Глобальной Стратегической Стабильности в Современную Эпоху” [Joint Declaration by the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the Strengthening of Global Strategic Stability in the Contemporary Era], Президент России [President of Russia]. <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5412>, accessed April 20, 2022.

⁴ Anna Kireeva, “The Limits to Russia and China’s ‘No Limits’ Friendship,” *East Asia Forum*, March 22, 2022. <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/03/23/the-limits-to-russia-and-chinas-no-limits-friendship/>, accessed May 2, 2022.

⁵ Igor Denisov, “‘No Limits’? Understanding China’s Engagement With Russia on Ukraine,” *The Diplomat*, March 24, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/no-limits-understanding-chinas-engagement-with-russia-on-ukraine/>, accessed May 2, 2022.

⁶ Gabuev interview in the *Financial Times*, “China, Russia, and the War in Ukraine,” YouTube video, 11:22, March 24, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzG9b9DfLsw>, accessed May 2, 2022.

⁷ Yun Sun, “Ukraine: Did China Have a Clue?” *Stimson Center* (blog), February 28, 2022. <https://www.stimson.org/2022/ukraine-did-china-have-a-clue/>, accessed May 2, 2022.

PRC flag to protect themselves, they appear to have assumed that whatever Russia planned to do in Ukraine would be successful and PRC nationals would be exempt from violence.⁸

As the invasion continued for a third month (and Chinese officials faced pressure from Western capitals to distance themselves from Russia), the Russian Foreign Ministry stated that Russia was “interested in seeing our relations with the People's Republic of China continue to develop steadily and consistently. Together with you and with other like-minded people, we will move toward a multipolar, just, and democratic world order.”⁹ Gabuev contends that Putin and his circle believe that, based on a resurgent Russia and a rising China, “an unstoppable shift in power to authoritarian regimes” underpins this emerging order.¹⁰

At a time when this new order appears more difficult than ever to achieve, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, recounts that at his first meeting with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, since the Russian invasion began, “the two countries praised the current state of Russian-Chinese relations, which continue to develop dynamically in an unstable and tense foreign policy situation.”¹¹ Their discussion, described as “traditionally confidential and friendly,” involved an exchange of views on Ukraine, and both foreign ministers “noted the counterproductive nature of the illegal unilateral sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and its satellites.” The Foreign Ministry statement concludes that, despite the “difficult international situation, Russia and China continue to strengthen their strategic partnership and act in world affairs from a unified position.” The two countries agreed to continue to develop their foreign policy coordination.¹² Despite this trend, Georgy Zinoviev, director of the First Asia Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, warns that the Western countries are looking for “gaps” in relations

⁸ Analysis by Simone McCarthy and CNN’s Beijing Bureau, “Analysis: China’s Reaction to Ukraine Could Be Putting Its Citizens in Danger,” CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/28/china/chinese-citizens-ukraine-danger-intl-hnk-mic/index.html>, accessed May 2, 2022.

⁹ Вступительное слово Министра иностранных дел Российской Федерации С.В.Лаврова в ходе переговоров с Министром иностранных дел Китайской Народной Республики Ван И, Туньси, 30 марта 2022 года [Opening Remarks by Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov During Negotiations with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China Wang Yi], March 20, 2022. https://mid.ru/ru/press_service/vizity-ministra/1807067/, accessed May 15, 2022.

¹⁰ Alexander Gabuev, “By Invitation: Alexander Gabuev Writes from Moscow on Why Vladimir Putin and his Entourage Want War,” *The Economist*, March 11, 2022. <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/02/19/alexander-gabuev-writes-from-moscow-on-why-vladimir-putin-and-his-entourage-want-war>, accessed May 2, 2022.

¹¹ О переговорах Министра иностранных дел Российской Федерации С.В.Лаврова с Министром иностранных дел Китайской Народной Республики Ван И [On the Talks between Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China Wang Yi], March 30, 2022. https://mid.ru/ru/press_service/vizity-ministra/1807072/, accessed May 15, 2022.

¹² Ibid.

between Russia and China in order to undermine their strategic partnership. He counters that, working with its Chinese friends, Russia will “neutralize the relevant efforts.”¹³

How Russian Scholars Assess China’s Position on Ukraine

In their analyses, Russian scholars emphasize the difficulties confronting China in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Professor Alexander Lukin of the Higher School of Economics argues that Chinese leaders face a conundrum—Russia is important to China as a geopolitical ally against perceived U.S. pressure and as a supplier of energy and mineral resources, and Sino-Russian relations are the closest they have been in years. Yet he also notes that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is problematic for Beijing because it blurs the lines it seeks to draw about “the fundamental difference between the aggressive, hegemonic policies of the United States and its allies” that disrespect state sovereignty and territorial integrity and about what PRC officials depict as “the peace-loving line of China and its friend Russia, directed toward peaceful co-existence and constructive cooperation with everyone, including the West.”¹⁴ Lukin adds that China also faces possible economic costs from the invasion due to the threat of counter-sanctions and rising energy prices. Moreover, Russia would have less value as a strategic partner if it were to emerge from the invasion in a weakened position vis-à-vis the West.

For Gabuev, China’s number one concern is not friendship with Russia—it is Chinese interests. “China cares about the interests of China,” he tells *The Financial Times*. Although the Sino-Russian partnership supports Chinese interests, Gabuev contends that Beijing hopes to avoid collateral damage to its relations with the West. He also claims that, while Beijing feigns equidistance, PRC officials tailor their statements on Ukraine to a particular audience. Gabuev sees China scrupulously respecting sanctions against Russia, “but after the war is over, China will come in and see what contracts will be available on the cheap.” He further notes that the West’s response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated that there is real collective will to punish an aggressor. Consequently, the PRC will double down to acquire the technology it needs and will become more self-sufficient economically.¹⁵

Other observers see different views in the PRC about the Russian invasion. Vladimir Soskyrev, a journalist who has covered China for many years, observes that even on censored Chinese social media, it is possible to find criticism of official PRC positions supporting Russia. He mentions that one post on Ukrainian blood donors received 62 million views and another by a Chinese

¹³ “В МИДе обвинили Запад в желании разрушить отношения России и Китая” [The Foreign Ministry Accuses the West of Wanting to Destroy Relations Between Russia and China], *Izvestia*, April 20, 2022.

<https://iz.ru/1323685/2022-04-20/v-mide-obvinili-zapad-v-zhelanii-razrushit-otnosheniia-rossii-i-kitaia>, accessed May 2, 2022.

¹⁴ Alexander Lukin, “Why China Won’t Break with Russia Over Ukraine,” *The National Interest*, March 28, 2022. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-china-won%E2%80%99t-break-russia-over-ukraine-201495>, accessed May 2, 2022.

¹⁵ Gabuev interview in the *Financial Times*.

author who states that “war is no joke” received 60,000 likes. Similar to Lukin, Soskyrev notes that China seeks to balance its partnership with Russia with its traditional claim to support state sovereignty.¹⁶ He points out that Chinese media have been directed not to criticize Russia, thus providing more context for the PRC’s apparent support for the Russian positions.

Ivan Zuenko, a senior research fellow at MGIMO and a Vladivostok-based analyst, agrees that there are multiple views about Ukraine in China. Zuenko sees the dominant view holding that China’s main goal should be to remain neutral and avoid breaking partnerships with any countries, while also refusing to openly join an anti-Russian front. Zuenko finds a pro-Western view in China that is extremely critical of Chinese support for Russian positions on Ukraine and is urging the country to engage more with the West and to stop decoupling.¹⁷

Ukraine and Sino-Russian Relations

Russian experts on China and international relations are well aware that their country’s invasion of Ukraine will have repercussions for Russia’s relations with China. Even Sergei Karaganov, an adviser to Putin and Lavrov who has pressed for closer ties with China, a partnership that he characterizes as almost allied,¹⁸ acknowledges that “China’s economic influence in Russia and over Russia will grow.”¹⁹ Dmitri Trenin, former director of the Moscow Carnegie Center, who previously was believed to hold more pro-Western positions on foreign policy, now sees Asian and Middle Eastern states as Russia’s key partners. In early April 2022, he wrote: “Russia will have to rely more than ever on the countries of the East for the foreseeable future—primarily on China, but also on India and, if possible, on other countries of Asia and the Middle East.”²⁰ Just prior to the Russian invasion, however, Trenin spoke of natural limits and asymmetries between

¹⁶ Vladimir Soskyrev, “Может ли Китай стать посредником между Россией и Украиной?” [Can China Become an Intermediary between Russia and Ukraine?], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, http://www.ng.ru/world/2022-02-25/100_220225world1.html. [This is correct. You need to scroll down the page to find the article.]

¹⁷ Ivan Zuenko in “A New Framework for International Relations: The End of US Hegemony? An Expert Discussion,” Video, 1:14:40, April 20, 2022. <https://valdaiclub.com/multimedia/video/a-new-framework-for-international-relations/>, accessed May 2, 2022.

¹⁸ Interview with Sergey Karaganov, “Against Us is the Big West Which Sooner or Later Will Crumble,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, April 18, 2022. [tps://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/ukraine/2022/04/russia-cannot-afford-to-lose-so-we-need-a-kind-of-a-victory-sergey-karaganov-on-what-putin-wants](https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/ukraine/2022/04/russia-cannot-afford-to-lose-so-we-need-a-kind-of-a-victory-sergey-karaganov-on-what-putin-wants). Accessed May 15, 2022,

¹⁹ “‘Russia Cannot Afford to Lose, so We Need a Kind of a Victory’: Sergey Karaganov on What Putin Wants,” *New Statesman* (blog), April 2, 2022. <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/ukraine/2022/04/russia-cannot-afford-to-lose-so-we-need-a-kind-of-a-victory-sergey-karaganov-on-what-putin-wants>, accessed May 15, 2022.

²⁰ Dmitry Trenin, “Кто мы, где мы, за что мы – и почему?” [Who We Are, Where We Are, What We Are For and Why?]. <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/kto-my-gde-my-za-cto-my-i-pochemu/>, April 11, 2022, accessed May 2, 2022.

Russia and China, contending that Putin—and indeed most Russian people—were seeking to avoid Russian dependence on China.²¹

Most Russian scholars see Russia’s invasion of Ukraine setting limits to the Sino-Russian partnership, despite official displays of mutual support. Kireeva writes that “As Moscow and Beijing feel pressure from the West, simultaneously they tend to be more supportive of each other. Yet this falls short of transforming the relationship into something more formal.”²² She sees greater interoperability of forces emerging without any alliance obligations—China wants to maintain its economic ties to the West despite Russia’s conflict with NATO, and similarly Russia wants to pursue its Asian interests while remaining neutral if China were to enter into a conflict with its neighbors. Ivan Timofeev of the Russian International Affairs Council agrees that “China will keep its distance and free hand,” and it will be more concerned with its own economic security given the unprecedented Western sanctions against Russia than it will be with creating any type of alliance with Russia.²³

In addition to a shared perception of Western pressure, many factors underpin the Sino-Russian partnership. Gabuev emphasizes that domestic drivers are equally important, including the two countries’ long shared border with its history of confrontation, economic complementarities, their common political choice of authoritarianism and shared concerns about sovereignty, as well as the increasing personalized nature of their regimes. Even though Gabuev sees the Sino-Russian partnership as very solid, he also believes that China views Putin’s actions in Ukraine as irrational. Nevertheless, Gabuev argues that China is unlikely to pressure Russia to stop the war because Chinese leaders so dislike being lectured. Moreover, Gabuev states that if U.S. President Joe Biden failed to convince Putin, then Xi will be even less likely to do so.

Some Russian China scholars point to fundamental differences between Russian and Chinese positions. Denisov points out, for example, that while China has been echoing Russian positions on Ukraine, Chinese media have doubled down on the strategic narrative about Ukraine as a conflict between Russia and NATO, but they have largely avoided engaging with Russia’s portrayal of the domestic situation in eastern Ukraine and the nature of the Ukrainian regime,²⁴ which Putin claims to justify his invasion. Denisov contends that “Chinese silence can hardly be

²¹ “Understanding Putin and the Ukraine Crisis with Dmitri Trenin,” YouTube Video, 45:50, February 22, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/02/22/carnegie-connects-understanding-putin-and-ukraine-with-dmitri-trenin-event-7820>, accessed May 2, 2022..

²² Kireeva, “The Limits to Russia and China’s ‘No Limits’ Friendship.”

²³ Ivan Timofeev, “Ukrainian Crisis. Who Has the Upper Hand?” Valdai Discussion Club, March 16, 2022.

<https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/ukrainian-crisis-who-has-the-upper-hand/>, accessed May 2, 2022.

²⁴ Denisov, “‘No Limits’? Understanding China’s Engagement with Russia on Ukraine,” *The Diplomat*, March 24, 2022.

seen as tacit agreement with Russian talking points—rather the opposite. This is where the division between the positions of Moscow and Beijing runs.”²⁵

Lukin also sees some daylight between Chinese and Russian positions. He argues that China considers Russia’s reaction to perceived threats in Ukraine to be excessive. Lukin points to a statement by PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi, at a meeting with SCO Secretary General Zhang Ming on March 17, in which Wang criticizes the policies that led to the bloc confrontation, and violations of the UN Charter and principles of international justice, without naming the countries involved. To Lukin, this amounts to indirect criticism of Russia. “Chinese officials formulate their position in such a way that criticism of power politics can be attributed not only to the United States and NATO but also to other states, including Russia,” he argues.²⁶

Many observers in the West have noted that China’s support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine will raise questions about Beijing’s long-held positions on sovereignty and territorial integrity that are so important for its core interest in Taiwan reunification. Lukin emphasizes that Chinese officials constantly reject comparisons between Ukraine and Taiwan not only because of its own concerns about Taiwan but also because China sees itself as a leader of the developing world that has long faced challenges about territorial integrity.²⁷ Denisov agrees with the characterization of China’s concern over territorial integrity and finds it unlikely that China will recognize the republics of eastern Ukraine. However, he also cautions that to the extent that the Black Sea region becomes an arena for strategic competition, China will be more amenable to supporting Russian positions.²⁸

In Gabuev’s view, since the Russian annexation of Crimea China has developed a “template” for reacting to Russia’s irrational views. This involves criticizing NATO expansion and U.S.-led alliances, but as civilian casualties mount, it also involves adding some language expressing sympathy for the Ukrainian people. Chinese officials want to avoid the “strategic nightmare” scenarios of an unstable or pro-Western Russia, while also preventing China’s own economic relationship with the West from unraveling. There is no contradiction in Chinese positions on non-interference—Gabuev emphasizes that “For China, non-interference means non-interference in *China’s* affairs. China itself interferes in the affairs of its neighbors all the time. ...”²⁹

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Alexander Lukin, “Китай и украинский кризис. Позиция Пекина пока не сформировалась окончательно” [China and the Ukraine Crisis: Beijing’s Position Has Not Been Finalized], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, March 27, 2022. https://www.ng.ru/dipkurer/2022-03-27/9_8401_china.html, accessed May 2, 2022. [Same issue here. Scroll down the page to find the article.]

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Denisov, “‘No Limits’? Understanding China’s Engagement with Russia on Ukraine.”

²⁹ Gabuev interview in Jonathan Tepperman, “Putin in His Labyrinth: Alexander Gabuev on the View from Moscow,” *The Octavian Report*, March 14, 2022. <https://octavian.substack.com/p/inside-the-bear-alexander-gabuev?s=r>, accessed May 2, 2022.

China's Next Moves

Chinese officials and experts occasionally float the possibility that their country might mediate between Russia and Ukraine, but Soskyrev emphasizes that China is really just trying to avoid becoming drawn into the conflict. China tried to appear neutral, for example, by publishing back-to-back interviews, reported by Xinhua without comment, with the Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers on April 30, in which they each had an opportunity to outline their country's position. Lavrov thanks the Chinese government for its “balanced approach,”³⁰ which Ukrainian Foreign Ministry Dmytro Kuleba did not highlight—he limited his gratitude to China's diplomatic efforts and position against escalation.³¹

Russian observers generally do not foresee China providing any direct support to Moscow. Gabuev dismisses Western speculation about Chinese military assistance as an effort to put pressure on Beijing and any material received now will simply reflect contracts concluded prior to the invasion. Kireeva concurs that there are no “signs of direct support” apart from statements blaming the U.S.—she sees China trying “to avoid endorsing or condemning Moscow's actions by highlighting a peaceful resolution.”

In contrast, Russian experts tend to see China's behavior as largely self-serving, especially on economic matters. Gabuev recounts how Russian officials were disappointed that China was not willing to “deliver as much as Russia had hoped for” after the first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, but it then became reconciled to China prioritizing its own interests, just as Russia does.³² In April 2022, facing new obstacles to Xi's signature Belt and Road Initiative, such as impeding transiting the New Eurasian Landbridge via Russia and Belarus, China opted for a southern route from Xian to Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, via the Black Sea to Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and concluding in Mannheim, Germany. *Pravda*, formerly the official Soviet Communist Party newspaper, adds: “And this route will bypass Russia.”³³ After criticism that its DJI drones used by Ukraine were secretly supplying intelligence to Russia, the Chinese company suspended sales to both Russia and Ukraine.³⁴

³⁰ “Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Gives Exclusive Interview to Xinhua News Agency,” Xinhua English News Co., April 30, 2022. http://www.news.cn/world/2022-04/30/c_1128610657.htm, accessed May 1, 2022.

³¹ “乌克兰外长德米特里·库列巴接受新华社专访 [Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dymtro Kuleba Interviewed by Xinhua News Agency],” 新华网, [Xinhua News], April 30, 2022. http://www.news.cn/world/2022-04/30/c_1128610853.htm, accessed May 2, 2022.

³² Gabuev interview in Jonathan Tepperman.

³³ Anton Kulikov, “Китай Запустил Новый Маршрут в Обход России” [China Develops Routes Bypassing Russia], *Pravda.ru*, April 20, 2022. <https://www.pravda.ru/economics/1700638-marshruty/>, accessed May 2, 2022.

³⁴ DigitNews, “DJI Suspends Activities in Russia,” April 26, 2022. <https://digitnews.in/dji-suspends-activities-in-russia/>, accessed May 2, 2022; DJI rejected allegations of assisting Russian intelligence. See Eduardo Baptista, “China Rejects Claim of Data Leaks to Russia on Ukrainian Military Positions,” Reuters, March 30, 2022.

Russian scholars argue that China will seek to navigate the threat of secondary sanctions, but given that some of its own companies already face U.S. sanctions, China may look for opportunities opened up by the departure of Western firms.³⁵ A Chinese auto group is in talks to acquire Renault's 68 percent stake in Russia's AutoVAZ company, for example.³⁶ The pullout from Russia of Western firms, such as Renault, Toyota, BMW, Volkswagen, and Hyundai, which all halted production in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, also gives Chinese car producers an opportunity to increase their market share in Russia.³⁷

Chinese companies may find that the best deals will be in the energy sector, though investing in downstream production may be easier than financing and building any new pipelines.³⁸ As Timofeev argues, there are many upsides for China in the current situation, including lower prices for Russian energy. Nevertheless, under guidance from the PRC Foreign Ministry, Chinese energy majors—China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), and Sinopec—have been urged to exercise caution in their investments in Russia. We already have seen Sinopec withdraw from a new \$500 million venture with SIBUR, a major Russian petrochemical company that is partly owned by sanctioned oligarch Gennady Timchenko.³⁹ However, these same Chinese companies are exploring purchasing the stake Shell is vacating—its 27.5 percent stake in the Sakhalin-2 liquid natural gas (LNG) project, which is 50 percent owned by Russian state-owned gas company Gazprom.⁴⁰ Sanctions prevent the Russian firm from accessing new financing, but the company itself is not

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-dji-rejects-claim-that-russian-military-uses-its-drones-ukraine-2022-03-28/>, accessed May 2, 2022.

³⁵ Kireeva, “The Limits to Russia and China’s ‘No Limits’ Friendship.”

³⁶ “Chinese Auto Group May Buy Out Renault’s Avtovaz Stake in May–June, Says Source,” TASS, April 25, 2022.

https://tass.com/economy/1442805?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com, accessed May 2, 2022.

³⁷ “Western Exodus from Russia Could Benefit Chinese Automakers,” *Automotive News*, March 8, 2022. <https://www.autonews.com/china/western-exodus-russia-could-benefit-chinese-automakers>, accessed May 2, 2022.

³⁸ Timofeev, “Ukrainian Crisis. Who Has the Upper Hand?”

³⁹ Chen Aizhu, Julie Zhu, and Muyu Xu, “China’s Sinopec Pauses Russia Projects, Beijing Wary of Sanctions,” Reuters, March 28, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/exclusive-chinas-sinopec-pauses-russia-projects-beijing-wary-sanctions-sources-2022-03-25/>, accessed May 2, 2022.

⁴⁰ Francesca Regalado, “Shell Exits Russia’s Sakhalin-2: Five Things to Know,” *Nikkei Asia*, March 1, 2022. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Ukraine-war/Shell-exits-Russia-s-Sakhalin-2-Five-things-to-know>, accessed May 2, 2022.

facing sanctions.⁴¹ Japan has thus far retained its stakes in Sakhalin energy companies, fearing that selling them would harm its own energy security and would add money to the Russian treasury and would benefit China.⁴²

Moscow State University scholar Alexei Maslov argues that the Chinese government has not yet decided on its policy on economic ties with Russia. In Maslov's view, the war will need to end and then Russia will have to discuss its economic needs and positions with China. He adds, "Of course, China is waiting for special offers. And these special offers should be fundamentally different from what we previously did in the economic sphere. I believe that at least until the end of the year, there may be complex and lengthy negotiations between Moscow and Beijing on this issue."⁴³ Maslov suggests that such discussions might involve tax benefits for Chinese investments and more Chinese production in Russia, though he states that Russia should be a co-investor, not just a purchaser, of Chinese goods and technology.

Russian scholars are well aware that their country risks greater financial dependence and a more asymmetrical partnership with China. Zuenko cautions that there is no need to trade one type of dependence for another. He reminds us that China failed to receive special privileges in the aftermath of the sanctions imposed on Russia in 2014 as a result of its annexation of Crimea. In Zuenko's view, Chinese officials believe that since then Russia has benefited more from China than China has benefited from Russia. Zuenko argues that it is easier for other countries to do business in Russia, and going forward, there is unlikely to be a major change in Sino-Russian relations beyond more Chinese goods in Russian shops. According to Zuenko, "It is likely that two or three flagship projects, like Yamal-LNG, will be implemented. However, there will be no mass attraction of Chinese investors on the special conditions that China hopes for. ..."⁴⁴

Regarding projects in the Arctic like the Yamal LNG ventures, Gabuev agrees that China "will fill the void and find a way to be even more present, and Russia will not be able to push back."⁴⁵ While Russia has jealously guarded its prerogatives as an Arctic coastal state and has been wary of China's Arctic ambitions, China succeeded in expanding its investments in the Russian Arctic

⁴¹ Suriya Janati, "The Vital Missing Link in the U.S. Sanctions Against Russia," *Time*, February 26, 2022. <https://time.com/6151766/u-s-sanctions-against-russia-gas-oil/>, accessed May 2, 2022. Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller is under US and UK sanctions.

⁴² Tom Wilson, Sun Yu, and Antoni Slodkowski, "Shell Starts Talks over 'Nightmare' Russia Exit," *Financial Times*, April 22, 2022. <https://www.ft.com/content/5723dccb-6786-4848-816d-6a76a4f58420>, accessed May 24, 2022.

⁴³ Alexei Maslov, "Что от нас ждет Китай?" [What Does China Expect from Us?], Telegram, April 6, 2022, <https://t.me/maslovasia/808>, accessed May 2, 2022, cited in <https://twitter.com/DimitriASimes/status/1513825426606637057?s=20&t=2dS5fdbVgZwax7pK SqBdmA>, accessed May 2, 2022.

⁴⁴ Ivan Zuenko in "A New Framework for International Relations."

⁴⁵ Alexander Gabuev, "The Spectacular Rise of the Bad Boys of NATO During the Ukraine Crisis," March 22, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/03/22/spectacular-rise-of-bad-boys-of-nato-during-ukraine-crisis-pub-86701>, accessed May 2, 2022.

after 2014. This may be more difficult to achieve in 2022 due to the much greater reputational costs for Chinese involvement in the Russian Arctic—the region’s only governance body, the Arctic Council, which China fought hard to join as an observer—suspended its operations in protest against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, Novatek, a Russian independent gas producer which now faces sanctions, may be unable to secure financing to move forward with its second Yamal LNG project,⁴⁶ in which Chinese energy companies CNPC and CNOOC each already have a 10 percent stake.⁴⁷

China and Russia’s Asia Pivot

For decades, Russia has sought to pivot to Asia and take better advantage of its geographic position astride both the European and Asian continents. In particular, Russian strategists have long hoped to become a “swing” supplier of energy resources to Asia as well as to Europe. As Western countries now aim to wean themselves off Russian oil and gas, the pivot to Asia is becoming a necessity, but Russian experts urge looking beyond the Chinese market. Maslov has suggested reaching out to a number of Asian countries, especially longstanding partners like India and Vietnam, with incentives for trade and investment in Russia. The Indian government, for example, has already urged its state-owned oil company, UVL, to explore purchasing the 30 percent stake in the Sakhalin 1 LNG project that ExxonMobil is vacating.⁴⁸ Zuenko notes that Russia’s Asia pivot has never been only about China—previously Japan and South Korea were important as well as India and Southeast Asia. Moreover, despite the geostrategic factors and strong energy ties, Zuenko argues that it will take time to expand economic cooperation with China due to logistics problems in Russia, political inertia, and cultural barriers.

Putin already has commissioned plans for rerouting Russia’s energy infrastructure eastward and for developing additional pipelines to better supply Asian markets as well as to supply potential energy customers in Africa and the Middle East.⁴⁹ This might involve expanding the capacity of the East Siberian Pacific Ocean oil pipeline and moving forward with the Power of Siberia gas pipeline that will traverse Mongolia en route to China (which has yet to agree on the routing). However, such projects will take years to complete as will commitments from purchasers to buy the energy, not to mention financing, which will be difficult to obtain due to the sanctions. As of

⁴⁶ “Russia’s Novatek Halts Growth Projects Other than Arctic LNG 2 - Kommersant,” Reuters, March 25, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russias-novatek-halts-growth-projects-other-than-arctic-lng-2-kommersant-2022-03-25/>, accessed May 2, 2022.

⁴⁷ Katya Golubkova and Maria Kiselyova, “Russia’s Novatek to Sell 20 Percent in Arctic LNG 2 to China,” Reuters, April 25, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-gas-novatek-cnodc-idUSKCN1S11WY>, accessed May 2, 2022.

⁴⁸ “Centre Asks State-Run Companies to Consider Buying Russian Oil Assets,” *Business Standard India*, April 29, 2022. https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/centre-asks-state-run-companies-to-consider-buying-russian-oil-assets-122042801291_1.html, accessed May 2, 2022.

⁴⁹ Tatyana Dyatel and Yuri Barsukov, “Петрпубація: Росія збирається перебросити нафту і газ в Азію” [Petropipelines in the Making: Russia Is Going to Transfer Oil and Gas to Asia], *Kommersant*, April 14, 2022. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5306878>, accessed May 15, 2022.

March 2022, Europe had purchased 50 percent of Russian oil and 75 percent of its gas. Coal is the only energy resource Russia currently sends more to Asia than it sends to Europe.⁵⁰

In Gabuev's view, China's growing leverage over Russia is likely to complicate Moscow's plans for an Asia pivot that is not exclusively focused on China. He contends that if China gains more leverage over Russia, and Russia fails to stabilize its relationship with the Western countries, then China will be in a position to dictate political terms to Russia, for example, insisting that it cease arms sales to India, calling for the most sophisticated Russian weapons systems, or requiring that the renminbi be used as the official currency for Sino-Russian trade.⁵¹

Conclusion

Despite speculation about an authoritarian convergence between Moscow and Beijing and rhetoric about a Sino-Russian partnership without limits, Russian China-watchers see Russia's invasion of Ukraine constraining China's support for Russia. Having had nearly a decade to assess China's response to Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014, they largely conclude that China is likely to prioritize its own interests rather than to back Russia overtly. Russian China experts highlight the competing interests Chinese policymakers confront as they seek to prevent a further weakening of Russia to the benefit of the West, while also aiming to minimize damage to Chinese economic interests and the PRC's global reputation. While some Russian observers emphasize the difficulties China faces in navigating the situation, others point to the potential gains—greater economic and even political leverage over an economically vulnerable Russia and diminished Western pressure on China.

Some Russian Asia experts are convinced that Russia will succeed in avoiding over-dependence on Chinese investment, especially in traditionally sensitive areas like the Russian Far East and the Arctic, while others see China in a better position to obtain long-sought economic opportunities. Most agree that one unintended consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is that Russia's Asia pivot—discussed since the days of Peter the Great, but yet to be fully implemented—will need to become a reality, especially if the European countries finally succeed in disconnecting themselves from Russian energy flows. As some Russian observers note, this will provide new opportunities not only for China but also for other Asian countries, especially Russia's other partners, India and Vietnam. Some U.S. partners, such as Japan and South Korea, will face tradeoffs between supporting Western sanctions and forfeiting to China their investments in the Russian energy sector and in the Russian Arctic.

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⁵⁰ "By the Numbers: Where Do Russia's Energy Exports Go?" | *Russia Matters*, March 25, 2022. <https://www.russiamatters.org/blog/numbers-where-do-russias-energy-exports-go>, accessed May 2, 2022.

⁵¹ Gabuev interview in Jonathan Tepperman.

Resilience in the Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. Dr. Wishnick is known for her research on Sino-Russian relations, Chinese foreign policy, and China's Arctic strategy. Her book project, "China's Risks: Oil, Water, Food, and Regional Security (forthcoming, Columbia University Press) addresses the security consequences of energy, water, and food risks in China for its Eurasian neighbors, a topic she explores in a related policy blog, www.chinasresourcerisks.com. She received a Ph.D. in Political Science from Columbia University, an M.A. in Russian and East European Studies from Yale University, and a B.A. from Barnard College. She speaks Chinese, Russian, and French and spent five months in Vladivostok, Russia, and Shanghai, China, as part of the Fulbright Global Scholar program in 2018–19.

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