

CALIBRATED COLLUSION – CHINA, RUSSIA AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

By DR. SARI ARHO HAVRÉN



**CENTRE FOR
INDO-PACIFIC
STUDIES**

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Her research focuses on China’s foreign policy, Great Power competition, and Sino-Russian relations, with recent work examining Beijing’s enablement of Russia’s war effort and the strategic dimensions of the EU-China relationship. She previously served as an Adjunct Professor at the George C. Marshall European Centre for Security Studies and as a European China Policy Fellow at MERICS.

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CENTRE FOR INDO-PACIFIC STUDIES

About the Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies

The **Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies** is a research centre within the Henry Jackson Society that aims to educate the public about the geostrategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region, and to explore structural shifts, regional complexities and historic tensions that exist alongside the economic and social growth that constitutes the “rise of Asia”. It also advocates a British role in the broader Indo-Pacific region, commensurate with Britain’s role as a custodian of the rule-based international system.

FOREWORD BY THE RT HON SIR JULIAN LEWIS MP

The relationship between Beijing and Moscow since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is often regarded as a matter of temporary wartime convenience – an arrangement of mutual advantage which a ceasefire, a change of government in Moscow, or renewed Western engagement might dissolve. Dr Sari Arho Havrén’s paper demonstrates with admirable rigour that the opposite applies.

China’s support for Russia’s war effort has been carefully calibrated, sustained and expanded. It is not the improvisation of opportunists, but the product of decisions taken at the highest levels of the Chinese Communist Party. China’s support results in energy revenues, in dual-use components reaching the battlefield via concealed supply chains, and in diplomatic cover for Russia at the United Nations and elsewhere. We should harbour no illusion that Beijing is a neutral bystander in the war against Ukraine.

As well as charting China’s pro-Russian initiatives, Dr Arho Havrén asks a harder question: what does China gain from all this, beyond the immediate commercial and energy dividends? Her answer is that Beijing is using the war, and the strains it has placed on the Western-led order, to advance a parallel architecture of global governance in which Russia’s dependency is a structural feature rather than an incidental one. Her thesis deserves close attention from our Government and our allies.

Cold War Sino-Soviet estrangement no longer applies. Nixon and Kissinger a genuine rupture between Moscow and Beijing to exploit, but no comparable divergence now exists. Nor, for the foreseeable future, is one likely to emerge. This has direct implications for British policy, which the author sets out with admirable clarity: for example, sanctions enforcement is inadequately applied against the intermediaries and the financial techniques which sustain illicit trade with Russia. On the other hand, our dealings with the countries of the Global South must recognise those aspects of the Chinese propaganda narrative which exploit hypocrisy, or worse, in the record of the West.

The outcome of the Kremlin’s bloody conflict in Ukraine will have vast consequences for the future security of Europe. An erratic and unreliable US leadership has put the stability of Western deterrence policy in greater jeopardy than at any time since the foundation of NATO. We need clarity about Chinese motives and methods if we are successfully to assess and navigate this complex and hazardous geopolitical era. By commissioning such high-quality analyses as Dr Arho Havrén’s paper, the Henry Jackson Society continues to provide Parliament and the public with the insight we need for the trials ahead.

The Rt Hon Sir Julian Lewis MP

Introduction

In late February 2022, just three weeks after Beijing and Moscow declared a bilateral partnership with “no limits”¹ in scope, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. At first, China’s support for Russia’s war was measured and cautious: in the initial weeks, Beijing appeared to distance itself from the conflict, emphasising neutrality and calling for talks. Yet over time, China’s assistance became increasingly pivotal for the Kremlin, gradually expanding across economic, technological, diplomatic, and political domains.

British politicians, including senior government ministers and members of parliament, have raised persistent concerns about China’s support for Russia’s war in Ukraine. In October 2024, during a visit to Beijing, then Foreign Secretary David Lammy urged his Chinese counterpart to investigate and stop Chinese companies from supplying Russia’s military. He warned that such support risks damaging China’s relations with Europe while sustaining Russia’s war effort.² Lammy has continued to raise these concerns in parliamentary statements and meetings.³

Similar warnings have been voiced across the European continent. Ursula von der Leyen and Kaja Kallas have been among the most outspoken European Union leaders in criticising China’s support for Russia.⁴ In April 2026, Finnish Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen went so far as to declare that China’s close ties with Russia should be a “disqualifying factor” in Beijing’s bid to open free-trade negotiations with the European Union,⁵ a statement that illustrated both apprehension about the close Sino-Russian ties and the fragility of European unity: decisions would require the support of all twenty-seven member states. Valtonen was, in effect, announcing a veto connected to China’s support for Russia. Yet her intervention also highlighted how divided the bloc remains on China, given the depth of ties that countries such as Spain⁶ and Germany⁷ maintain with Beijing.

Overall, Beijing’s reluctance to condemn Russia’s invasion, and its refusal to respond positively to European requests that it restrain President Vladimir Putin, have further strained relations with Ukraine’s supporters and deepened political distrust.

Beijing’s own messaging has been conspicuously mixed. On the one hand, Chinese officials have flatly denied providing material help, with the Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations arguing that had China helped Russia, Russia would already have won.⁸ On the other hand,

China’s top diplomat Wang Yi⁹ told Kaja Kallas, the EU’s top diplomat, that China cannot afford to see Russia lose the war, expressing concern that Washington would subsequently redirect its full strategic focus to China and the Indo-Pacific.¹⁰

The reality sits between these extremes. Beijing has maintained a strategy of strict denial of any material help whilst benefiting from maximalist trade without jeopardising China’s self-reliance drive and keeping military and dual-use support as camouflaged and off-the-radar as possible.

China’s support for Russia’s war effort – now in its fifth year – remains largely indirect: it is centred on economic lifelines, dual-use technology transfers, diplomatic alignment, and limited intelligence sharing. To avoid secondary sanctions, Beijing sustains a posture of “pro-Russian neutrality”, denying direct military aid or weapons sales whilst casting itself as a promoter of peace negotiations. However, Western officials and analysts have increasingly described China as Russia’s “key facilitator” and “indispensable backstop”,¹¹ enabling Moscow to sustain the war despite sanctions pressure.¹² This support has deepened since 2025,¹³ with no signs of reversal amid broader EU-China tensions and the ongoing conflict in Iran.

China’s support for Russia cannot be understood in isolation from the wider grouping of authoritarian states that has coalesced around Moscow’s war. Western analysts have come to describe this grouping by the acronym CRINK – China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea – and, less formally, as an “axis of upheaval”. The four regimes differ markedly in ideology and capability, and they have signed no collective treaty; their cooperation remains transactional and loosely aligned rather than a formal alliance. Yet they are bound together by a shared rejection of the US-led order and a common interest in eroding the reach of Western sanctions and military power. Russia’s full-scale invasion has served as the principal catalyst, drawing material support from all three of its authoritarian partners.¹⁴ Within this informal axis, China is the indispensable anchor. It is the only member with the economic weight, the technological base, and the diplomatic standing to sustain the others, and it derives the greatest strategic benefit from their combined pressure on Washington and its allies.

Whilst China continues to be Russia’s “key facilitator” in the ongoing war in Ukraine, less attention has been paid to what China gains from the war – particularly in advancing its global governance ambitions. The war in Ukraine has accelerated structural changes in the international order, including pressure on the European security architecture that Beijing seeks to engineer.

This paper analyses China’s support for Russia under five headings: its economic contributions to Russia’s war economy; its dual-use and military-related assistance; putting emphasis on its diplomatic and political cover and on the strategic benefits Beijing derives from the relationship; and, finally, the structural drivers that will sustain the partnership long after the end of the

¹ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development”, The Kremlin, 4 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.
² “UK Foreign Secretary Lammy urges China against supporting Russia’s military”, *AP*, 19 October 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/uk-china-foreign-secretary-lammy-visit-b6f7da40b721b069e7469fc7cf55eb6b>.
³ *China Audit*, Volume 769: debated on Tuesday 24 June 2025, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2025-06-24/debates/63984F18-8D5A-47DF-9B98-9AE010A726BC/ChinaAudit>.
⁴ “EU says China’s links with Russia now ‘determining factor’ in ties”, *The Straits Times*, 24 July 2025, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/eu-says-chinas-links-with-russia-now-determining-factor-in-ties>; Alexandra Brzozowski, “EU’s new top diplomat Kallas strong on Russia-China axis, struggles on Middle East”, *Euractiv*, 12 November 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/news/eus-new-top-diplomat-kallas-strong-on-russia-china-axis-struggles-on-middle-east/>.
⁵ Finbarr Bermingham, “China’s Russia ties mean EU trade deal is off the table, Finland says”, *South China Morning Post*, 23 April 2026, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3351183/chinas-russia-ties-mean-eu-trade-deal-table-finland-says>.
⁶ Aitor Hernández-Morales, “China’s Xi recognizes Spain’s Sánchez as key interlocutor between Beijing and the EU”, *Politico*, 14 April 2026, <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-xi-jinping-recognizes-spain-pedro-sanchez-key-interlocutor-between-beijing-eu/>.
⁷ Noah Barkin and Gregor Williams, “Germany’s ‘China Shock’ Revisited”, *Rhodium Group*, 10 February 2026, <https://rhg.com/research/germanys-china-shock-revisited/>.
⁸ “If China had provided military supplies to Russia, situation on the battleground would not have been where it is now: Chinese Ambassador to UN in response to US smear”, *Global Times*, 17 January 2026, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202501/1327080.shtml>.

⁹ Wang Yi is the Director of the Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission Office of the Communist Party of China and the Minister of Foreign Affairs.
¹⁰ Finbarr Bermingham, “China tells EU it does not want to see Russia lose its war in Ukraine: sources”, *South China Morning Post*, 4 July 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3316875/china-tells-eu-it-cannot-afford-russian-loss-ukraine-war-sources-say>.
¹¹ “Russia’s War Network”, *NAKO*, 2026, <https://nako.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/russia-s-war-network.pdf>.
¹² Jens Stoltenberg, *On my watch, leading NATO in a time of war*, William Collins, United Kingdom, 2025, p.433.
¹³ Khaled Robert Maalouf, “China, Russia and Ukraine: October 2025”, *CFR*, 7 January 2026, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/china-russia-and-ukraine-october-2025>.
¹⁴ Audronius Azubalis, “NATO and the Coalescing Bloc of Authoritarian Countries”, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Political Committee Report, 12 October 2025, <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2025-crink-report-azubalis-020-pcnp>; Bonny Lin, Brian Hart, Leon Li, Hugh Grant-Chapman, Truly Tinsley, and Feifei Hung, “CRINK Security Ties: Growing Cooperation, Anchored by China and Russia”, *CSIS*, 30 September 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/crink-security-ties-growing-cooperation-anchored-china-and-russia>.

war. The central argument is that China’s help has been incremental and calibrated to sustain Russia without triggering the costs of overt belligerence. Despite undeniable mutual distrust and historical grievances, which are not the subject of this paper, Sino-Russian convergence predates the war and is poised to outlast it: their strategic alignment began deepening years before 2022 and is rooted in broader mutual interests that extend beyond the war in Ukraine. These ties run deeper than the war itself.

China’s Economic Support for Russia’s War Economy

China has become the principal economic lifeline sustaining Russia’s war effort. Since 2022, as Western nations severed trade ties and imposed successive rounds of sanctions, Beijing stepped in to purchase Russian exports and supply critical goods, cushioning Moscow’s economy from isolation. Chinese imports of Russian oil, gas, and coal have reached unprecedented levels, whilst exports of machinery, electronics, vehicles, and other products have filled gaps left by departing Western firms. This support has enabled the Kremlin to finance and equip its military campaign even without direct arms transfers. Beijing’s economic alignment with Moscow is carefully calibrated: it helps Russia withstand sanctions and continue fighting, whilst advancing China’s geoeconomic interests, such as securing cheap energy, internationalising the yuan and deepening Russia’s dependence on the Chinese market.

Energy underpins everything. Roughly 70% of China’s imports from Russia are fossil fuels – primarily crude oil, along with natural gas and coal.¹⁵ By redirecting its energy exports eastward, Russia found in China both its largest customer and a reliable source of revenue for its war chest. Chinese refiners exploited steep “sanctions discounts” on Russian crude, saving an estimated US\$18 billion or more in 2022–2025 from below-market pricing. By 2024, Russia accounted for approximately one fifth of China’s total oil imports, a dramatic rise from previous years; conversely, over one third of Russia’s entire oil export volume was flowing to China, making Beijing absolutely central to Russian oil revenues.¹⁶ These energy revenues are central to funding Russia’s war: some Western analysts have estimated that Chinese purchases effectively bankroll up to 60% of the Kremlin’s war budget.¹⁷

The trend has continued to deepen despite the broader geopolitical turbulence of 2026. China’s customs data showed a 13% year-on-year rise in crude imports from Russia in March 2026, with Russian crude supplies to China in the first quarter of 2026 up 31% year on year, reaching 31.86 million tons.¹⁸ Russia remains China’s largest crude supplier and, given disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz caused by the US-Iran conflict, one of the most attractive non-maritime alternatives to vulnerable Gulf flows. The Russian ambassador to China, Igor Morgulov, described this as confirmation that the Sino-Russian energy partnership is “highly resilient to external shocks”.¹⁹

Beyond energy, China has replaced many Western suppliers across the breadth of Russia’s economy. Chinese exports to Russia rose by over 70% from 2021 to 2024.²⁰ This upsurge filled critical supply gaps after hundreds of foreign firms exited the Russian market. For example, Chinese carmakers rushed in to occupy the void left by Western auto companies: China’s

¹⁵ Maciej Kalwasinski and Filip Rudnik, “Closing ranks: Russia-China energy cooperation amid escalating confrontation with the West”, *Merics*, 11 February 2026, <https://merics.org/en/comment/closing-ranks-russia-china-energy-cooperation-amid-escalating-confrontation-west>.
¹⁶ Erica Downs, “Where China Gets Its Oil: Crude Imports in 2025 Reveal Stockpiling and Changing Fortunes of Certain Suppliers, Including Those Sanctioned”, *Center on Global Energy Policy*, Columbia, 29 January 2026, <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/where-china-gets-its-oil-crude-imports-in-2025-reveal-stockpiling-and-changing-fortunes-of-certain-suppliers-including-those-sanctioned/>.
¹⁷ George Allison, “China quietly funding Russian war machine MPs told”, *UK Defence Journal*, 4 February 2026, <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/china-quietly-funding-russian-war-machine-mps-told/>.
¹⁸ “Russian oil exports to China up 31 percent”, *Vestnik Kavkaza*, 20 April 2026, <https://en.vestikavkaza.ru/news/Russian-oil-exports-to-China-up-31.html>; Xiaoning Mo, “China using a double-insurance strategy to secure crude oil supplies amid Iran war”, *ABC News*, 30 April 2026, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-05-01/how-china-secures-oil-supplies-amid-hormuz-disruption/106625732>.
¹⁹ “Посол РФ: поставки российских энергоносителей в Китай достигли почти \$80 млрд”, *Финансы*, 28 April 2026, <https://finance.mail.ru/article/posol-rf-postavki-rossijskih-energonositelej-v-kitaj-dostigli-pochti-80-mlrd-69206734/>.
²⁰ Alessia Caruso and Tim Rühlig, “The dependence gap in Russia-China relations”, *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, 2 October 2025, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/analysis/dependence-gap-russia-china-relations>.

vehicle exports to Russia were nearly ten times higher in 2024 than in 2021, though they dipped slightly in 2025 after Moscow imposed protective tariffs. Overall, China now provides more than half of Russia’s total imports by value, up from roughly one-quarter before the war. The Russian economy has not simply absorbed Chinese goods – it has become structurally dependent on them.²¹

To facilitate this surging trade in the face of Western banking sanctions, China and Russia have also developed financial workarounds. This has also materially helped China advance its payments and currency infrastructure outside the US dollar system, though not enough to challenge dollar dominance in the near or even the medium term. The use of the yuan in bilateral trade has risen from negligible levels before the war²² to the point where, by today, nearly all bilateral trade between the two countries is conducted in national currencies – the yuan and the rouble.²³ This shift has been enabled by Russia’s adoption of the yuan for energy sales and the growing use of China’s Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) as an alternative to SWIFT. Chinese state-owned banks have maintained cautious operations in Russia, whilst smaller Chinese banks and shadow financial networks have helped process transactions for sanctioned Russian entities. Chinese insurers and shipping firms have similarly assisted with carrying Russian oil exports after European maritime sanctions, helping to organise a “shadow fleet” of tankers insured outside Western providers. Collectively, these measures have significantly blunted the intended effect of Western sanctions.²⁴

Notably, and throughout all of this, Beijing has calibrated its support to avoid overt violations that could trigger severe secondary sanctions against Chinese entities. Beijing has so far refrained from direct arms transfers: no Chinese-made missiles, shells or ammunition have been found on the Ukrainian battlefield. When the White House signalled in early 2023 and again in 2024 that it would sanction Chinese firms or banks that crossed into direct military assistance,²⁵ Beijing heeded those warnings, at least to the extent of holding back from large-scale deliveries of munitions. There were signs in 2024 that certain sensitive dual-use exports dipped or paused after the US Treasury flagged potential penalties.²⁶ This reflects Beijing’s balancing act – providing maximum economic support to Russia without incurring costs it cannot bear. So far, that balance has held: Western governments have sanctioned a handful of Chinese companies for aiding Russia, but Beijing’s core state-owned banks and major industrial firms have avoided the broad retaliatory actions that would disrupt their global operations.

²¹ Alessia Caruso and Tim Rühlig, “The dependence gap in Russia-China relations”, *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, 2 October 2025, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/analysis/dependence-gap-russia-china-relations>; Alexander Knobel and Alexander Firanchuk, “Foreign Trade Outcome in 2024”, Gaidar Institute, *Monitoring of Russia’s Economic Outlook* 2 (175), March 2025, <https://www.iep.ru/files/RePEc/gai/mreoen/mreoen-2025-1381.pdf>.

²² In 2014, Nabiullina’s Central Bank of Russia closed a deal with the People’s Bank of China to create a \$24 billion currency swap line. This created a framework for Russia and China to settle some of their bilateral trade in rubles and renminbi (Edward Fishman, *Chokepoints, How economic warfare is changing the world*, Elliott and Thomson Ltd, United Kingdom, 2025, p.238).

²³ “Russia and China Settle 99% of Trade in National Currencies”, *Politics Today*, 6 November 2025, <https://politicstoday.org/russia-and-china-settle-99-of-trade-in-national-currencies/>.

²⁴ “Share of ruble, yuan in Russia-China mutual settlements exceeds 95% – PM Mishustin”, *Interfax*, 24 August 2024, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/105270/>; “Trade with China mainly settled in yuan, rubles: Russian deputy PM”, *Global Times*, 28 March 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202403/1309666.shtml>; Reid Standish, “G7 Takes Aim At Small Chinese Banks To Combat Russian War Economy”, *RFERL*, 12 June 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/g7-china-banks-russia-ukraine-war-sanctions/32989852.html>; Elisabeth Braw, “The shadow fleet is undermining the maritime order more brazenly than ever”, *Atlantic Council*, 22 April 2026, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/the-shadow-fleet-is-undermining-the-maritime-order-more-brazenly-than-ever/>.

²⁵ Adam Schrader, “Jake Sullivan warns China about sending arms to Russia”, *US News*, 23 February 2023, https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2023/02/26/national-security-adviser-warns-china-sending-arms-russia/7871677442160/; Colin Clark, “White House’s Sullivan warns China over aid to Russia’s defense industrial base”, *Breaking Defence*, 31 January 2024, <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/01/white-houses-sullivan-warns-china-over-aid-to-russias-defense-industrial-base/>.

²⁶ Kateryna Denisova, “Media: Russia faces difficulties with Chinese imports as Beijing tightens control”, *Kyiv Independent*, 5 July 2024, <https://kyivindependent.com/media-russia-faces-difficulties-with-chinese-goods-import-after-beijing-tightened-control/>.

China’s Dual-Use and Military-Related Support for Russia’s War

Whilst China has avoided the overt transfer of weapons, it has quietly become a critical enabler of Moscow’s war machine. In 2024, NATO formally labelled Beijing a “decisive enabler” of Russia’s aggression, citing Chinese firms’ supply of the microelectronics, machinery, and dual-use materials that keep Russia’s weapons production operational.²⁷ Beijing denies providing any “lethal aid”,²⁸ yet customs data and intelligence assessments reveal an extensive pipeline of dual-use exports sustaining Russian drone fleets, missile arsenals, and ammunition stocks that have proven vital to the Kremlin’s sustained military effort.²⁹

Since 2022, Chinese exports of strategic components to Russia have surged, often to record volumes. Operating within the spirit, if not always the letter, of a “no limits” partnership and “no forbidden areas of cooperation”³⁰ Chinese companies have circumvented Western embargoes by selling Russia critical inputs that straddle the civilian-military divide: semiconductors, optical systems, machine tools, speciality chemicals, and more. By 2023, an estimated 90% of Russia’s imported microelectronics came via China, and roughly 70% of its machine-tool imports – used to manufacture missiles, artillery shells, and other arms – were of Chinese origin.³¹

The drone warfare domain offers the most vivid illustration of this dynamic. In May and June 2025, China shipped 249,000 miles of fibre-optic cable to Russia; in August 2025 alone, the figure reached an unprecedented 328,000 miles.³² These ultra-thin cables are used to build wire-guided, first-person-view (FPV) drones that are immune to electronic jamming – a technology that has given Russian forces a new and troubling edge in striking Ukrainian positions. Simultaneously, Chinese lithium-ion battery exports to Russia soared, peaking at approximately US\$54 million in June 2025 and US\$47 million in August, far exceeding comparable shipments to Ukraine.³³ These components, though ostensibly civilian, are fuelling Russia’s war innovations: the wired drones enabled by Chinese cables can now reach targets beyond ten miles and operate with impunity from jammers, a capability that can be attributed directly to China’s selective supply chain support.

Chinese technology and material inputs flow behind Russia’s lines through a range of opaque networks. Chinese companies dispatch goods to intermediaries in Central Asia, the Middle East, or via Hong Kong, who then re-export to Russia to evade direct scrutiny.³⁴ A particularly revealing example is nitrocellulose, the chemical precursor for gunpowder: despite a European Union ban, Chinese and Turkish firms combined supply thousands of tons to Russia, enabling

²⁷ “Washington Summit Declaration”, NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C., 10 July 2024, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2024/07/10/washington-summit-declaration>.

²⁸ Wei Han, “Beijing Rejects U.S. Claim That China Plans to Send Lethal Aid to Russia”, *Caixin*, 21 February 2023, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2023-02-21/beijing-rejects-us-claim-that-china-plans-to-send-lethal-aid-to-russia-102000047.html>; “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian’s Regular Press Conference on February 25, 2025”, 25 February 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/fyrbt/202502/t20250225_11561975.html.

²⁹ Christian Shepherd and Rudy Lu, “Behind Russia’s battlefield drone surge in Ukraine? Chinese factories”, *The Washington Post*, 13 October 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/10/13/china-russia-drone-parts-ukraine/>.

³⁰ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development”, The Kremlin, 4 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>; Huasheng Zhao, “Explaining China’s Reaction to the Russia-Ukraine Crisis”, *China International Strategy Review*, Vol.5, No.1 (2023), pp.24-46, 12 May 2023, <https://iis.fudan.edu.cn/en/69/b5/c16666a616885/page.htm>.

³¹ “U.S. intelligence shows China is surging equipment sales to Russia to help war effort in Ukraine, AP says”, *PBS News* via *AP*, 12 April 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/u-s-intelligence-shows-china-is-surging-equipment-sales-to-russia-to-help-war-effort-in-ukraine-ap-says>.

³² Christian Shepherd and Rudy Lu, “Behind Russia’s battlefield drone surge in Ukraine? Chinese factories”, *The Washington Post*, 13 October 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/10/13/china-russia-drone-parts-ukraine/>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Edward Lemon and Bradley Jardine, “Reordering Central Asia: China’s Emerging Economic Hierarchy”, *FPRI*, 5 May 2026, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2026/05/reordering-central-asia-chinas-emerging-economic-hierarchy/>.

Moscow to produce conceivably up to 700,000 artillery shells in 2023 – with Chinese firms providing roughly one third of those critical imports. One Russian drone producer, Rustakt LLC, reportedly imported some US\$577 million worth of Chinese parts in eighteen months before eventually being sanctioned by the European Union. By 2025, Russian FPV drones, Lancet loitering munitions and repurposed Iranian Shahed drones were routinely found to carry Chinese-made components, from navigation modules and optical sights to engines and microchips.³⁵

China now accounts for approximately 75% of reported Common High Priority (CHP) exports to Russia, even as Russia’s total imports of those high-priority items have fallen in value under export controls. China is nevertheless indispensable to Russia’s war machine, but it weighs that support against the threat of secondary sanctions. This, however, shows that sanctions and secondary sanctions matter when trying to influence China’s behaviour and its support for Russia’s war machine.

Figure 1A: China as enabler – near-exclusive and locked in.
China + Hong Kong share of Russia’s high-priority (CHP/battlefield) goods imports, by value.

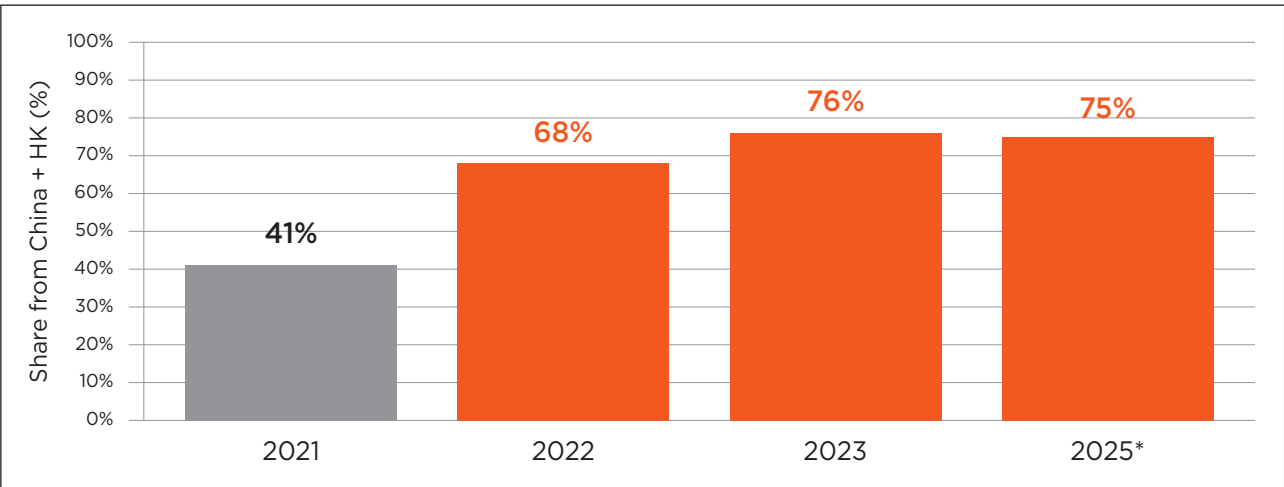
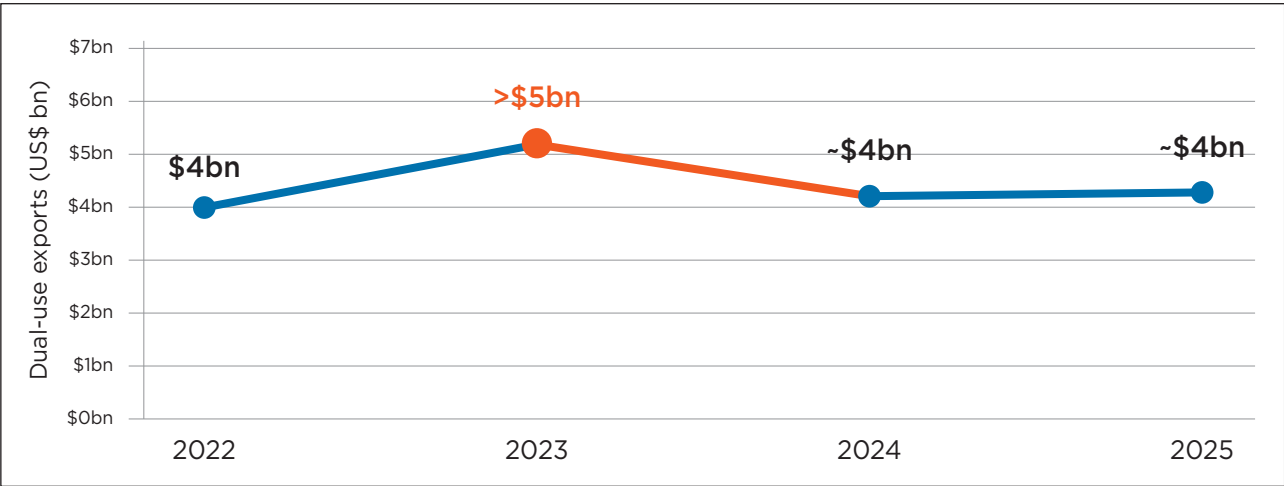


Figure 1B: China as calibrated enabler – volume throttled under sanctions.
Chinese dual-use exports to Russia (US\$ bn); coral marks the post-sanctions decline.



³⁵ Alexander Pologenko, “Chinese, Turkish Companies Supplying Russia With Key Gunpowder Component”, *The Moscow Times* via TASS, 31 January 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/01/31/chinese-turkish-companies-supplying-russia-with-key-gunpowder-component-a83921/pdf>; Christian Shepherd and Rudy Lu, “Behind Russia’s battlefield drone surge in Ukraine? Chinese factories”, *Washington Post*, 13 October 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/10/13/china-russia-drone-parts-ukraine/>; Ольга Кошарна, “China sharply increased drone component exports to Russia since late spring”, *sensor.net*, 14 October 2025, <https://sensor.net/en/news/3579650/china-sharply-increased-exports-of-drone-components-to-russia>.

China’s *share* stays dominant (A) even as the *value* dips after the Dec 2023 US secondary-sanctions threat (B) – calibration of volume, not of dominance.

Figure 1 A and B: China as enabler and calibrated enabler of Russia’s war machine, to 2025.

(A) China + Hong Kong’s share of Russia’s high-priority (CHP/battlefield) goods imports, by value; sources: KSE Institute and the Yermak-McFaul Group (2021–2023); KSE Institute Russian CHP Imports Tracker, Q1 2026 (≈75%, latest). 2025* reflects data through end-2025.

(B) Chinese dual-use exports to Russia, US\$ bn, 2022–2025, with the post-December-2023 decline marking calibration; sources: EUISS (2023 peak), Merics China–Russia Dashboard (2024–25); 2022 figure approximate. Share (A) versus value (B): China’s dominance holds even as volume is throttled. Author’s own figure, created with Claude (Anthropic).

China has also bolstered Russia’s wartime intelligence and targeting capabilities. Reports from late 2023 and 2024 indicate that Chinese satellite imagery has been shared with Russia’s military, augmenting Moscow’s limited reconnaissance assets. In October 2025, Ukraine’s Foreign Intelligence Service alleged a “high level of cooperation” whereby Chinese reconnaissance satellites directly supported Russian missile strikes, noting that Chinese remote-sensing satellites had overflown western Ukraine shortly before a heavy Russian bombardment. The US Treasury had earlier sanctioned Chinese firms, including Changsha Tianyi, for providing imagery to the Wagner Group, corroborating that Chinese commercial satellites had served Russian military ends. Beyond imagery, Sino-Russian space cooperation, including joint GLONASS/BeiDou navigation stations, potentially enhances Russia’s precision targeting capacity.³⁶

There are also reports of Chinese military observers operating behind Russian lines. According to Western intelligence assessments, Beijing approved People’s Liberation Army officers to work in support roles in Russia, gleaning tactical lessons from the conflict – studying NATO tactics and Ukraine’s defences at second-hand. This suggests that, alongside material aid, China is actively learning from Russia’s war in ways that may inform its own military planning.³⁷ Despite the evidence of Chinese physical observation of the war remaining thin, it still appears that the People’s Liberation Army has been reformed based on the intelligence it has been gaining: “Russia’s war in Ukraine has, therefore, impacted the PLA both structurally and operationally”.³⁸

A growing body of reporting in 2026 suggests that Chinese support for Russia’s war effort runs deeper than all of the above, and now also covers direct military training. According to Reuters, citing three European intelligence services and documents it reviewed, Chinese military facilities secretly trained roughly 200 Russian servicemen in late 2025 under a bilateral agreement signed on 2 July 2025. The training allegedly took place at sites including Beijing and Nanjing and focused especially on drone warfare, while also covering electronic warfare, army aviation, armoured infantry, mine warfare, demining, and counter-drone tactics. Some

³⁶ “China provides Russia with satellite imagery for Ukraine strikes”, *NewsUkraine RBC* via *Bloomberg*, 6 April 2024, <https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/china-provides-russia-with-satellite-imagery-1712434304.html>; Ketii Korkiya and John Hardie, “Ukraine Alleges China Provides Satellite Imagery To Support Russian Strikes”, *FDD Policy Brief*, 15 October 2025, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/10/15/ukraine-alleges-china-provides-satellite-imagery-to-support-russian-strikes/>.

³⁷ Erin Banco, Jonathan Landay and Michael Martina, “Chinese nationals fighting for Russia in Ukraine are mercenaries-US officials”, *Reuters*, 12 April 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/chinese-nationals-fighting-russia-ukraine-are-mercenaries-us-officials-2025-04-11/>; Brendan Cole, “Chinese Soldiers Quietly Creep Into Ukraine War”, *Newsweek*, 12 April 2025, <https://www.newsweek.com/chinese-soldiers-quietly-creep-russia-ukraine-war-2058954>.

³⁸ Toomas Hanso, “China’s New Information Support Force: Military Lessons from Ukraine”, *The International Centre for Defence and Security*, 17 December 2024, https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2024/12/ICDS_Analysis_China%20B4s_New_Information_Support_Force_Toomas_Hanso_December_2024.pdf.

of those personnel reportedly later returned to fight in Ukraine. Subsequent statements by a senior European Union official went further, saying EU services had confirmed that training occurred at multiple locations in China and involved hundreds of Russian soldiers, some of whom were later deployed to the Ukrainian front.³⁹

Beijing’s permissive stance has also extended to tolerating the involvement of Russia’s other backers. North Korea has reportedly shipped large quantities of artillery shells and rockets to Russia, and deployed what Kyiv estimates as between 10,000 and 12,000 personnel in logistical or near-front roles. China has offered no censure of Pyongyang’s intervention and has blocked or diluted efforts at the United Nations to call out North Korean or Iranian assistance to Russia, whilst simultaneously criticising Western arms deliveries to Ukraine.⁴⁰ By allowing the North Korea sanctions panel to be terminated in March 2024, China helped silence a key UN mechanism that was beginning to expose Pyongyang’s arms shipments to Russia.⁴¹ This tacit acceptance signals Beijing’s willingness to allow its junior partner to fortify Russia, further insulating Moscow from the isolation Western policy aims to impose.

Importantly, Beijing continues to calibrate all of this support to avoid obvious red lines. China conspicuously has not sent “smoking gun” weapons: no Chinese tanks or missiles appear on the Ukrainian battlefield. Whenever Western pressure spikes, as it did in early 2023 over potential Chinese arms transfers, Beijing treads carefully. Under diplomatic pressure, China announced export licensing for certain drones and electronics in mid-2023,⁴² a gesture of regulation whose practical enforcement remained lax. Chinese firms have also pulled back from shipping a few high-profile items – notably long-range unmanned aerial vehicles – to avoid triggering US sanctions against key Chinese banks.⁴³ In essence, Beijing supplies the brains and the veins of Russia’s war effort (electronics, components, energy, targeted transfer of tactical know-how) whilst stopping short of overtly supplying the blood (weapons) that would expose it to direct and comprehensive punitive action.

Nor is this merely the product of rogue actors or grey-market opportunism. Chinese state-owned enterprises and ostensibly private firms with party ties are deeply embedded in these trades. Some Chinese provincial agencies have encouraged and supported firms expanding their business with Russia,⁴⁴ reflecting a political green light from above. High-level China-

³⁹ “Exclusive: Russians covertly trained by China return to fight in Ukraine, sources say”, *Reuters*, 19 May 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/russians-covertly-trained-by-china-return-fight-ukraine-sources-say-2026-05-19/>; “EU Says It Has Proof China Trained Russian Soldiers for War in Ukraine”, *Kyiv Post*, 12 June 2026, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/78077>.

⁴⁰ Molly Carlough and James Kennedy, “How North Korea Has Bolstered Russia’s War in Ukraine”, *CFR*, 25 November 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/how-north-korea-has-bolstered-russias-war-ukraine>; Xin Liu, “China calls for restraint as Ukraine crisis risks escalation”, *Global Times*, 22 November 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202411/1323616.shtml>.

⁴¹ Arnord Aaron, “Russia Just Gutted the UN Panel of Experts on North Korea – What Now?”, *RUSI*, 3 April 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russia-just-gutted-un-panel-experts-north-korea-what-now>; Statement by Deputy Political Coordinator Thomas Phipps at the UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine, “Russia has violated UN resolutions by procuring weapons from North Korea and Iran to use in Ukraine: UK statement at the UN Security Council”, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and Thomas Phipps, UK Deputy Political Coordinator at the UN, 12 April 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/russia-has-violated-un-resolutions-by-procuring-weapons-from-north-korea-and-iran-to-use-in-ukraine-uk-statement-at-the-un-security-council>; Edith M. Lederer, “US and allies accuse North Korea and Russia of flagrantly violating UN sanctions in military deals”, *The Hill*, 29 May 2025, <https://thehill.com/homenews/ap/ap-international/ap-us-and-allies-accuse-north-korea-and-russia-of-flagrantly-violating-un-sanctions-in-military-deals/>.

⁴² “China to impose temporary export control on some drones”, *CGTN*, 31 July 2023, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-07-31/China-to-impose-temporary-export-control-on-some-drones--1ITkXGOblCM/index.html>.

⁴³ “Exclusive-China firms go ‘underground’ on Russia payments as banks pull back”, *Investing.com* via *Reuters*, 29 April 2024, <https://www.investing.com/news/world-news/exclusivechina-firms-go-underground-on-russia-payments-as-banks-pull-back-3402239>.

⁴⁴ “区商务委积极组织外贸企业开拓国际市场, 重庆市北碚区商务委员会”, 16 July 2025, https://beibei.gov.cn/bm/qswww/zwx_58244/dt_58245/202507/t20250716_14821911.html; “Россию призвал сотрудничать регион, производящий 70% дронов в мире”, *МКРУ*, 17 May 2026, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2026/05/17/rossiyu-prizval-sotrudnichat-region-proizvodyashhiy-70-dronov-v-mire.html>.

Russia dialogues frequently include pledges to deepen “military-technical cooperation” – a phrase that encompasses everything from joint research to arms trade facilitation. US Ambassador to NATO Matthew Whitaker observed in July 2025 that “China thinks they’re fighting a proxy war through Russia” – occupying Washington and its allies in Europe whilst preserving China’s own room for manoeuvre in Asia.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Tim Zadorozhnyy, “US NATO ambassador warns China over ‘subsidizing’ Russia’s war in Ukraine”, *Kyiv Independent*, 22 July 2025, <https://kyivindependent.com/us-envoy-warns-china-over-subsidizing-russias-war-in-ukraine-calls-it-strategic-miscalculation/>.

Diplomatic and Political Support

Multilateral Shielding: Blocking Condemnation and Isolation

China’s diplomatic machinery has provided crucial political cover for Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine. Beijing has refused outright condemnation, echoed Russian justifications, including Russia’s “legitimate security concerns” over NATO expansion,⁴⁶ and consistently opposed Western sanctions as unlawful “bullying”.⁴⁷ China’s voting behaviour in multilateral forums and its official rhetoric consistently avoid placing sole blame on Russia. Through high-level engagements and peace proposals, Beijing projects an image of a neutral mediator whilst, in practice, reinforcing conditions favourable to Russia, particularly calls for an immediate ceasefire that would freeze territorial gains. This posture not only helps sustain Russia’s war effort but also advances China’s own strategic aims: challenging Western narratives, promoting alternative security norms, solidifying ties with the Global South and fostering a multipolar order more amenable to Beijing’s interests.⁴⁸

China’s actions in multilateral bodies have repeatedly shielded Russia diplomatically, preventing consensus on condemning Moscow’s aggression and softening international responses. In the United Nations, Beijing has abstained from or opposed motions that explicitly censure Russia.⁴⁹ At the UN Security Council vote on 25 February 2022, immediately after the invasion, China abstained, declining to support a resolution denouncing Russia’s actions.⁵⁰ Days later, China was among thirty-five countries abstaining from the UN General Assembly resolution of 2 March 2022 that condemned the invasion and demanded unconditional withdrawal. In subsequent years, Beijing continued to abstain or vote against Ukraine-related resolutions, including at the General Assembly in February 2023 and in 2024.⁵¹ In February 2025, China abstained from a major UN vote condemning Russia’s aggression, even as an increasingly isolated Moscow received only a handful of votes in its favour.⁵²

China’s abstentions are not neutral acts. By withholding condemnation, Beijing tacitly helps Russia avoid complete diplomatic isolation, preventing a united Western stance whilst maintaining the appearance of even-handedness. It consistently denies Moscow’s critics the final stamp of blame that Western governments seek, preserving a diplomatic lifeline for the Kremlin. Beyond the General Assembly, China has also intervened in technical multilateral bodies. At the International Atomic Energy Agency in March 2022, China joined Russia in

⁴⁶ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on March 1, 2022, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, 1 March 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347234.html.

⁴⁷ Sheng Yang and Hengyi Wan, “China ‘won’t be coerced by US’ on its ties with Russia”, *Global Times*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1255360.shtml>.

⁴⁸ Gim Siong Lee, “Why did China abstain from UN vote on Ukraine war even while US backs Russia?”, *CNA*, 1 March 2025, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/east-asia/china-abstain-un-resolution-ukraine-russia-us-switch-side-4967256>; “China understands Russia’s legitimate security concerns”, *People’s Daily Online*, 25 February 2022, <https://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0225/c90000-9963062.html>; Jakub Fromer, “UN votes to condemn Russian invasion of Ukraine, but China again stays silent”, *SCMP*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3169010/un-votes-condemn-russian-invasion-ukraine-china-again-stays-silent>.

⁴⁹ Gim Siong Lee, “Why did China abstain from UN vote on Ukraine war even while US backs Russia?”, *CNA*, 1 March 2025, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/east-asia/china-abstain-un-resolution-ukraine-russia-us-switch-side-4967256>.

⁵⁰ “Russia vetoes U.N. Security action on Ukraine, China abstains”, *The Asahi Shimbun*, 26 February 2022, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14558340>.

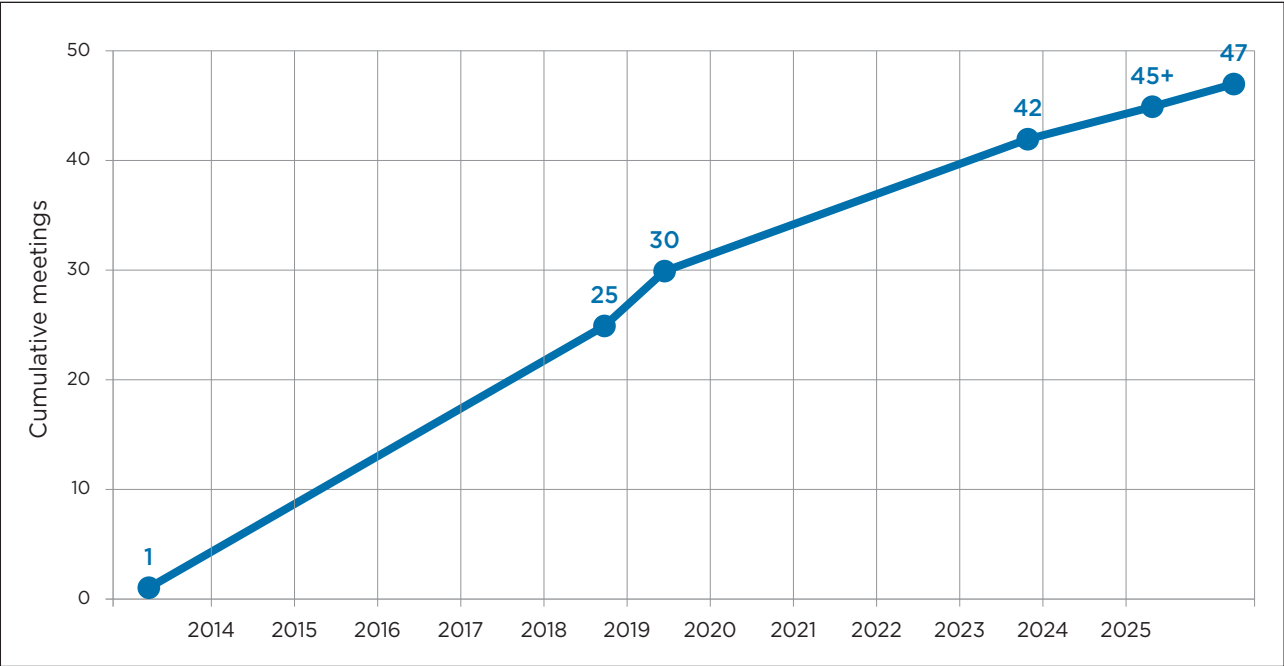
⁵¹ Michelle Nichols, “Russia isolated as U.N. marks one year of Ukraine war”, *Reuters*, 24 February 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-isolated-un-marks-one-year-ukraine-war-2023-02-23/>; Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the U.N., “Explanation of Vote by Ambassador Fu Cong on the UN General Assembly Draft Resolution on the Safety and Security of Nuclear Facilities of Ukraine”, 11 July 2024, https://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/chinaandun/securitycouncil/202407/t20240712_11453219.htm.

⁵² Elizabeth Crisp, “These 17 countries voted with US against Ukraine UN resolution”, *The Hill*, 24 February 2025, <https://thehill.com/homenews/5161380-ukraine-un-resolution/>.

voting against a resolution raising concerns about nuclear safety in Ukraine, arguing that the IAEA should avoid “politicising” nuclear issues. In March 2026, China again sided with Russia against an IAEA resolution condemning attacks on Ukraine’s power grid.⁵³ Each time, Beijing’s negative vote has prevented Moscow from being singled out in bodies that are usually apolitical.

Xi Jinping’s personal diplomacy has compounded this shielding effect. Since the 2022 invasion, Xi has met or spoken with Vladimir Putin at least ten times, a frequency that has counteracted diplomatic pressure on Putin by demonstrating that he retains the partnership of a major power.⁵⁴ In October 2023, in Beijing, Xi himself told Putin that it was their 42nd meeting in ten years.⁵⁵ Given that Xi Jinping didn’t need to meet Vladimir Putin this often, these high-profile, frequent exchanges project an image of continued great-power solidarity and, as such, normalise Russia’s international standing in defiance of Western attempts at isolation.

Figure 2: Cumulative Xi-Putin meetings, 2013–2026. Author’s own figure, created with Claude (Claude Opus 4.8, Anthropic), 12 June 2026. Underlying figures drawn from *CSIS/ChinaPower*, *The Diplomat*, *NPR*, *Fox News*, *Al Jazeera*. *The Diplomat* piece from 2025⁵⁶ put the figure at more than 45 on Xi’s 11th visit to Russia, and the 19–20 May 2026 Beijing state visit was Putin’s 25th visit to China, taking the running total to roughly 47–48.



Echoing Moscow’s Narrative – Assigning Blame to NATO and the West

Beijing’s public narrative about the war mirrors Russia’s justifications, shifting blame to the West and absolving Moscow of sole responsibility. From the outset, Chinese officials have avoided calling Russia the aggressor, emphasising instead “complex historical causes” and validating Russia’s security grievances. Just one day after the invasion, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that China “understands Russia’s legitimate security concerns” in Europe, whilst reiterating that the sovereignty of all

⁵³ Colum Lynch, “U.N. Denounces Russia’s Ukraine Invasion”, *Foreign Policy*, 2 March 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/02/un-denounces-russia-invasion-ukraine/>.

⁵⁴ Zoriana Stepanenko and Reid Standish, “As Ukraine War Enters Fifth Year, Europe Faces Hard Truth On China”, *RFERL*, 22 February 2026, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-ukraine-russia-sanctions-peace-deal-putin-xi-zelenskyy/33682608.html>.

⁵⁵ “Russian-Chinese Talks”, *The Kremlin*, 18 October 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72529>.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Wishnick, “The Xi-Putin Summit: A Display of China-Russia Resilience on Victory Day”, *The Diplomat*, 17 May 2025.

nations should be respected.⁵⁷ This dual message, respecting sovereignty but acknowledging legitimate concerns, has been a hallmark of China’s approach. It creates a moral equivalence between Russia and the NATO-Ukraine alignment, implying that Russia was driven to act by insecurity rather than committing unprovoked aggression against a neighbour.

Chinese diplomacy consistently frames Russia’s war against Ukraine in terms of competing security interests rather than as a right-versus-wrong issue or even a violation of the UN Charter (Article 2(4)). Xi Jinping’s Global Security Initiative (GSI), unveiled in 2022, encapsulates this aligned perspective. The GSI paper pointedly warns against “strengthening or expanding military blocs” and asserts that no country’s security should come at another’s expense, insisting instead that “indivisible security” should be upheld.⁵⁸ Chinese officials frequently invoke this principle of “indivisible security”, arguing that NATO’s enlargement created an unacceptable threat to Russia⁵⁹ – talking points that elevate Moscow’s narrative to the international stage under the imprimatur of a permanent member of the UN Security Council. In UN sessions and official press briefings, China’s representatives consistently reference the need to address the “legitimate security concerns of all parties” and criticise a “Cold War mentality”⁶⁰ in Europe, language virtually lifted from Russian talking points, signalling that Beijing does not accept the Western framing of Russia as the sole offender. Instead, China promotes a story of East-West security tensions in which Ukraine is a victim of big-power rivalries.

This narrative alignment was evident as recently as February 2026, when Xi met German Chancellor Friedrich Merz in Beijing. Discussing Ukraine, Xi again refrained from singling out Russia, insisting that peace talks involve “all parties on an equal footing” and that each side’s concerns be taken into account.⁶¹ In fact, Beijing’s 2023 White Paper on global governance attributed the root cause of the war to European security governance and called for a security architecture in which Russia’s “legitimate security concerns” would be addressed.⁶²

Chinese state media and diplomats also amplify Russia’s preferred themes, commonly citing NATO’s eastward expansion, Western “encirclement”, and US hegemony as factors that “triggered” the conflict. In early 2023, China’s Deputy Ambassador to the UN argued that “adding fuel to the fire will only exacerbate tensions”,⁶³ implicitly exonerating Russia’s initial invasion by casting Western military aid as the primary escalatory agent.

Beneath this official restraint runs a coarser current. Whilst Chinese state media echo Moscow with somewhat controlled reticence, Chinese social media are markedly more hostile to Kyiv. An analysis of 1,800 Weibo posts from high-follower accounts found consistently toxic discourse echoing Russian disinformation: that Ukraine is a Western proxy run by a charlatan,

⁵⁷ “China understands Russia’s legitimate security concerns, Wang tells Lavrov”, *CGTN*, 24 February 2022, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-02-24/Chinese-FM-holds-phone-conversation-with-Russian-FM-Lavrov-17UV2UChJq/index.html>.

⁵⁸ “The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper”, *China’s Diplomacy in the New Era*, 2022, https://en.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/pdf/The_Global_Security_Initiative_Concept_Paper.pdf. Next year, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a “Proposal of the People’s Republic of China on the Reform and Development of Global Governance” (13 September 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367498.html), which further underlined Beijing’s security thinking.

⁵⁹ “Wang Yi Speaks with German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock on the Phone”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, 27 February 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjzbhd/202202/t20220227_10645996.html; MFA Press Briefing, 8 March 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347238.html.

⁶⁰ China’s Position on Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine, Key Events and Statements from February 21, 2022 through March 31, 2026, *The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 31 March 2026, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-position-russias-invasion-ukraine>.

⁶¹ “Despite differences, China’s Xi and Germany’s Merz seek to deepen ties in turbulent times”, *The Asahi Shimbun*, 26 February 2026, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/16380082>.

⁶² “Proposal of the People’s Republic of China on the Reform and Development of Global Governance”, The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 13 September 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367498.html.

⁶³ “China says sending weapons to Ukraine will not bring peace”, *Al Jazeera*, 23 February 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/23/year-into-ukraine-war-china-says-not-sending-weapons-to-russia>.

its soldiers “Nazis”, and Russian strikes mere counterterrorism. Given these influencers’ state links, the free operation of Russian outlets on China’s policed platforms, and the selective amplification of sensitive themes, Beijing may be tolerating or even encouraging such discourse to corrode the authority of Kyiv and its backers.⁶⁴

“Neutrality” with Pro-Russian Characteristics: Peace Plans and Mediation

Whilst declaring itself neutral, China has put forward peace proposals that tilt visibly towards Russian interests. Beijing’s high-profile initiatives – ostensibly meant to broker peace – have consistently avoided measures that would pressure Moscow or benefit Ukraine’s position. The clearest example is the twelve-point plan released on 24 February 2023, the war’s first anniversary, entitled “Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis”. The document called for a quick ceasefire, talks, and various generic principles, but it did not demand that Russia withdraw its forces from occupied Ukrainian territory. It urged all parties to “exercise restraint” whilst remaining silent on the question of reversing Russia’s aggression, explicitly opposed “unilateral sanctions” on Russia, and condemned a “Cold War mentality” in security affairs.⁶⁵ In essence, China’s peace blueprint repackaged many of Russia’s talking points (ceasefire now, NATO to blame, drop the sanctions), without requiring Russia to make any real concessions.

The reaction from Moscow and the West underscored the plan’s pro-Russian alignment. Ukraine and its allies gave the Chinese proposal a frosty reception, noting that it didn’t address core issues such as Russian withdrawal or accountability. Then US Secretary of State Antony Blinken pointed out that if China truly respected Ukraine’s sovereignty, as stated in point one of the plan, “this war could end tomorrow” – implying Beijing’s plan was hollow.⁶⁶ Blinken and other Western officials argued China was offering a “distraction” and a tactical pause for Russia under the guise of peace. NATO’s then chief Jens Stoltenberg said the proposal lacked credibility since China “has not been able to condemn the invasion”.⁶⁷ In contrast, Moscow quickly welcomed the Chinese plan, saying it “appreciated” Beijing’s ideas. By April 2024, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov openly hailed China’s plan as “the most reasonable” path to end the conflict, praising in particular its focus on addressing “the reasons for what is happening” and eliminating “root causes”.⁶⁸ This was Lavrov’s way of acknowledging that China’s plan adopts Russia’s core grievances about NATO and European security as the necessary starting point for any negotiation. Lavrov noted that while some criticised Beijing’s peace outline as vague, it was indeed “a reasonable plan” from a great power and worth discussing.⁶⁹

Notably, Lavrov’s endorsement highlighted what China’s proposal did not include: any insistence on Russian retreat or culpability. Russian officials liked that Beijing’s ceasefire-first initiative started from Moscow’s perspective on “root causes” and skipped over uncomfortable

⁶⁴ Yurii Poita, “Russian propaganda abounds in Chinese social media debate on Ukraine”, *Merics*, 8 June 2026, <https://merics.org/en/comment/russian-propaganda-abounds-chinese-social-media-debate-ukraine>. The analysis was produced by the New Geopolitics Research Network in cooperation with Doublethink Lab.

⁶⁵ “China’s Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, 23 February 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367485.html.

⁶⁶ Phelim Kine, “US dismisses China’s Ukraine peace proposal as an attempt to distract”, *Politico*, 24 February 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/02/24/united-states-china-ukraine-00084384>.

⁶⁷ Helen Davidson and Amy Hawkins, “Western leaders give cool response to China’s plan for Ukraine peace talks”, *The Guardian*, 24 February 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/24/china-calls-for-russia-ukraine-war-peace-talks>.

⁶⁸ Семен Александров, “Лавров назвал мирный план Китая по Украине наиболее четким и разумным”, *Lenta.ru*, 4 April 2024, <https://lenta.ru/news/2024/04/04/lavrov-nazval-mirnyy-plan-kitaya-po-ukraine-naibolee-chetkim-i-razumnym/>; “UPDATE 1-Russia’s Lavrov says Chinese peace plan on Ukraine is most reasonable so far”, *Reuters*, *YahooFinance*, 4 April 2024, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/1-russias-lavrov-says-chinese-114756889.html>.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

specifics. As Lavrov and Putin have repeatedly asserted, any eventual peace must “reflect the new realities on the ground”⁷⁰ – code for acknowledging Russia’s control of Ukrainian land. China’s ceasefire-first approach implicitly leans towards freezing the conflict in place, thereby ratifying many of those “new realities”. Western leaders warned that such a freeze would reward Putin’s aggression by locking in territorial gains. Blinken cautioned that a ceasefire, without Russian withdrawal, would have allowed Russia to “entrench its positions and re-arm”,⁷¹ under the cover of nominal negotiations. Ukraine has flatly rejected any truce that leaves Russian troops on its soil, arguing it would only lead to a temporary lull before renewed fighting.⁷²

The February 2023 peace plan was not an isolated gesture. Seven months later, in September 2023, China published its Proposal of the People’s Republic of China on the Reform and Development of Global Governance,⁷³ a document whose implications for European security have received insufficient attention in Western policy debate. Amongst its provisions, the proposal called for the building of a “balanced, effective, and sustainable security architecture” in Europe – language that, on its face, sounds constructive but whose operative meaning is unmistakable in context. A European security architecture that addresses Russia’s “legitimate security concerns”, as the same document demands, is one that accommodates a Russian sphere of influence in Ukraine and Eastern Europe. The proposal made no reference to Russia’s responsibility for the conflict, offered no call for withdrawal, and did not condemn the invasion. Read alongside the February peace plan, it reveals a consistent pattern: China offers governance frameworks that are superficially universal in their language but structurally aligned with Russian interests in their content. For European policymakers, the significance of this document lies precisely in its framing of European security as a matter requiring Chinese input and Russian consent – a claim that, if normalised, would fundamentally undermine the principle that European states determine their own security arrangements. That Beijing advanced this position through a multilateral governance document, rather than a bilateral declaration with Moscow, gave it a veneer of institutional legitimacy that the peace plan alone could not have achieved.

Despite criticisms, Beijing continued to cast itself as a potential mediator. Over 2023–2024, China launched diplomatic forays – sending special envoy Li Hui to European capitals, issuing joint statements with countries such as France and Brazil on peace, and convening informal dialogues – all aimed at positioning China as a peace-broker.⁷⁴ None of these efforts pressed Russia to withdraw or acknowledge wrongdoing. China’s self-described neutrality is arguably heavily laced with pro-Russian bias. Beijing insists it respects Ukraine’s sovereignty, but in the same breath, it echoes Russia’s “legitimate security concerns” and has called on Kyiv’s partners to stop military aid. China has also provided Ukraine with some humanitarian assistance: Xi Jinping finally telephoned Ukraine’s President Zelenskyy in April 2023,⁷⁵ and in early 2026,

⁷⁰ “Peace talks: What Ukraine and Russia want”, *RTE*, 13 February 2025, <https://www.rte.ie/news/2025/0213/1496555-ukraine-peace-talks/>.
⁷¹ “No cease-fire without a peace deal that includes Russian withdrawal from Ukraine, Blinken says”, *PBS*, 2 June 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/no-cess-fire-without-a-peace-deal-that-includes-russian-withdrawal-from-ukraine-blinken-says>.
⁷² “Ukraine tells China envoy peace plan must not lose land to Russia”, *Al Jazeera*, 18 May 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/18/ukraine-tells-china-envoy-peace-plan-must-not-lose-land-to-russia>.
⁷³ “Proposal of the People’s Republic of China on the Reform and Development of Global Governance”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, 13 September 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367498.html.
⁷⁴ Grzegorz Stec, “Li Hui’s Europe tour 2.0 + Beijing’s mediation as seen from Kyiv + Market distortions”, *MERICs*, 21 April 2024, <https://merics.org/en/merics-briefs/li-huis-europe-tour-20-beijings-mediation-seen-kyiv-market-distortions>; Marcin Przychodniak, “Chinese Envoy Visits Europe to Talk about the War in Ukraine”, *PISM*, 14 March 2024, <https://pism.pl/publications/chinese-envoy-visits-europe-to-talk-about-the-war-in-ukraine>.
⁷⁵ “President Xi Jinping Speaks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the Phone”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, 26 April 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/3265_665445/3250_664382/3252_664386/202304/t20230426_11066785.html.

China pledged humanitarian energy aid.⁷⁶ Yet these moves are carefully calibrated not to undercut Russia. Tellingly, China still refuses to join any international mechanism that holds Russia accountable, and no Chinese leader or high official has visited Kyiv as of the first half of 2026, despite multiple visits to Moscow.

This posture invites labelling China as a “false neutral”. As NATO’s former Secretary General Stoltenberg put it, China claims impartiality but “has taken Russia’s side” in international forums and media narratives.⁷⁷ Indeed, Chinese diplomacy amounts to “neutrality with Chinese characteristics” – Beijing offers peace proposals and goodwill rhetoric, yet always in terms that align with Russian interests and never at Russia’s expense. This balancing act allows China to maintain ties with Europe and claim the moral high ground of promoting peace, all while quietly buttressing Russia’s position in the war.

Staunch Opposition to Sanctions – An Economic Lifeline for Moscow

A key pillar of China’s support for Russia is its refusal to participate in – and vocal condemnation of – sanctions against Moscow. Since the invasion, Chinese diplomats and state media have consistently cast Western sanctions as illegitimate and harmful, arguing they violate international law as “unilateral” measures not authorised by the United Nations. When the United States sanctioned several Chinese firms in 2023 for aiding Russia’s war effort, China’s Foreign Ministry accused Washington of “outright bullying and double standards”. Spokesperson Mao Ning accused Washington of “illegal” actions and hypocrisy – arming Ukraine on the one hand while “spreading false information” about China on the other.⁷⁸ This rhetoric aligns seamlessly with Moscow’s own talking points that Western sanctions are a form of economic warfare and neo-colonialism.⁷⁹

Diplomatically, Beijing has also offered Moscow a united front against sanctions. China’s top diplomat Wang Yi and other officials often publicly affirm that the China-Russia partnership is “rock solid” in the face of Western pressure.⁸⁰

At the May 2025 summit between Xi and Putin, the two leaders jointly condemned sanctions and touted the benefits of their cooperation.⁸¹ They reiterated earlier in the year that there are “no limits” to their partnership⁸² – a not-so-subtle message that China would not betray Russia economically or politically. In multilateral settings, including BRICS, the G20, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, China has worked alongside Russia to prevent consensus on any statement that might endorse sanctions or criticise Russia’s conduct. At the G20

⁷⁶ “China to Provide Humanitarian Energy Aid to Ukraine Amid Russian Strikes”, *Kyivpost*, 13 February 2026, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/69999>.
⁷⁷ Jorge Liboreiro, “China must condemn Russia’s war if it wants to be ‘serious’ about peace in Ukraine: Stoltenberg”, *Euronews*, 21 March 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/03/21/china-must-condemn-russias-war-if-it-wants-to-be-serious-about-peace-in-ukraine-stoltenber>.
⁷⁸ “China accuses US of ‘bullying’ with new ‘illegal’ sanctions”, *The Hill*, 27 February 2023, <https://thehill.com/homenews/ap/ap-international/ap-china-accuses-us-of-bullying-with-new-illegal-sanctions/>.
⁷⁹ “Единороссы проанализируют работу мер поддержки граждан и бизнеса в условиях санкций”, *TACC*, 16 March 2022, <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/14088985>; Александр Афонин, “Посол РФ назвал 17-й пакет санкций ЕС примером политики неокolonизма Запада”, *Gazeta*, 13 July 2025, <https://www.gazeta.press/politics/news/2025/07/13/26257154.shtml>.
⁸⁰ “China and Russia should strengthen coordination in international affairs, says President Xi”, *The Straits Times*, 1 March 2025, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-and-russia-should-strengthen-coordination-in-international-affairs-says-president-xi>; “China-Russia relations remain ‘as steady as rock’ despite test of winds, rains: Chinese FM”, *Global Times*, 8 March 2026, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202603/1356526.shtml#:~:text=China%2DRussia%2Orelations%2Oremain%2O'as,by%2ORussia's%2OSputnik%2ONews%2OAgency>.
⁸¹ “Joint Declaration of the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Further Strengthening Cooperation to Uphold the Authority of International Law”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, 9 May 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/xjpdelsjxgsfwcxjnsjwggzslqd/202505/t20250509_11617838.html.
⁸² Antoni Slodkowski and Laurie Chen, “China’s Xi affirms ‘no limits’ partnership with Putin in call on Ukraine war anniversary”, *Reuters*, 24 February 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/xi-putin-hold-phone-call-ukraine-war-anniversary-state-media-says-2025-02-24/>.

in 2023, China reportedly opposed language condemning Russia’s aggression,⁸³ leading to an ambiguously worded communiqué that prevented the West from claiming a truly global consensus against Moscow. Beijing’s stance gives many other countries political cover to justify doing business with Russia and to dodge sanctions by portraying it as a principled rejection of Western “hegemonic” tactics.

Global South Signalling – Contesting the Western Narrative

China’s diplomatic support for Russia extends to a global information campaign, particularly targeting the Global South, to frame the Ukraine conflict in non-Western terms. By refusing to condemn Russia and blaming NATO expansion,⁸⁴ China validates the ambivalence or pro-Russian leanings of numerous countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, lowering the threshold for others to adopt a similar posture.

China and Russia have each, through separate but mutually reinforcing channels, provided political cover and economic incentives that have encouraged many developing nations to abstain from or soften their criticism of Russia in multilateral forums.⁸⁵ Beijing’s stance provides political cover: other governments can claim they are taking a balanced approach, just as China has. Chinese officials also actively encourage this perspective, framing every country’s independent foreign policy choice as an expression of sovereignty and resistance to Western “pressure”. In UN votes, the combined effect has been that condemnations of Russia, whilst numerically strong, have remained far from universal, and communiqués have often been diluted.

China also uses its influence in the Global South to reframe the conflict from a question of Russian aggression to one of systemic East-West rivalry.⁸⁶ Chinese officials frequently highlight that “most of Asia, Africa, and Latin America are not part of Western sanctions” and accuse the United States of double standards. By propagating the view that the Ukraine war is a proxy battle in a new Cold War,⁸⁷ Beijing diverts attention from Russia’s conduct to a critique of Western policies. Chinese outlets amplify Russian claims that Western sanctions and military aid, not Russia’s invasion, are prolonging the war and causing global economic pain, including food and energy crises.⁸⁸ This resonates in countries hit hard by commodity inflation, where the message that Western decisions are to blame for the hardship travels further than the account of Russian responsibility.

Through initiatives such as the Global Security Initiative and the Global Development Initiative, China simultaneously offers alternative forums for international problem-solving that exclude

⁸³ Oliver Slow, “China refuses to condemn Russia’s Ukraine invasion during G20 deadlock”, *BBC News*, 26 February 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64773618>.
⁸⁴ “No peace possible where NATO extends ‘diabolical paws’ – Chinese envoy”, *RT*, 3 August 2023, https://www.rt.com/russia/580752-nato-expansion-ukraine-conflict-/?utm_; Yan Xuetong, “China’s Ukraine Conundrum-Why the War Necessitates a Balancing”, *Institute of International Relations, Tsinghua University*, 31 May 2022, <http://www.tuiir.tsinghua.edu.cn/imiren/info/1142/1300.htm>.
⁸⁵ Alessia Amighini and Alicia García-Herrero, “What really influences United Nations voting on Ukraine?”, *Bruegel*, 3 May 2023, <https://www.bruegel.org/analysis/what-really-influences-united-nations-voting-ukraine>.
⁸⁶ E. Tran Sautédé, F. V. Mo and J. Tang, “China and the Ukraine war: Global Times’ strategic narratives. Global Media and Communication”, 2025, 21(1), 65-89; “President Xi Jinping Had a Virtual Meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, 30 December 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg_663340/dozys_664276/xwlb_664278/202212/t20221230_10999132.html.
⁸⁷ Jian Gao, “US’ ‘fighting a proxy war to avoid a real NATO-Russia war’ rhetoric is absurd”, *Global Times*, 26 February 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202402/1307696.shtml>; Xinbo Wu, “US prolongs Russia-Ukraine conflict for three aims, aggravates nuclear war risk: experts at GT annual forum”, *Institute of International Studies, Fudan University*, 22 December 2022, <https://iis.fudan.edu.cn/en/4f/14/c38333a478996/page.htm>.
⁸⁸ Minghao Zhao, “赵明昊：对‘全球南方’问题的冷思考”, *Tsinghua CISS*, 24 April 2024, <https://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/zlyaq/7113>; “中华人民共和国和俄罗斯联邦在两国建交75周年之际关于深化新时代全面战略协作伙伴关系的联合声明（全文）”, *Xinhua News Agency*, 16 May 2024, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202405/content_6951404.htm.

Western dominance. By keeping Russia engaged as a major diplomatic and economic partner for much of the non-Western world, Beijing bolsters the credibility of its own claim to lead a post-Western coalition of sorts – one in which US and allied dictates can be defied, and where alternative great powers assert their own rules with a degree of impunity.

What’s in it for China? – Strategic Gains from Backing Russia

China’s economic, military, and diplomatic backing of Russia is not driven by any single ambition alone; it yields concrete strategic benefits for Beijing across multiple dimensions. Understanding what China gains from the war is essential to understanding why the relationship has proven so durable, and why it is unlikely to unravel after any ceasefire.

Economic Gains and Statecraft: Energy, Markets and Leverage

At the most direct level, China has secured long-term access to discounted Russian energy and commodities, reducing its own import costs and strengthening its energy security. Chinese refiners have saved billions through preferential pricing – Russian Urals crude has often sold at discounts of 10 to 30%⁸⁹ – and China has negotiated additional supply deals for pipeline gas and coal on favourable terms. With Western competitors gone, Chinese carmakers, machinery producers, and consumer electronics firms have captured significant Russian market share, finding in Moscow a captive market for their exports at a moment when demand elsewhere has been slack.

Politically, China has dramatically enhanced its leverage over Moscow. Russia’s isolation has made it increasingly dependent on Beijing as an economic patron, effectively tilting the bilateral balance of power firmly in China’s favour. Chinese policymakers recognise that a sanctioned Russia has few alternatives and that Moscow has become increasingly dependent on access to the Chinese market, while Beijing’s exposure to Russia remains limited.⁹⁰ This asymmetry allows China to quietly shape the partnership to its advantage – securing cheaper resources now and likely expecting Russian deference on future geopolitical issues in return.

By helping Russia withstand Western sanctions, China undermines the efficacy of Western economic statecraft more broadly. Beijing shares Moscow’s interest in eroding the power of US-led sanctions as a geopolitical instrument and has a personal stake in doing so: a sanctioned China could face similar pressures in a future confrontation over Taiwan or the South China Sea. Every instance where China enables Russia to circumvent restrictions sets a precedent and refines China’s own playbook for handling potential sanctions it could face in due course. The war has provided Beijing with a live testing ground for its yuan-based payment networks, sanctions-evasion techniques, and alternative financial architecture. Successfully propping up Russia also bolsters China’s credentials among Global South countries as a partner capable of defying Western pressure and keeping trade flowing.

Constraining US Power and Legitimising Spheres of Influence

Beijing sees strategic upside in a protracted conflict that pins down Western focus on Europe. As US and European resources and attention have been heavily absorbed by the war in Ukraine, this has distracted the West from efforts to develop a coherent strategy towards China in Asia. During the Biden administration, some Chinese analysts argued that the war

⁸⁹ Brian Evans, “Russian oil has been selling for 32% less than Brent crude, and the discount could continue widening amid new sanctions”, *Business Insider*, 31 May 2022, <https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/commodities/russian-oil-32-percent-less-brent-crude-discount-may-widen-2022-5>; Hugo von Essen, “Russia-China Economic Relations Since the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine”, *SCEEUS*, 5 July 2023, <https://sceeus.se/publikationer/russia-china-economic-relations-since-the-full-scale-invasion-of-ukraine-2/>; “Russian Oil Discount Lowest Since Start of War Despite EU Push”, *Bloomberg*, 29 July 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-07-29/russian-oil-discount-lowest-since-start-of-war-despite-eu-push>.

⁹⁰ Alessia Caruso and Tim Rühlig, “The dependence gap in Russia-China relations”, *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, 2 October 2025, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/analysis/dependence-gap-russia-china-relations>; Natalia Chabarovskaya, “Going Steady: China and Russia’s Economic Ties are Deeper than Washington Thinks”, *CEPA*, 16 June 2025, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/going-steady-china-and-russias-economic-ties-are-deeper-than-washington-thinks/>.

had complicated and delayed the United States’ Indo-Pacific pivot.⁹¹ Transatlantic unity has also strained under the second Trump administration’s approach to Ukraine. By helping to sustain the conflict at a simmer, Beijing’s support for Russia complicates Western efforts to build a united front against China in the Indo-Pacific, since European allies are now, above all, preoccupied with Russia.

There is also a normative dimension. By challenging the Western narrative on Ukraine and blocking US-led initiatives – whether at the UN or the G20 – China actively undermines Washington’s global leadership capacity. Every time China abstains on a Ukraine resolution or criticises sanctions, it signals that Western-defined rules are not universal when they conflict with great-power interests, thereby eroding the West’s normative authority in ways that serve Beijing’s longer-term vision of a multipolar order built around its design.⁹²

A core message China and Russia jointly promote is that European security must consider Russia’s interests⁹³ – essentially legitimising a Russian sphere of influence in Ukraine and Eastern Europe. In endorsing that principle, Beijing also reinforces its own stance that major powers should be accorded deference in their regions. It is a reciprocal understanding: you validate my core interests, I validate yours. If Russia succeeds even partially in its aims, or at least avoids decisive defeat and punishment, it bolsters China’s argument that the US-NATO system is not the only model for organising international security. Furthermore, tolerating such claims by Moscow and Beijing would not only undermine European security arrangements but also render international law meaningless.

⁹¹ Wei Zongyou, Tang Jie, “The Russia-Ukraine conflict, new developments in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and the international order”, *Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies*, No.1, 2024, pp.17-40, Fudan University, <https://cas.fudan.edu.cn/info/1033/15792.htm>.

⁹² Sari Arho Havrén, “Building a safe shared future for the People’s Republic of China”, *9DashLine*, 8 November 2023, <https://www.9dashline.com/article/building-a-safe-shared-future-for-the-peoples-republic-of-china>.

⁹³ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development”, The Kremlin, 4 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>; “JOINT STATEMENT by the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Global Strategic Stability”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, 9 May 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zy/jj/xjpdelsjxgsfwcxjnsllwgzzslqd/202505/t20250509_11617864.html.

Positioning as Leader of a Post-Western Order:
How the War in Ukraine is Reshaping Global Leadership

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine presented Beijing with a strategic opportunity, even if it also put China on the fence.⁹⁴ As Western governments marshalled an unprecedented sanctions regime against Moscow, froze nearly US\$300 billion in Russian foreign reserves,⁹⁵ and poured military and financial resources into Kyiv, China watched from a position of studied neutrality. The war has not merely benefited China tactically; it has accelerated a long-standing Chinese ambition to displace the Western-led liberal international order with a multipolar architecture in which Beijing occupies the central role. Understanding that ambition requires looking not only at what China has done since 2022, but at where it intends to arrive.

China’s most visible diplomatic move since the invasion has been to cast itself as a responsible mediator rather than a belligerent bystander. Its February 2023 twelve-point position paper – however one-sided its content, closely echoing Kremlin talking points and declining to call for a Russian withdrawal – was nonetheless presented to global audiences as evidence of Chinese statesmanship. The following year, in May 2024, China and Brazil jointly launched a proposal calling for an international peace conference to be held at a proper time recognised by both Russia and Ukraine, with equal participation of all parties and fair discussion of all peace plans. In September 2024, this initiative was formalised into a Group of Friends for Peace on the Ukraine Crisis, drawing in other Global South countries. Whether these proposals are sincere or performative almost misses the point: their function is to keep China visibly in the conversation as an indispensable power, untainted by the conflict itself.⁹⁶

China’s broader diplomatic stance claims to seek stability while ensuring it does not directly oppose Russia, maintaining the image of neutrality while in practice functioning as a close Russian ally, providing diplomatic cover and serving as an invaluable trade partner. Ukraine itself has grown aware of this gap between Chinese rhetoric and Chinese conduct. Ukraine has moved from caution to open strategic scepticism; China is no longer seen as a potential mediator but as a strategic adversary masked in neutral rhetoric. That scepticism has not, however, spread uniformly across the Global South – and it is in the Global South where the strategic contest for narrative leadership is being waged.⁹⁷

The Global South as the Primary Arena

Beijing’s messaging on Ukraine, that it stands for peace through dialogue and opposes the “double standards” of a West that selectively upholds sovereignty, has been carefully calibrated for audiences outside Western democracies. The reasons behind non-alignment on the Russia-Ukraine war vary across Global South states but are not simply a product of Chinese propaganda: some share the anti-Western sentiment. Beyond government statements,

⁹⁴ Matti Nojonen, “Sino-Russian Relations, the Ukraine War and Trump as a Challenge: The Eventual Test of ‘No-Limits Friendship’”, in *Inevitable Instability in Russia*, Springer Nature Link, February 2026, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-032-11892-9_16.
⁹⁵ Alexander Conner and David Wessel, “What is the Status of Russia’s Frozen Sovereign Assets?”, *Brookings Institution*, 24 June 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-is-the-status-of-russias-frozen-sovereign-assets/>.
⁹⁶ Vidya Nadkarni, Paul D’Anieri, Sydney Kerr, Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, Xiaoyu Pu, Deepa M Ollapally, Paulo Velasco Junior, Candice Moore, Abdolrasool Divsallar, “Forum: The Russia-Ukraine War and Reactions from the Global South”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Volume 17, Issue 4, 2024, pp.449–489, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poae02>; “‘Friends for Peace’ Group on the Ukraine Crisis Set up in the United Nations”, Chinese Foreign Ministry, People’s Republic of China, 28 September 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202409/t20240929_11500459.html.
⁹⁷ Anya Konstantinovskiy, “China, Russia, and Ukraine: October 2024”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 4 November 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/china-russia-and-ukraine-october-2024>; John T. Psaropoulos, “How China forgot promises and ‘debts’ to Ukraine, and backed Russia’s war”, *Al Jazeera*, 8 September 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/8/how-china-forgot-promises-and-debts-to-ukraine-and-backed-russias-war>.

prominent voices across Africa, Asia, and Latin America have condemned Western “double standards” in Ukraine. For example, criticisms compiled in a Tanzanian news analysis point out that the US and Europe “mobilise moral outrage” for Ukraine while showing far less for conflicts in Africa or the Middle East, reinforcing a widespread sentiment that Western powers apply international law “à la carte”.⁹⁸ This language is almost identical to Beijing’s messaging: China has, from early on, urged diplomatic talks in Ukraine while accusing Western powers of hypocrisy for emphasising Ukraine’s sovereignty but neglecting similar principles in other conflicts. Simultaneously, China has been adept at framing its own position in language that resonates with all of these constituencies.⁹⁹ Some of the sympathies for Russia’s position in the war also stem from trade and diplomatic relations with Russia, some from military ties, and some from historic connections with the former Soviet Union.

China is trying to position the BRICS grouping, whose newly expanded membership now accounts for nearly half the world’s population and more than a third of global GDP, as a counterweight to the G7, using it as a powerful vehicle to denounce Western double standards and failures. This is more than just rhetorical manoeuvring. The BRICS coalesced around Russia, undermining international efforts to isolate and ostracise Putin, whilst refusing to condemn Russia’s military aggression or to join Western sanctions, and rather than fading into irrelevance as many predicted, the BRICS has experienced a revival amid growing geopolitical tensions.¹⁰⁰

The BRICS expansion itself is one of the most tangible institutional gains of the post-2022 period. Between 2023 and 2025, BRICS underwent a significant transformation, expanding its membership to include five additional states – an initiative proposed by Xi during the 2022 virtual summit and operationalised through invitations issued in 2023, resulting in four countries joining in 2024 and one more in 2025. In 2025, the group was further expanded with Indonesia joining as a full member and nine states, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Uganda, and Uzbekistan, becoming “partner countries”, eligible to participate in BRICS meetings and propose initiatives. The expansion is significant not only numerically but symbolically: it signals to the Global South that an alternative architecture exists and is growing.¹⁰¹

The contrast between China’s role in BRICS and its role in CRINK is instructive. In BRICS, Beijing operates through an avowedly open, economically framed grouping whose very heterogeneity, encompassing democracies such as India and Brazil, lends it legitimacy as a vehicle for Global South aspirations, even as that same diversity constrains how far China can bend it towards an explicitly anti-Western purpose. In the informal CRINK axis, by contrast, China anchors a far narrower and more confrontational alignment of sanctioned autocracies, bound together by a shared adversary. The two formats can easily be seen as complementary

⁹⁸ “Ukraine peace plan exposes Western double standards”, *Daily News*, 27 November 2025, <https://dailynews.co.tz/ukraine-peace-plan-exposes-western-double-standards/>.
⁹⁹ Amber Wang, “China takes aim at ‘blatant double standards’ over Ukraine and Taiwan”, *SCMP*, 7 March 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3169595/china-takes-aim-blatant-double-standards-over-ukraine-and>; Mandy Turner, “The Global South and the Russia-Ukraine War: Nonalignment and Western Responses on the Cusp of a Multipolar World”, *Security In Context*, <https://www.securityincontext.org/posts/the-global-south-and-the-russia-ukraine-war-nonalignment-and-western-responses-on-cusp-of-multipolar-world>.
¹⁰⁰ Randolph Karr and Paula Köhler, “Munich Security Report 2025, Chapter 3 – China: Pole Positioning”, *MSC*, 2025, <https://securityconference.org/en/publications/munich-security-report-2025/china/>; K. Hopewell, “The ties that bind: reassessing the political significance of the BRICS amid Russia’s War on Ukraine”, *Globalizations, Taylor and Francis Group*, 2026, pp.1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2026.2624158>.
¹⁰¹ Evgeny Roshchin, “The Implications for Global Governance of China and Russia’s Post-2022 Alignment”, *CEPA*, 23 June 2025, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/the-implications-for-global-governance-of-china-and-russias-post-2022-alignment/>; K. Hopewell, “The ties that bind: reassessing the political significance of the BRICS amid Russia’s War on Ukraine”, *Globalizations, Taylor and Francis Group*, 2026, pp.1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2026.2624158>.

instruments of a single strategy. BRICS furnishes a broad, respectable platform from which to build an alternative financial and institutional architecture and to address common concerns of Global South countries; CRINK supplies the committed core that sustains Russia’s war and ties down American power across two theatres. Beijing masters the art of occupying the leading position in both at once: wearing the mantle of Global South spokesman in the one, while quietly underwriting the axis of upheaval in the other.¹⁰²

In a broader battle of narratives, China and Russia have both strategically adopted anti-colonial, anti-Western messaging to shape Global South perceptions of the Russia-Ukraine war and global politics. They frame Western actions as modern “colonial” aggression and “imperialist” double standards, while portraying themselves as champions of the Global South’s sovereign rights and historical anti-colonial struggles. Through official speeches, diplomatic initiatives, and state media, both Beijing and Moscow invoke the outrages of past Western colonialism and “hegemonic” behaviour to gain sympathy in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, aiming to increase support (or at least neutrality) among developing countries and undermine Western influence.¹⁰³

The Global Governance Initiative: From Rhetoric Towards Architecture

The evolving global order is vividly illustrated by the relationship between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. Both leaders view each other as representatives of a new era, demonstrating a shared confidence in their roles as members of a winning coalition in the current geopolitical landscape. Although material benefits play a significant role, particularly in sustaining Russia’s war economy and China’s undervalued commodity imports, the West has often misunderstood the true nature of this alliance and its global reach. The primary motivation for countries aligning with the Sino-centric order is their desire to resist Western influence.¹⁰⁴

The most ambitious expression of China’s post-war governance project arrived in September 2025. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit on 1 September, Xi Jinping unveiled the Global Governance Initiative (GGI), explicitly framing it as opposition to what he called “Cold War mentality, bloc confrontation, and bullying practices”. The GGI is presented as an extension of China’s earlier frameworks – the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilisation Initiative – representing Xi’s growing aspiration to lead a global alternative, rooted in his 2021 identification of four global deficits: governance, trust, development, and peace.¹⁰⁵

The 12th Beijing Xiangshan Forum in September 2025 showcased an emboldened China ready to present itself as the leader of an alternative global order, with Defence Minister Dong Jun’s keynote address providing a systematic articulation of China’s global governance vision. The GGI is not a standalone improvisation; it is the capstone of an incremental institutional

architecture that China has been constructing since at least 2021. Operating through UN mechanisms such as ECOSOC and novel multilateral structures, Beijing promotes norms that legitimise state-level governance models, while positioning Chinese technological standards as globally accepted frameworks – recently including the establishment of Chinese-led bodies such as the World AI Cooperation Organisation and the Global AI Governance Initiative.¹⁰⁶

The Chinese model of global governance is neo-Westphalian in nature and attractive to many in its public narrative, emphasising sovereign equality, non-interference, and reform of the UN system, yet the same key terms carry markedly different meanings in Chinese diplomatic usage than in the normative framework of the EU or the UN itself. For Western audiences, not understanding the embedded meanings can have consequences. In practice, the principle of “sovereign equality” functions to shield authoritarian governance from external scrutiny, whilst “multipolarity” serves as a cover for Chinese centrality dressed as collective reform.¹⁰⁷

The war in Ukraine gave this architecture its moment. The freezing of Russian foreign reserves, a demonstration to the entire Global South of what dollar-based financial system membership can cost a state that defies Western preferences, provided Beijing with a potent and readily available argument for why the existing order requires replacing. For many governments outside the NATO bloc, the weaponisation of the dollar accelerated hedging behaviour, driving experimentation with alternative currencies, gold accumulation, and digital payment systems. China is the primary beneficiary and chief designer of the alternative system being constructed to meet that demand.

Russia is also a Strategic Asset for China

Central to China’s post-Western vision is its relationship with Russia – and that relationship has been fundamentally restructured by the war. The Russia-China partnership is symbiotic but highly asymmetrical: essential for Russia, whereas China has the power to capitalise on Russia’s vulnerabilities whilst avoiding deep, full commitment. But foremost for China, Russia is an ideological ally for challenging US primacy; for Russia, China is an economic lifeline.¹⁰⁸

The energy dimension illustrates the depth of Russia’s new dependency. Western sanctions stripped Russian policymakers of alternatives to selling excess oil and gas supplies to China at very attractive prices; in 2022, Chinese imports of Russian oil rose by 55% from the previous year, displacing Saudi Arabia as China’s largest oil provider. Putin and Xi signed an agreement to construct a new gas pipeline supplying China with as much as 50 billion cubic metres of gas per year, in addition to the 38 billion cubic metres China already receives from an existing pipeline, and on 28 August 2025, China received its first shipment of liquefied natural gas from Russia’s Arctic LNG 2 project, a sanctioned liquefaction plant. As Ukraine’s Centre for Countering Disinformation has noted, Russia is cementing its political and economic dependence on China, which is dictating cheap prices, terms, and deadlines, forcing Moscow to sign agreements that turn it into an appendage.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰² Mona Yacoubian and Briana Winslow, “CRINK Diplomatic Ties: A Broader Tilt Toward the Global South”, *CSIS*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/crink-diplomatic-ties-broader-tilt-toward-global-south>.
¹⁰³ Sergey Lavrov, “Russia and Africa: a future-bound partnership. Article by H.E.Sergey V. Lavrov for African media”, *The International Affairs*, 22 July 2022, <https://en.interaffairs.ru/article/russia-and-africa-a-future-bound-partnership-article-by-h-e-sergey-v-lavrov-for-african-media/>; “Full Text: Remarks by Chinese President Xi Jinping at China-Africa Leaders’ Dialogue”, *The State Council*, 26 August 2023, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202308/26/content_WS64e9365cc6d0868f4e8ded72.html; “China calls for efforts to eradicate manifestations of colonialism”, *Xinhua*, 19 June 2025, <https://english.news.cn/20250619/b56af8050a0246e5b84ea40a37ccfb50/c.html>.
¹⁰⁴ Sari Arho Havrén, “Sino-Russian Friendship in the Indo-Pacific”, *Decoding the Chessboard of Asian Geopolitics*, 2025, pp.279-302, 10.1007/978-981-96-3073-8_14.; Gilbert Rozman, “Asia for the Asians – Why Chinese-Russian Friendship Is Here To Stay”, *Foreign Affairs*, 29 October 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2014-10-29/asia-asians>.
¹⁰⁵ Sookyeon Lee, “2025 Xiangshan Forum: China Enters a New Era of Assertive Global Governance”, *The Diplomat*, 23 September 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/09/2025-xiangshan-forum-china-enters-a-new-era-of-assertive-global-governance/>; Sriparna Pathak and Upamanyu Basu, “China’s ‘Global Initiatives’ and the Quest to Rewrite the World Order”, *Raisina Debates*, *ORF*, 19 September 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/china-s-global-initiatives-and-the-quest-to-rewrite-the-world-order>.

¹⁰⁶ Mayal DCS: “China’s Global Governance Initiatives: Diplomacy-Intelligence Convergence”, *ORF Issue Briefs*, 13 April 2026, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/china-s-global-governance-initiatives-diplomacy-intelligence-convergence>; Sookyeon Lee, “2025 Xiangshan Forum: China Enters a New Era of Assertive Global Governance”, *The Diplomat*, 23 September 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/09/2025-xiangshan-forum-china-enters-a-new-era-of-assertive-global-governance/>.
¹⁰⁷ Mario Esteban, “Global governance according to Xi Jinping: between Westphalia and the imperial court”, *Real Instituto Elcano*, 10 December 2025, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/global-governance-according-to-xi-jinping-between-westphalia-and-the-imperial-court/>.
¹⁰⁸ Elena Ribakova, “China-Russia Cooperation: Economic Linkages and Sanctions Evasion”, *Intereconomics*, Volume 60, 2025, Number 2, pp.135-136, <https://www.intereconomics.eu/contents/year/2025/number/2/article/china-russia-cooperation-economic-linkages-and-sanctions-evasion.html>; Alexander Gabuev, “Can Trump Split China and Russia?”, *Foreign Affairs*, 6 December 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/can-trump-split-china-and-russia>.
¹⁰⁹ M. Skalamera, “The Geopolitics of Energy after the Invasion of Ukraine”, *The Washington Quarterly*, 46(1), pp.7-24, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2023.2190632>; John T. Psaropoulos, “How China forgot promises and ‘debts’ to Ukraine, and backed Russia’s war”, *Al Jazeera*, 8 September 2025, <https://aje.io/pOgvfs>.

This asymmetry is a geopolitical gain of considerable magnitude for Beijing, achieved at no military cost and with minimal diplomatic exposure. The longer the conflict continues under sanctions, the deeper Russia sinks into China’s economic orbit – extending Chinese influence across Eurasia without requiring Chinese soldiers, Chinese casualties, or Chinese risk. Central Asian states have sought to use their deepening ties to China as a hedge against a weakened Russia; by the end of 2024, trade between China and the five Central Asian states was worth US\$100 billion, and China’s economic engagement with the region far outstrips that of Russia. The war has, in effect, accelerated China’s rise as the dominant external power across the Eurasian landmass – precisely the outcome that underpins its vision of a post-Western order.¹¹⁰

Russia also provides diplomatic reciprocity. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov has expressed support for China on issues such as Taiwan, criticised US actions in the Indo-Pacific, and commended China’s stance on the war in Ukraine, framing both countries as sharing strategic goals. In this sense, Russia functions for Beijing not only as an economic dependency but as a reliable chorus in international forums, lending weight to China’s multipolar narrative at precisely the moments when Western pressure on Beijing is highest.¹¹¹

The Limits of the Vision

Candour requires acknowledging where China’s project has stalled or produced unintended costs. The UN Security Council has become virtually paralysed, and Russia’s military actions have done little to help China build international prestige through the UNSC. Russia has, on occasion, declined Chinese proposals – including, notably, the 2024 China-Brazil peace initiative – reminding Beijing that even its most important partner retains an independent course of action. The two countries also diverged publicly on UN reform: China supported the Pact for the Future, a reform initiative including proposals on veto power and Security Council representation, whilst Russia outright opposed it, marking a significant instance of ideological non-alignment between the two capitals.¹¹²

Within BRICS itself, China’s vision of a coherent anti-Western bloc has run into the heterogeneity of the membership. As the expansion proceeded, the rhetoric of a pole forming around China became so abundant that members felt compelled to clarify that BRICS was not an anti-Western coalition – India and Brazil in particular voicing concerns about unchecked expansion and the bloc’s potential tilt towards Beijing. The 2025 BRICS summit in Rio demonstrated that internal disagreements have increased, with Iran publicly criticising the final declaration and new tensions emerging from the group’s expanded and ideologically heterogeneous membership.¹¹³

China’s peace proposals have attracted the charge of opportunism: with little directly at stake in the conflict and peace appearing remote, Beijing could cultivate the reputation of a mediator it would never actually be required to become. The reputational damage from being seen as Russia’s economic lifeline has also complicated relations with Europe – a major trade partner China cannot afford to fully alienate. China appears to be advancing the GGI with

¹¹⁰ Zaur Shiryev, “Rewarding Russian Aggression Would Send Shockwaves Across Eurasia”, *Carnegie Politika*, 11 April 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/04/russia-influence-future?lang=en>.
¹¹¹ Anya Konstantinovskiy, “China, Russia, and Ukraine: October 2024”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 4 November 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/china-russia-and-ukraine-october-2024>.
¹¹² Evgeny Roshchin, “The Implications for Global Governance of China and Russia’s Post-2022 Alignment”, *CEPA*, 23 June 2025, <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/the-implications-for-global-governance-of-china-and-russias-post-2022-alignment/>.
¹¹³ Ibid; Luis Jr. Gouveia, “Political Conclusions of the 2025 BRICS Summit”, *E-International Relations*, 8 July 2025, <https://www.e-ir.info/2025/07/08/political-conclusions-of-the-2025-brics-summit/>.

an undefined time frame and less-defined objectives, and has yet to determine the points of common interest that might succeed, or explain why China is the best-placed country to advance this conversation.¹¹⁴

The Road Ahead: Building the Architecture of an Alternative Order

The trajectory, nonetheless, points in a consistent direction. The war in Ukraine has provided Beijing with a live demonstration case: a captive and dependent major power in Russia, an expanding institutional platform in BRICS and the SCO, and a coherent ideological framework – the GGI and its predecessor initiatives – through which to present the case for a new order. At the SCO summit in September 2025, Xi presented China as the champion of a Global South-led multipolar order,¹¹⁵ while Putin embraced further economic integration with China, even as energy deals revealed Moscow’s growing dependence on Beijing.¹¹⁶

What China is building is not a rival superpower bloc in the Cold War sense. It is something more subtle: a parallel institutional architecture, in finance, in governance norms, in development finance, in AI regulation standards, that reduces the cost of defecting from the Western system and raises the attractiveness of Chinese-led alternatives. The war in Ukraine did not create this project, but it has advanced it more than any deliberate Chinese policy initiative could have in the same timeframe. The question for the coming decade is whether the institutional infrastructure being constructed around China’s vision can develop from an alternative into an indispensable centre of its own – and whether the inherent tensions within the coalition it has assembled will allow that transition to occur.

¹¹⁴ Henry Tugendhat, “China’s Global Initiatives Are Worth Taking Seriously”, *The Washington Institute*, 30 October 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-global-initiatives-are-worth-taking-seriously>.
¹¹⁵ “Full text of Xi Jinping’s speech at the ‘Shanghai Cooperation Organization Plus’ Meeting”, The State Council, 1 September 2025, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202509/01/content_WS68b584acc6d0868f4e8f53c8.html.
¹¹⁶ “Russia Analytical Report, Aug. 25–Sept. 2, 2025”, *Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center*, <https://www.russiamatters.org/news/russia-analytical-report/russia-analytical-report-aug-25-sept-2-2025>.

When the War Ends: The Partnership is Bigger than the War

A common error is to treat China-Russia alignment as merely a temporary product of the war in Ukraine. Equally mistaken would be to exaggerate its seamlessness or to ignore the tensions and asymmetries within it. The relationship is anchored in a much longer strategic trajectory than simply around the invasion of Ukraine, and the structural drivers of its continuity will outlast the war. Beijing and Moscow have spent years institutionalising “comprehensive strategic coordination”, and they continue to do so. Chinese and Russian official messaging in May 2026 explicitly described the relationship as entering “new historical opportunities”, tied to the thirtieth anniversary of the China-Russia strategic partnership of coordination and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation.¹¹⁷ Behind this messaging may also lie the Trump administration’s strategy to break the Sino-Russian relationship, but in fact, Washington’s policy has had the opposite effect: it has brought China and Russia closer together.¹¹⁸

So even if the war ends, the structural commonalities are substantial. Both countries share a fundamental opposition to the Western sanctions regime and to what they jointly characterise as US hegemony in global affairs. Their economies are powerfully complementary: Russia’s energy reserves and raw materials align with China’s industrial appetite and import needs. Even if Russia seeks to diversify its trading relationships after the war, China will remain by far its most significant economic partner for the foreseeable future, given the depth of the infrastructure, financial, and contractual ties that had already formed before the war and have only increased since 2022. China, for its part, has a clear interest in a strategically useful northern partner that continues to distract Western resources and provides strategic depth in Eurasia. As the High North rapidly becomes a consequential geopolitical arena, China’s Arctic ambitions also align with Russia’s position as an Arctic power. As long as the other Arctic nations remain wary of China’s Arctic ambitions, Russia remains China’s gateway.

Recent statements from both sides demonstrate that the agenda extends well beyond wartime necessity. Putin has indicated that also the forthcoming talks with Xi will cover international stability, energy cooperation (including oil, gas, and nuclear), space, and high-technology collaboration, noting that the two sides are approaching a new stage in energy partnership. Chinese officials have publicly echoed the intention to deepen cooperation across all these fields, including Beijing’s focal strategy, to develop a “global governance system” that reflects shared values and interests with Russia rather than those of the Western-led multilateral order.¹¹⁹

The war in Ukraine has, in this sense, been an accelerant rather than a cause. It has deepened a relationship that was already institutionalising “comprehensive strategic coordination”, and it has given that relationship urgency, mutual dependence, and a shared adversarial reference point that will persist even after fighting stops. For Beijing, a post-war Russia remains valuable: as a source of energy, as a diplomatic partner in multilateral forums, as a buffer against

¹¹⁷ “China-Russia relations embrace new historical opportunities: FM spokesperson”, *Xinhua*, 11 May 2026, <https://english.news.cn/20260511/4c6df9921f2e49ebb22eb868c630cc26/c.html>; “Ответы на вопросы журналистов”, Президент России, 9 May 2026, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/79718>.
¹¹⁸ Matti Nojonen, “Sino-Russian Relations, the Ukraine War and Trump as a Challenge: The Eventual Test of ‘No-Limits Friendship’”, in *Inevitable Instability in Russia*, Springer Nature Link, February 2026, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-032-11892-9_16.
¹¹⁹ “Путин обсудит с Си Цзиньпином сотрудничество России и Китая”, *Новости*, 10 May 2026, <https://news.mail.ru/politics/70837412/>; “Путин в ответ на вопрос журналиста «МК» назвал сотрудничество России и Китая «фактором сдерживания и стабильности»”, *MKRU*, 9 May 2026, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2026/05/09/putin-v-otvet-na-vopros-zhurnalista-mk-nazval-sotrudnichestvo-rossii-i-kitaya-faktorom-sderzhivaniya-i-stabilnosti.html>; “外交部：中方愿同俄方推动构建更加公正合理的全球治理体系”, *XinhuaNet*, 11 May 2026, <https://www.news.cn/20260511/4d7a2a5f06c44e10aa31423c8d6b44c2/c.html>.

US encirclement from the north, and as a partner whose growing dependence on Chinese goodwill can be leveraged in bilateral negotiations.

At the same time, the grievances and frictions within the relationship are real and should not be minimised. The reputational cost to China of being seen as Russia’s economic lifeline has also complicated its relations with Europe, a trade partner it cannot afford to wholly alienate. None of these frictions, however, constitutes a threat to the relationship’s fundamentals. Both Beijing and Moscow benefit too much from each other, and share too deep an interest in contesting Western primacy, to allow tactical disagreements to fracture the partnership. China will not abandon Russia after the war; it will simply reposition itself as an investor in post-war reconstruction (likely in Ukraine as well), a potential facilitator of Russia’s eventual partial re-engagement with non-Western markets, and a partner in the long-term project of building institutional alternatives to the US-led order. The war is an episode, albeit an important one, in a relationship built on structural foundations that will outlast it.

The policy implication is sobering. Western strategies that assume China will loosen its alignment with Moscow once the fighting stops are likely to be disappointed. The relationship has matured precisely because the war accelerated the interdependencies that now bind it. Engaging China on Ukraine after a ceasefire will require not just post-conflict diplomacy but a clear-eyed understanding that the partnership Beijing and Moscow have consolidated since 2022 is a durable feature of the international order, not a temporary wartime aberration.

Conclusions

China's conduct since February 2022 has been neither passive nor purely opportunistic. Beijing has sustained Russia's war economy through energy purchases, dual-use technology transfers, financial workarounds, and diplomatic cover – each calibrated to provide maximum support whilst stopping short of the overt belligerence that would trigger severe Western retaliation. The 90% share of Russian microelectronic imports originating in China, the surge in fibre-optic cable shipments enabling Russian drone warfare, and the sharing of satellite imagery with Russian forces reflect deliberate policy, authorised at the highest levels of the Chinese Communist Party and operationalised through state-owned enterprises, provincial export incentives, and the systematic tolerance of sanctions evasion via third-country intermediaries.

The economic dividends are real: Chinese refiners have saved billions through discounted Russian crude, Chinese manufacturers have captured market share vacated by Western firms, and the yuan has advanced as a currency of bilateral trade. These gains, however, are derivative rather than primary. To frame Beijing's conduct principally in terms of trade flows and sanctions evasion is to address the symptom whilst leaving the cause intact. The deeper logic of China's support for Russia is the advancement of a geopolitical project whose ambitions extend well beyond cheap oil or captured export markets.

That project is the displacement of the Western-led international order with a multipolar architecture in which Beijing occupies the central organising role. The war has provided this ambition with unprecedented momentum. The freezing of nearly three hundred billion dollars of Russian foreign reserves was read across the Global South as a demonstration of what dollar-based financial system membership can cost a state that defies Western preferences – and Beijing was swift to furnish that lesson with institutional alternatives. The Global Governance Initiative, unveiled at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in September 2025, is the capstone of an architecture constructed since at least 2021 through the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and the Global Civilisation Initiative. What China is building is not a Cold War-style rival bloc but something more subtle: a parallel framework in finance, governance norms, development assistance, and technology regulation that reduces the cost of defecting from Western-led arrangements. The war in Ukraine has advanced this project further and faster than any deliberate Chinese policy could have achieved in equivalent time.

Russia's role within this project is structural. Moscow contributes a permanent Security Council seat, diplomatic reciprocity on Taiwan and the Indo-Pacific, vast energy reserves, and a reliable chorus in multilateral forums when Western pressure on Beijing is highest. The relationship is, however, profoundly asymmetric. Sanctions have stripped Russia of alternatives, driving Moscow into an increasingly subordinate position: selling energy at steep discounts, signing pipeline agreements on Chinese terms, and accepting what amounts to Eurasian clienthood. China has extended its influence across the continent without soldiers, casualties, or commensurate political risk. The longer the conflict continues under sanctions, the deeper that dependency becomes – which is itself a reason why Beijing has no incentive to press for a settlement that restores Russian strategic autonomy.

China's diplomatic and narrative contributions have been no less significant than its material ones. Consistent abstentions and negative votes at the United Nations have preserved a diplomatic lifeline for the Kremlin and denied Ukraine's supporters a unified international front. Beijing's framing of the conflict – as a product of Western hegemony, Cold War mentality, and NATO expansion rather than unprovoked aggression – has been effective with audiences

outside the Western alliance. The twelve-point peace plan of February 2023, however hollow its substance, performed the function of projecting Chinese statesmanship whilst normalising a ceasefire-first approach that would freeze Russia's territorial gains. Lavrov's enthusiastic endorsement of that plan was not coincidental. Chinese "peace" proposals have systematically avoided demanding Russian withdrawal or accountability, making them instruments of diplomatic positioning rather than genuine conflict resolution.

A common error in Western strategic thinking has been to treat Sino-Russian alignment as a wartime anomaly that will dissolve with a ceasefire. The structural commonalities, shared opposition to the US-led sanctions regime, complementary economic interests, and mutual investment in multipolar governance norms predate the war and will outlast it. Chinese and Russian official messaging in May 2026 described the relationship as entering "new historical opportunities". The Trump administration's attempt to drive a wedge between Beijing and Moscow has produced the opposite effect. The frictions within the partnership are genuine, but they do not threaten its foundations. Both parties benefit too much from each other and share too deep an interest in contesting Western primacy to allow tactical disagreements to fracture the alignment.

Policy Recommendations

Several implications follow for British and Western policymakers. First, the China-Russia relationship must be assessed as a structural feature of the international order rather than a wartime contingency. China supports, of its own accord, the building of a new “sustainable European security architecture”, sympathising with Russian visions of indivisible security. Strategies premised on post-conflict drift between Beijing and Moscow will be disappointed, and may result in the premature relaxation of pressure at precisely the moment it should be sustained. A unified analytical framework, tracking Sino-Russian institutional cooperation across economic, military, diplomatic, and governance domains, should inform policies irrespective of whether the war is active.

Second, secondary sanctions must be enforced with greater rigour and consistency. The evidence presented here demonstrates that credible enforcement pressure can alter Chinese behaviour at the margins. The United Kingdom, in coordination with Washington and Brussels, should identify specific Chinese financial institutions, shipping firms, and technology exporters whose continued operations in Russia create the greatest vulnerability to targeted action – and be prepared to impose costs on them, even at the expense of short-term bilateral trade relations.

Third, China’s global governance project deserves to be treated as a strategic priority rather than a rhetorical irritant. British officials engaging at the UN, the G20, and in bilateral exchanges with Global South partners should understand the specific semantic displacements embedded in Chinese governance language: “sovereign equality”, “multipolarity” and “indivisible security” carry meanings in Chinese diplomatic usage that differ materially from their conventional international law definitions. Effective counter-engagement requires precision.

Fourth, contesting Chinese and Russian narrative influence in the Global South requires substance, not merely counter-messaging. Chinese framing resonates in part because it addresses genuine grievances regarding selective Western engagement with international law and development finance. Responding credibly means reforming multilateral development institutions to offer competitive alternatives, applying international legal standards consistently, and engaging Global South partners as strategic interlocutors rather than passive audiences.

The war in Ukraine has been a crucible for Chinese strategic ambition: testing and refining Beijing’s capacity to sustain a major power’s war effort without formal belligerence, to project mediation credentials whilst shielding the aggressor, and to advance an alternative governance architecture under the cover of a distracted Western alliance. The principal lesson is not that China has won from the war, but that it has prosecuted its interests within it with strategic consistency and long-term purpose. Meeting that challenge requires equivalent consistency on the Western side: active defence of the rules-based order through credible enforcement, competitive institutional investment, and sustained engagement with the countries whose alignment will determine whether the emerging multipolar order is anchored in law or in power.

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