



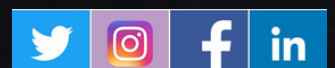
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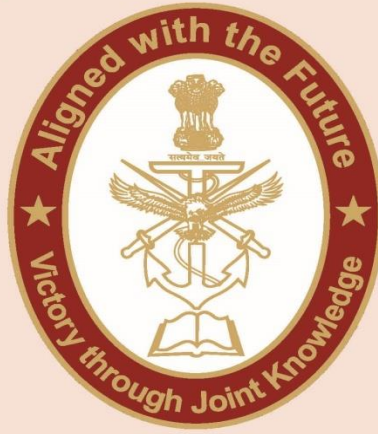
RUSSIA-CHINA AND THE STATE OF THE 'LIMITLESS' PARTNERSHIP

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Introduction

Russia's envoy to Beijing, Ambassador Igor Morgulov, recently told state news agency RIA that Chinese President Xi Jinping is likely to visit Russia in 2025 with plans being actively drawn up¹. The visit would underline the growing partnership between Moscow and Beijing, which has reached new heights in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and has come to be characterised by a mutual mistrust of the US-led world order. Days before Russian troops rolled into Ukraine for the 'Special Military Operation' (SMO), President Putin described the relationship between the two states as a 'limitless' one with 'no forbidden areas' for cooperation at a joint meeting with his Chinese counterpart during the latter's visit to Moscow². This partnership has remained strong even in the face of Western sanctions on Russia and increasing Western pressure on China to scale down its economic and trade ties with Russia. China has also refrained from condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine and has been accused by Kyiv of trying to further Russia's agenda through the 'peace plan' proposed by China and Brazil³. China has also been supplying Russia with valuable components for various high-end military platforms⁴ despite being faced with Western pressure. While the partnership has seen growth in a number of areas and seems ironclad in its determination to bring about a change in the Western-dominated global order, it is not

without its issues and underlying issues may flare up as the international situation evolves.

Political Cooperation

The relationship between China and Russia in the post-Cold War era is based on the foundation of mutual understanding and support (or at least non-opposition to) of each side's core interests. For China, this means Moscow accepting its non-democratic political system and respecting its territorial integrity (one-China policy on Taiwan and other regions). The two have a meaningfully different domestic political system, but their common non-democratic tendencies have allowed them to cooperate closely, particularly against the West. They have repeatedly demonstrated support for the other's claims and domestic policies, reflected in Russian support for China's policies in Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang. China in turn has avoided openly opposing Russian policies in Ukraine, Chechnya, Georgia and Syria. The settlement of the border dispute between the two in 1991 also allowed the two to move from seeing each other as rivals to strategic partners. This partnership has also been leveraged to not only complement but expand their respective global influence reflected not only in their bilateral dealings but also in their cooperation in multilateral forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Military Cooperation

The biggest driver of the supposedly 'limitless' partnership between the two today is a mutual suspicion of the West, led by the United States, and both Russia and China have used this to drive up their already extensive security and political ties and take them to new levels. In July 2024, US Air Force (USAF) jets from the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) intercepted two Chinese Xian H-6K bombers and two Russian Tu-95MS Bear bombers flying near Alaska. Both variants of bombers are nuclear capable and their interception by a combined US-Canadian force⁵ marked the first instance where a joint Russian and Chinese patrol was intercepted near American airspace. The incident comes at a time when the Russian Armed Forces (RuAF) and Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) have been ramping up joint exercises in both frequency and scale. In September 2024, China was the only country to participate alongside Russia in the 'Ocean-2024' naval exercises hosted by the

latter. Between 2013 and August 2024, China and Russia have taken part in at least 4 and as many as 10 joint exercises every year as per from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)⁶, figure 1 shows a table from CSIS detailing a breakdown of these exercises.

China-Russia Joint Military Exercises by Type

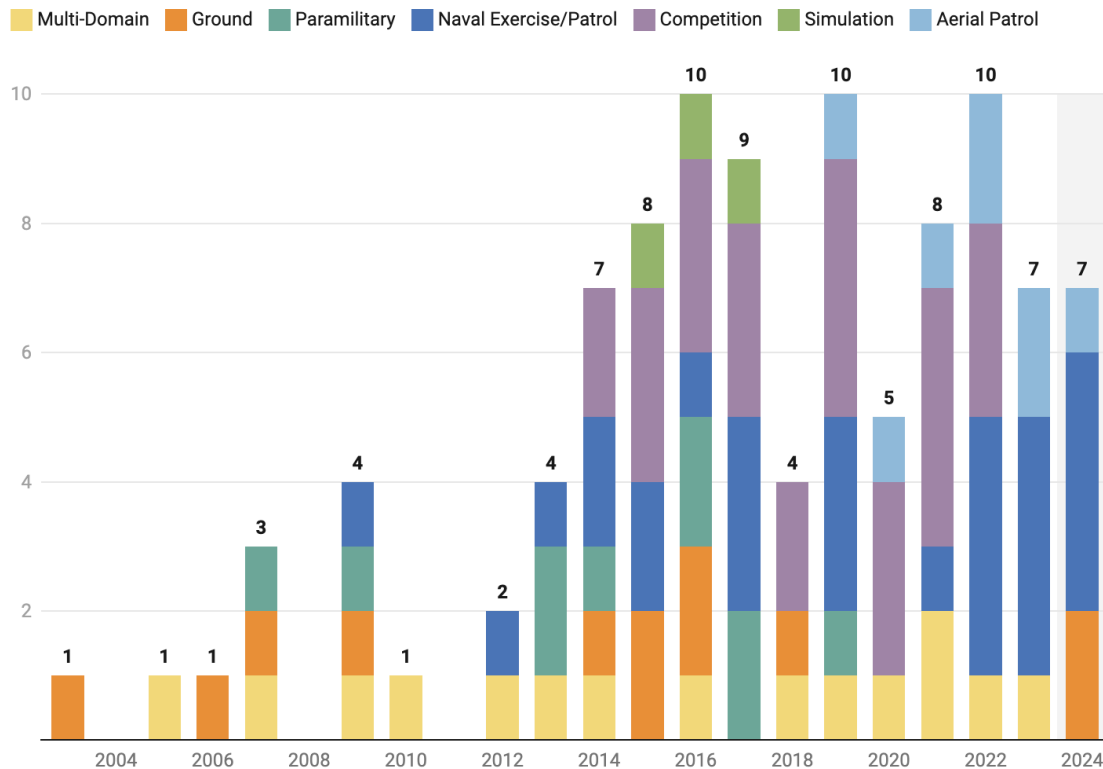


Figure 1: CSIS China Power Project, Source: <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-russia-military-cooperation-arms-sales-exercises/>

Since 2022, the two have held three joint air and one joint naval drill off the coast of Alaska and, with increasing frequency in the Sea of Japan, seen as being targeted towards US allies in the region, namely Japan and South Korea. These exercises are particularly valuable for China as the untested PLA has been able to learn from its counterparts in the RuAF and their experiences earlier in the Chechen wars and now from the war in Ukraine. It also allows the two to enhance interoperability between their units, given their mutual suspicion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), even if their ability actually to conduct joint operations in war remains untested. Finally, it allows them to send political signals, particularly to the US. Arms trade between the two has always been a key component of the relationship, with Russia being China's main source of advanced military technology for a long time. This has changed since the war in Ukraine began and China is now a key supplier of advanced technologies that Russia needs to manufacture equipment ranging from drones to tanks and

missiles. China has also sought to prevent or at least limit the amount of dual-use equipment, particularly that related to drones, that it supplies to Ukraine's Western Allies. This is reflected in China's move to sanction a number of Western firms engaged in the manufacturing of drones, which have become critical to the Ukrainian war effort against Russia⁷. While China justifies this move as being driven by American moves to arm Taiwan, the spillover effects on Ukraine and the resultant benefits for Russia are obvious. The two have also ramped up their cooperation in emerging areas and tech, such as AI, with President Vladimir Putin recently instructing his Government and Russia's largest bank, Sberbank, to cooperate with the People's Republic on this increasingly important tech⁸. China's status as one of the world's leading manufacturing and now AI states⁹ makes it extremely important for Russia as it seeks to circumvent Western sanctions through collaboration with Beijing and non-Western groupings like BRICS. These actions must also be viewed within the larger picture of the joint goal of China and Russia of seeking a change in the US-led world order.

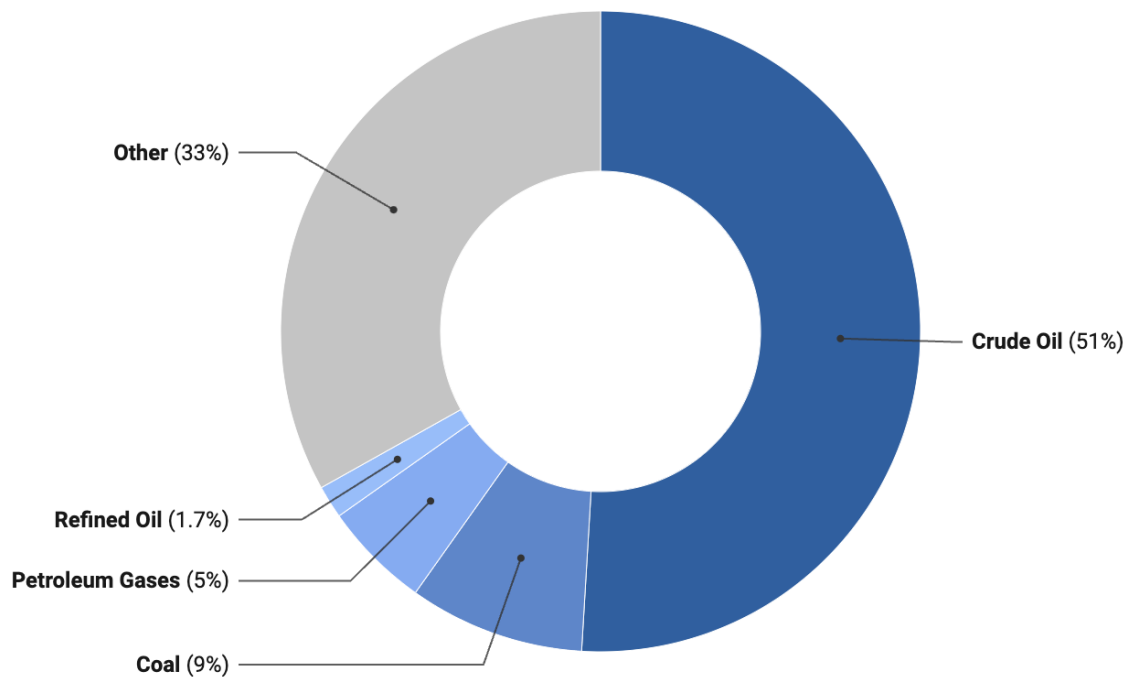
Despite these, the security relationship is not without potential issues, and a change in the global security situation may make these issues more prominent in the overall relationship. Despite their close relationship in the arms trade, Russia has not always been keen to provide China with key advanced technologies such as that found on nuclear submarines. Additionally, China's technological advancements and the growth of its domestic military-industrial complex (MIC) have meant it is no longer as reliant on Russian imports and thus no longer needs to be as sensitive towards the Kremlin's sensitivities. Technology espionage and reverse engineering have also been irritants for Moscow, four people were convicted of passing sensitive aerospace and laser technological research materials to China between 2021 and 2023¹⁰. On the global stage, it remains to be seen how long China is prepared to back Russia's actions in Ukraine, especially with the prospect of an intensified trade war looming with the upcoming presidency of Donald Trump in the US. China may also deem that the long-term impact of such strong support for Russia may impact its standing as a 'neutral' power, something it has been keen to preserve.

Economic and Trade Relations

One of the more widely discussed aspects of the partnership in recent times has been its economic partnership. Unlike the military domain, where Russia can claim a level of

parity with the PLA, China is undoubtedly the superior economic power today with much greater economic heft both in their bilateral relationship and worldwide. Despite this, ties between the two have flourished and between 2000 and 2021, annual bilateral trade value went from 8 billion USD to 147 billion USD¹¹. Russia also retains a measure of economic importance in the relationship despite its one-sided nature. In the wake of the Western sanctions on Russian energy exports, Beijing has been eager to take advantage of the cheap energy source now on offer (as have other states like India). Its imports of cheap oil have allowed it to power its energy-hungry economy and provided it with an alternative, albeit a limited one, to the time-consuming, costly and strategically vulnerable imports from the Middle East. Russia's willingness to leverage its energy-economic importance to several European states for its geopolitical aims is also something that benefits China by utilising the vulnerabilities of these states, making their negotiating positions vis-à-vis to China weaker. Finally, Russia remains an important trade partner for China's northern provinces, namely Heilongjiang, Jilin and Inner Mongolia. In 2021, approximately 24 percent of exports from Heilongjiang province went to Russia and a massive 78 percent of its imports came from there, highlighting Russia's economic importance in the development of these Chinese provinces which are relatively lacking in development compared to the other provinces¹². Figure 2 from the CSIS shows the importance of Chinese energy imports from Russia in the overall economic partnership¹³.

Composition of Chinese Imports from Russia (2021)



Source: CSIS China Power Project; General Administration of Customs of China

Figure 2: CSIS China Power Project, Source: <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-russia-relationship-strengths-benefit/>

Impact of 'Trump 2.0'

The return of President Trump to the White House on the 20th of January 2025 will be a significant moment for Great Power relations. Trump's first term saw him pursue a close relationship with Russia and launch a trade war against China, a state of affairs he has indicated he would return to. On Ukraine, Trump has indicated that he would significantly scale down the level of financial and military support the US has been giving to Ukraine thus far. With the war turning into one of attrition, the loss of American monetary and material support would be a devastating blow to Ukraine's defence and might spell the end of the war unless other states move in to fill the (presently) hypothetical American vacuum. Not only would this help Trump reset US-Russia ties and return them to a level of normalcy, but a Russian victory in Ukraine would also essentially legitimise the Kremlin's move to force a regime change in Kyiv using military force. While a discussion on the 'good vs bad' of the Ukraine conflict is beyond the scope of this paper, it would undoubtedly lead to further instability in the world as states may seek to enforce their interests through the direct employment of conventional military force more often. It would also validate Russia's claims that it is

entitled to a 'sphere of influence' in Eastern Europe and possibly beyond, potentially leading to increased pressure on NATO's Baltic front and testing their commitment to Article 5 in case of Russian aggression against its Baltic members. This is not a particularly far-fetched idea anymore especially as Trump has repeatedly voiced his unhappiness over the inability or unwillingness of some NATO members to meet the 2 percent of GDP on defence threshold that the alliance requires. Finally, if Russia is able to end the war in Ukraine without any real concession at the negotiating table, it would strengthen Putin's already safe position at home, allowing him to potentially turn his attention to projecting Russian power elsewhere across the world.

If Trump's return to office presents a fairly opportune moment for Russia, the mood in Beijing will be slightly different. Trump has suggested that he would intensify the ongoing trade war against China by imposing tariffs as high as 60 per cent on imports from there¹⁴. This would be a significant escalation in the trade war, which has already seen tariffs as high as 100 per cent on the import of Chinese electric vehicles into the US and China banning the export of critical minerals to the US. China would likely respond to Trump's tariffs with tariffs of its own. However, while this presents a challenge for the global economy and China's economy, which is still recovering, it is also an opportunity for the latter. Trump has also threatened tariffs on a number of other countries, ranging from the BRICS states to close American allies like Canada and other developing states. An American move away from free trade would allow China to further its already extensive trade relations, perhaps to a point where it is effectively able to alter the global financial and trade order to one which is closer to its desired state. Trump's unwillingness to make America's commitment to the defence of Taiwan also presents Beijing with an opportunity to try and force reunification should Trump be unwilling to risk American intervention in the defence of Taiwan. Trump has also threatened BRICS with 100% tariffs should its member states continue to pursue 'de-dollarisation'¹⁵, a move which may make such a move by the BRICS states harder to pursue.

While Trump's return to the White House may be viewed more positively in Moscow than it is in Beijing, it is unlikely to cause a significant break between the two. In recent weeks, Trump has spoken about his intent to take Greenland and the Panama Canal through 'military or economic action' if necessary, called for NATO states to up defence spending to 5 per cent of GDP and floated the idea of Canada joining the US as its 51st

state.¹⁶ While it is difficult to ascertain whether Trump actually intends to follow through with these ideas if he chooses to, they would signal a new age of American expansionism and will cause concern for both Russia and China. Trump's plans are an attempt to reassert American hegemony across the world and would present many states with the choice of either falling in line or facing the consequences. This is not ideal for either Russia or China and the two will likely continue their close cooperation through Trump's second presidency even if Russia sees better relations with Washington than Beijing does. There is a long-term goal underlining their partnership, one which seeks to change the global order and shift the balance of power away from the West. While the two may prefer different strategies in doing so, with Moscow being more belligerent and China seeking to cast itself as more 'by the rules', this unity in purpose means that the partnership is unlikely to seek a major break over the course of 'Trump 2.0'.

India's Course of Action

Besides the US, it is India which will keenly observe the 'limitless' partnership between Russia and China for a number of reasons. Russia and India have been close partners for many years, with a partnership that continued during the height of the Cold War and endured the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Sino-India relationship, on the other hand, has been a changing one with a brief period of closeness in the early 1950s, open hostility in 1962, cooperation with limits over the 90s and early 2000s and finally, a return to a period of conflict in the early 2020s following the Galwan standoff. The recent disengagement agreement¹⁷ reached between New Delhi and Beijing has likely brought the recent period of conflict to a close, but this does not necessarily mean that a period of closeness and cooperation is inevitable. In fact, beyond the boundary dispute, India-China relations are likely to be characterised by varying degrees of competition in the Indo-Pacific and South Asian region, given their respective regional and global aspirations. In such a scenario, India needs to develop a holistic strategy to ensure that it is able to successfully pursue its interests without having to compromise.

Militarily, the choice is obvious, India must pursue '*Aatmanirbharta*' (self-reliance) in its defence manufacturing, including the manufacturing of advanced equipment and components such as jet engines. India's traditional reliance on Russia as its main

defence supplier has already begun to change. In 2023, only 36 per cent of India's arms imports came from Russia as compared to 76 per cent in 2009¹⁸. This has occurred as India has sought to increase self-reliance in defence and deeper partnerships with the West have led to imports of cutting-edge technologies from there instead. However, more needs to be done to ensure that in case of military conflict, India's capabilities are not held hostage by the interests of a third power and the government's policies aimed at doing this are prudent.

Additionally, border infrastructure and capabilities need to be developed to address the present gap between India and China to ensure that Indian forces are able to carry out operations without the handicap of underdeveloped infrastructure or the absence of adequate response capabilities in the region. It must also move to ensure the in-house development of advanced technologies and try and cut out Chinese components from its supply chains where it can. Sustainable and quality economic growth must also be prioritised to ensure that more resources can be allocated to the defence budget, particularly in capital expenditure and research and development, to try and limit the growing difference in equipment quality between the Indian Armed Forces and the PLA. India must also leverage its growing economic clout to not only invest in its own people but also look to provide a financial alternative to China as and where it is able to by utilising its historical linkages to the South Asian and Indian Ocean states.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, India must leverage the full spectrum of its close ties with Russia to ensure that Moscow is able to pressure China into refraining from any military actions across the Line of Actual Control (LAC). India must also work with Russia and other states to ensure that China does not transform groups such as BRICS and the SCO into platforms to propagate its own interests and work to preserve the integrity and multilateral nature of these groupings.

Thus, Indian policymakers must realise that adjusting to a world where China is more important to Russia than India will require a holistic approach involving a combination of military, economic and diplomatic measures. India has scripted a remarkable story in its rise as a global power and the growing relationship between Russia and China must be seen as an opportunity in New Delhi for India to shed its current burdens and move onto a new role as a power able to truly act on its own.

Long term Outlook

The China-Russia partnership is based on a solid foundation encompassing a variety of interests ranging from supporting each other's claims and domestic policies, security and political cooperation and extensive economic ties, but these do not necessarily guarantee that relations will continue to be as close in the future. The biggest factor uniting the two powers today is a common front against the West and their respective concerns against the larger world order as it exists today. The Biden administration has provided extensive support to Ukraine in its conflict with Russia while trying to persuade China against any action on Taiwan by providing the latter with arms packages. The US is thus presently engaged against both powers on two vastly different fronts, engaging Russia in what is essentially a proxy war in Ukraine and against China in the Indo-Pacific through cooperation with regional allies like Japan, Philippines, Australia, etc and 'near-allies' like India. It has also opposed Russian policies in the Middle East, and the latest upheaval in Syria will come as a blow to Moscow's interests in the region. These American policies, however, are likely to change under the incoming Presidency of Donald Trump, who has indicated that he would significantly roll back the level of aid the US presently provides to Ukraine and has been less than certain about his Taiwan policy. Trump's 'America First' policies might see a rollback of American security presence on the European mainland and the Middle East, and his stated admiration of Russian President Vladimir Putin¹⁹ may lead to a level of normalisation in US-Russia ties. Should an improvement in Russia-US ties coincide with a worsening of the Sino-U.S. trade war and general state of relations, it remains to be seen if Russia would be willing to risk a continued confrontation with the West over China if its own immediate interests are not threatened.

Economically, China is a leader in alternative sources of energy such as wind, solar and hydro power. The share of energy consumption from renewable sources in China has increased tremendously from around 7 per cent in 2007 to more than 16 per cent in 2023²⁰. The present closeness in Russia-China energy ties may not last and should China not have to rely as much on Moscow to meet its energy requirements, it may be less inclined to continue to support Moscow against the combined West. The growing trade imbalance will also not sit well with Moscow, and it might seek a redressal on the issue at some point. Here too, China remains an important long term source of both exports and potential investments for Moscow and as the world, particularly the west,

continues to transition away from Fossil fuels Moscow would need Chinese help in diversifying away from its fossil fuel based economy.

Conclusion

Despite these issues, the relationship is likely to remain strong in the near future. Trump's upcoming presidency is unlikely to remove all issues in the US-Russia relationship, especially the historical suspicion of each other, a hangover effect of the Cold War. Russia and China also share interests in preventing the spread of extremism and Western influence in Central Asia, as well as cooperating in international forums such as BRICS, the UNSC, SCO and more. As more and more avenues of cooperation open up in areas such as space security, arctic exploration, and more, China and Russia are likely to continue their close cooperation and ramp it up in existing areas to complement each other's strengths and weaknesses and while there may be occasional hiccups in the 'limitless' partnership, if both sides remain true to the foundation of their ties in mutual respect, support and non-interference, it is unlikely that ties will take a turn for the worse.

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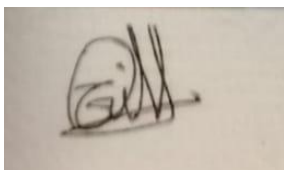
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