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Bromance of convenience

To break from Moscow, Beijing expects an appealing EU offer. But few in Brussels are ready to pay the price

The Chinese People's Liberation Army paraded its state-of-the art military equipment for Victory Day recently, showing off its perfectly choreographed marching formations across Tiananmen Square. A prime moment for China's head of state and party leader Xi Jinping to celebrate his friendship with Russia's President Vladimir Putin from the VIP stand. Just days earlier, the pair had renewed their claim to reshape the global order at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Tianjin. The West's US-led hegemony was to be broken, while the Global South was to gain more influence, development and security.

These global ambitions rest on the 'no-limits partnership' that China and Russia declared just days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. These are more than empty words, if the more than 40 face-to-face meetings between Xi and Putin since 2013 are anything to go by — a record-breaking number in world diplomacy. Trade volume reached around USD 245 billion in 2024, nearly double the pre-pandemic level. Today, China is Russia's biggest trading partner. Chinese exports, from cars to electronics, fill the gaps left by Western sanctions, while Russia supplies China with oil on the cheap. At the same time, the number of joint military exercises continues to grow.

To strengthen the partnership even further, more than 20 new cooperation agreements were signed on the sidelines of the SCO summit, ranging from agriculture to AI. Particularly symbolic was the announcement – alongside China's decision to waive visa requirements for Russian citizens – that the long-delayed Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline would finally be moving forward again. Gazprom chief Alexei Miller promised deliveries of 50 billion cubic metres per year, a volume comparable to Nord Stream 1 and 2.

United under one enemy

At first glance, China and Russia appear serious about their 'no-limits partnership.' But cracks are already starting to form in the pipeline

project. Beijing has kept stalling, concerned about dependence and disputes over price. It now seems to have been revived only because of Russia's weaker position: Moscow urgently needs alternatives to the European market and is dangling a carrot in the form of hefty discounts for Beijing. The project is useful for China, but by no means vital.

These signs point to a trade relationship that, despite recent growth, remains imbalanced and far below its potential. Both sides have put up barriers: Moscow wants to protect its own industry by slapping tariffs on Chinese cars, while Beijing has largely kept Russia's financial sector shut out.

For wider society, the partnership is just for show. Cultural exchange, tourism and scientific cooperation are marginal. Instead, both sides remain culturally alien, shaped by a deeply rooted historical mistrust. Security services monitor contacts suspiciously, and close ties across the border quickly arouse suspicions of espionage.

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What does bring Beijing and Moscow together is the rejection of US hegemony. China points to the Trump administration's aggressive stance, even towards America's own allies, as proof of the hypocrisy of the supposedly values and rules-based international order. Beijing argues that Washington exploits its global influence to inhibit China's growth. Meanwhile, Russia sees itself locked in a struggle with the US and its partners over dominance in Europe and welcomes any support, making China a natural partner.

Yet, the partnership of convenience between Beijing and Moscow against Washington is not an alliance like NATO. There is no shared long-term vision for the partnership, or for a future world order beyond opposition to the US. China would like to reform the current global system to its advantage, while Russia seeks to destroy it.

Even the Trump administration's piecemeal attempts at rapprochement with Russia, most recently at the Alaska summit, left China unfazed. Putin's manoeuvring was not about any real friendship, but about driving a wedge into the West and showing China that Russia can do business how it wants. From Beijing's perspective, Trump is driven by the prospect of resources and spheres of influence and his obsession with winning a Nobel Peace Prize. None of that will be enough to draw Russia out of China's orbit.

Behind the glittering façade of Sino-Russian unity, however, lie the fault lines. A leadership change in Moscow or an end to the war in Ukraine could quickly make Russia's elites look to the West. The clear division of roles, with Beijing as chef and Moscow as waiter, also clashes with Russia's imperial self-image. Meanwhile, China still has its eye on the far more attractive European market and on weakening the transatlantic alliance by edging closer to Europe. Other potential flashpoints include rising nationalism, reignited border disputes, geopolitical rivalries in Central Asia and the Arctic, and Moscow's ever closer ties with North Korea.

Beijing wants to work with Europe

The superficiality of Russia and China's bond is rooted in history. For centuries, border conflicts shaped relations, with the Tsarist Empire repeatedly seizing Chinese territory. Even the communist alliance after 1949 soon collapsed over ideological disputes and open border clashes. After the Soviet Union collapsed, relations were normalised, albeit cautiously. Only since the 2000s has China pursued a more active Russia policy, amidst growing rivalry with the US.

The fragility of the relationship is nowhere more evident than in the Ukraine war. Behind closed doors, Chinese experts consider Russia's invasion a strategic mistake. Widespread opinion holds that Moscow had hoped the brief 'special operation' would correct the imbalance with China. After its failure, Russia is more dependent on China than ever.

For Beijing, this is a dilemma: a Russian victory would contradict China's claim to defend the UN Charter, while also undermining the benefits of a weakened Russia. A Russian defeat, on the other hand, could bring instability along the shared border, ambiguous control over nuclear weapons and safe havens for cross-border terrorism. China's 'pro-Russian neutrality' – providing Moscow with diplomatic cover while supplying dual-use goods to both sides – doesn't solve the dilemma, but it does buy time. One positive side effect is that it keeps the US tied up in Europe for the duration of the war, far from the Indo-Pacific.

Although Beijing repeatedly stresses it wants to see peace in Ukraine soon, few there expect it. Both warring sides still believe a military victory can be achieved. At the same time, Putin's war economy is proving resilient, while Western support for Kyiv is too much to let it lose, but too little to secure victory. The chaos coming out of the US inspires little confidence. For China, this means planning for at least another year or two of war.

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China has warned Europe against 'Ukrainising' their own bilateral relations. From Beijing's point of view, the war must not obstruct cooperation. Europe, in turn, has criticised China for supporting Russia's attack on the European peace order as a violation of a core interest. Beijing firmly rejects this: it remains Ukraine's largest trading partner, has recognised neither the annexation of Crimea nor Russia's further territorial claims, and does not share Russia's narrative of a pre-emptive war against NATO's looming encirclement. While Beijing acknowledges that the West had threatened some legitimate Russian security interests, it does not see this as justification for a war of aggression. The fruitless EU-China summit in July 2025 showed just how far apart the two sides are.

Any meaningful contribution from China to a ceasefire or peace settlement is therefore unlikely. Beijing lays responsibility with the warring parties, as well as the US and the EU. It is also unwilling to get involved in reconstruction or potential peacekeeping, citing logistical, financial and political hurdles. That said, China hasn't entirely ruled out getting more involved in Ukraine.

But to break away from Russia, Beijing expects an attractive offer to prevent it from falling behind in competition with the US. If Brussels were to embrace this transactional approach, it would need to offer deeper economic ties, fewer trade barriers and greater 'strategic autonomy' from the US. Few are currently willing to pay that price.

In reality, this 'axis of autocrats' is nothing more than a staged bromance between Xi and Putin. The lack of popular support and ideological common ground is hidden behind the over-the-top political theatrics. Europe shouldn't be persuaded by the narrative of an unshakable alliance. Instead, it should recognise the complexity of Sino-Russian relations, which it can use to its strategic advantage.



Niels Hegewisch

Berlin

Dr Niels Hegewisch is a policy officer for China and geopolitics in the Asia Department of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in Berlin. He previously headed the FES offices in Mongolia and Pakistan.



Alexey Yusupov

Alexey Yusupov heads the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's Russia programme. He was previously the FES' office director in Myanmar, Afghanistan and Kazakhstan. He also supports political actors as an adviser and moderator.