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## China-Russia Relations

The People's Republic of China (PRC or China) and the Russian Federation (Russia) maintain a strategic and multifaceted relationship with extensive military, diplomatic, and economic connections. Although the contemporary China-Russia relationship dates back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the two countries also share a long, tumultuous history that has included periods of security and diplomatic cooperation, fluctuations in ideological alignment, diplomatic crises, and a border war in the 1960s. Many experts trace the current dynamism of the relationship to 2014, when the reaction of some countries to Russia's first invasion of Ukraine, including sanctions, led Moscow to seek to strengthen its ties to China and other countries.

The two countries' apparent mutual affinity has led some U.S. policymakers and Members of Congress to express concern that Beijing and Moscow constitute a *de facto* alliance, and to seek ways to counter their global influence. The PRC and Russia's bilateral relationship falls short of a mutual defense pact, more closely resembling a non-binding alignment based on shared opposition to what they describe as the U.S.-led international order. This common opposition has spurred cooperation between the two countries, but has not fully overcome their historical strategic mistrust. In the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia's reliance on China's economic and political support has grown, increasing China's advantage in the relationship.

### Key Features of the Relationship

Building on the foundation of the 1991 Sino-Soviet Border Agreement, the 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, among other things, noted Beijing's and Moscow's satisfaction on border issues and set broad areas of cooperation ranging from economics and trade to counterterrorism. The renewal of the treaty in 2021 reflects the overall positive trajectory of relations.

The direction of the bilateral relationship appears, in part, to reflect close personal ties between Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. Since 2013, Xi and Putin have met numerous times and established regular dialogue mechanisms at lower levels. In 2019, PRC and Russian leaders announced their intention to develop a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era," professing a "high degree of political trust" and "all-around cooperation."

Military cooperation between the PRC and Russia is significant, encompassing exchanges and joint exercises, as well as intelligence sharing and joint development of weapons systems. In November 2021, the two sides signed a Road Map for Military Co-operation for 2021-2025 to

guide collaboration in this sphere. The PRC and Russia are founding members of the Eurasia-based Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), an intergovernmental group mainly focused on security affairs.

The PRC and Russia also enjoy strong commercial and financial ties and are partners in their attempts to "de-dollarize" the global economy, which they see as beholden to the United States. (See CRS In Focus IF11885, *De-Dollarization Efforts in China and Russia*.) Both governments express opposition to the use of unilateral sanctions as tools of policy.

The PRC and Russia often cooperate and coordinate in multilateral settings, including the United Nations; the SCO; the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) grouping; and the Group of 20 (G20). In 2022, the PRC joined Russia in vetoing a U.S.-led draft U.N. resolution that would have tightened sanctions against North Korea over its missile launches. Where frictions may arise, the PRC and Russia have tried to harmonize the interests of overlapping ventures, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

### PRC and Russian Perspectives

PRC officials frequently describe the current moment as a "historic high" in the China-Russia relationship, with the two sides mutually supporting each other's positions on national sovereignty, security, territorial integrity, and economic development. For the PRC, one of the guiding principles of the relationship would seem to be flexibility, as is evident in its call to "form partnerships, not alliances," which has allowed it to distance itself from some of Russia's behavior in the international arena. Russia's role as a strategic partner in global affairs has at times been disruptive for the PRC, which values access to the markets, including capital markets, of the United States and Europe.

Russian concerns over China's economic advantage often are overshadowed by the benefits (and, perhaps, necessity) of greater economic, political, and military cooperation. Despite being aware of the practical benefits of a close relationship with the PRC, Russian policymakers remain guarded and harbor skepticism toward China's leaders. This includes avoiding the binding obligations of a formal alliance, especially commitments that could draw it into a potential conflict over Taiwan. Russian officials appear to reject the label of a "junior" partner and seek to manage the relationship on mutually beneficial terms.

## Selected Issues

### Challenging the Global Order

The PRC and Russia view each other as partners in their efforts to challenge the U.S.-led global order. During a phone call with Putin on December 30, 2022, Xi expressed that “in a changing and turbulent international environment, it is important that China and Russia remain true to the original aspiration of cooperation, maintain strategic focus, enhance strategic coordination,” and “continue to be each other’s development opportunity and global partner.”

A number of experts contend that while the PRC and Russia both seem to reject the current world order, their visions of what ought to replace it may not be consistent. Many analysts view the PRC as a “revisionist” power working to change certain aspects of the existing order, possibly with the intention of superseding it in the long run. PRC officials often depict China’s vision for global order as based on the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs, and contrast it with the current order, which they describe as having subordinated these principles to human rights and interventionism. Russian policymakers argue that the existing global order ignores the position and sovereignty of great powers other than the United States, and denies other powers what Russian policymakers view as legitimate spheres of influence. Russian leaders therefore attempt to push back against what they see as U.S. unipolar overreach, and remind the United States of Russia’s great power status and role in the international system.

### Defense Cooperation

The PRC and China are close partners in military and defense affairs. The PRC historically has been a major buyer of Russian arms to modernize its growing military. Defense trade has grown more complex, however, as the PRC’s defense industry has grown in sophistication and Russia has developed concerns about technology transfer and intellectual property violations. Russia’s defense industry now relies on importing key components and investment from China for the development of advanced weapon systems.

Current relations stress conducting combined military exercises, developing interoperability, and increasing defense sector cooperation and joint arms development. Russia has sought to increase its participation in military exercises with the PRC, including at the strategic and tactical level, as well as naval exercises and air patrols in the Asia Pacific. Russia arguably conducts these exercises to develop interoperability with PRC forces and to signal to the world that Russia remains a player in the region.

### Energy and Economics

Economic relations between China and Russia are asymmetrical; China’s economy is considerably larger and more dynamic. China is Russia’s second largest export market after the European Union (EU); Russia, meanwhile, is China’s ninth largest. Russia’s role as a key provider of PRC energy imports is a defining feature of the bilateral relationship. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, in 2021, Russia was China’s second largest source of crude oil, providing approximately 15% of

China’s total imports. In 2019, crude oil accounted for nearly 60% of the PRC’s imports from Russia. China’s transition away from coal could potentially lead to a greater role for Russian hydrocarbons (including “green coal” and natural gas). The recently-completed Power of Siberia Pipeline, when running at full capacity, could make China the second largest individual importer of Russian natural gas, after Germany. (For more on economic relations between China and Russia, see CRS In Focus IF12120, *China’s Economic and Trade Ties with Russia*.)

### Impact of Russia’s 2022 Invasion of Ukraine

Russia’s war against Ukraine has drawn increased scrutiny to the Beijing-Moscow relationship, including the extent to which China is willing and able to help relieve sanctions pressure on Russia. Some observers believe Russia’s invasion has strained relations, with China unaware of Russia’s plans and unwilling to be drawn into the conflict. Nonetheless, China has avoided public condemnation of Russia’s actions. Russia, meanwhile, appears to be turning to China to circumvent Western sanctions, including selling oil and purchasing critical components for its defense industry. Some trade data suggests some PRC firms may be providing dual-use goods to Russia, but it remains unclear how much support China is providing Russia. Media reports suggest the PRC government is selective in its engagement, allowing transactions that maximize advantages to China—such as buying oil at a discount, but unwilling to supply lethal weaponry.

The Biden Administration has repeatedly warned China against assisting Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. On January 9, 2023, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price stated: “We’ve been very clear with the PRC, including in private [ ... ] about any costs that would befall the PRC should they decide to assist Russia in a systematic effort to evade U.S. sanctions or in the provision of security assistance that would then be used against the Ukrainian people in Ukraine.” The Administration has sanctioned one Chinese firm and added several Chinese companies for export controls, and it has threatened further sanctions should China increase its support for Russia’s war in Ukraine. The White House stated on January 24, 2023, that it is “closely monitoring the situation,” and that it “will continue to communicate to China the implications of providing material support to Russia’s war against Ukraine.”

### Issues for Congress

U.S. policymakers, including in Congress, have identified countering PRC and Russian challenges to the current international order as a top national security priority. Both the Trump and Biden Administrations included such language in their national security strategies. The James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (P.L. 117-263) requires a report on whether and how the PRC has provided support to Russia with respect to its war against Ukraine. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328) appropriated \$325 million and \$300 million, respectively, for the Countering PRC Influence Fund and Countering Russian Influence Fund. The 118<sup>th</sup> Congress may review how these funds are being used to counter PRC and Russian narratives. It may also consider

how sanctions, including potential secondary sanctions against China, may affect China-Russia relations.

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