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Taiwan and the Limits of the Russia-China Friendship

Eugene Rumer

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: + 1 202 483 7600
F: + 1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

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Summary

- The relationship between Russia and China rests on four pillars:
 - A common adversary—the United States;
 - Complementary geopolitical priorities—Europe for Russia, Asia-Pacific for China—that reinforce each other in competition with the United States;
 - Authoritarian domestic politics; and
 - Complementary economic strengths—Russia’s natural resources and China’s manufacturing power.
- China benefits from the war in Ukraine, as U.S. resources and attention are diverted from the Asia-Pacific.
- But China has been careful to not become closely associated with the war, to avoid being targeted by U.S. sanctions, and to maintain a façade of impartiality.
- Russia benefits from tensions in the Asia-Pacific because they distract the United States from the European theater.
- But a war between the United States and China over Taiwan would most likely not be in Russia’s interest.
- A war over Taiwan would entail many risks for Russia:
 - The risk of a global catastrophe triggered by a confrontation between two global superpowers;
 - Risks to Russia’s military and economic assets along its Pacific coast; and
 - The risk of a global economic disruption with adverse consequences for Russia.
- In the event of a war between the United States and China, Russia would probably avoid becoming directly involved and adopt a policy broadly similar to China’s policy with respect to the war in Ukraine. It would probably help China with:
 - Energy deliveries—a critical factor stressed by Russian and Chinese experts;
 - Military equipment, technology, and know-how based on Russia’s warfighting experience in Ukraine;
 - Early warning and missile defense expertise; and
 - Intelligence-sharing and cyber expertise.
- However, even in the absence of direct involvement in the conflict by Russia, it would be a major risk factor for the United States to consider because of:
 - Its proximity to the theater of war, to the United States, and to U.S. treaty allies Japan and the Republic of Korea;
 - Its adversarial relations with the United States; and
 - The mistrust and lack of transparency between Washington and Moscow.

Introduction

In October 2023, the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States published its final report.¹ It concluded that “the risk of military conflict with [China and Russia] has grown” and that “the United States and its Allies must be ready to deter and defeat both adversaries simultaneously.” A two-theater war—in Europe and the Asia-Pacific—involving China and Russia simultaneously is arguably the worst-case scenario the United States could face in an era of so-called great-power competition.

But what about other, more ambiguous scenarios? The most commonly raised one is a potential confrontation with China over Taiwan. Since the start of Russia’s all-out war against Ukraine, Beijing has provided extensive assistance to Moscow that appears to have strengthened their already robust partnership and made Russia heavily dependent on China.

This paper explores the ways Russia might assist China in the event of a war with the United States over Taiwan. Because of the obvious political sensitivity that this issue poses for both Beijing and Moscow, a direct answer to this question cannot be found in official Russian or Chinese sources. But clues can be derived by examining Russia’s interests that would be at stake in a crisis surrounding Taiwan, its calculations of risks and opportunities, and the capabilities it could deploy in such a situation.

The paper begins with a broad overview of the relationship between China and Russia since the end of the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1980s, its drivers, and the benefits that each derives from it. It then explores the likely impact of a military confrontation between China and the United States over Taiwan on that relationship, highlighting important asymmetries between the positions of Beijing and Moscow that would affect Russian calculations of risks and benefits in such an event. Next the paper examines Russian and Chinese expert narratives as a gauge of each side’s expectations of the other in that contingency. It then turns to what assistance Russia could realistically offer China in the event of a war with the United States over Taiwan. Finally, the paper considers Russia’s probable course of action should this conflict materialize.

The Chinese-Russian Relationship—It’s Strategic

It has long been the norm among Western officials and analysts to describe the relationship between China and Russia as lacking strategic depth and being transactional, and as likely to eventually crack due to the imbalance in their power and capabilities and to Moscow never being willing to accept the role of junior partner.² Moreover, the argument goes, both have a lot more at stake in their respective relationship with the United States than with each other and will not risk jeopardizing their ties to it. Despite abundant evidence to the contrary, this argument continues to appear in Western

statements, occasionally reviving hopes that the West will be able to drive a wedge between China and Russia, and thus avoid the prospect of having to compete against both simultaneously. However, this ignores the record of their relationship over more than three decades and the structural factors underlying it, which have grown more robust since the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The Structural Factors

The Russian-Chinese “friendship without limits”³—the label that Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping used to describe the relationship at their February 2022 meeting in Beijing—now more than three decades old, rests on a solid foundation made up of four structural pillars that are positioned to keep supporting it well into the future. The combination of the first two factors—shared authoritarian domestic politics and adversarial relations with the United States that frame their foreign policies—is most important.

Another key factor is geopolitical complementarity. For China, notwithstanding its global footprint, the most important geopolitical arena is the Asia-Pacific, where it sees its interests being challenged by its principal rival, the United States. And, notwithstanding various territorial disputes with its neighbors, China’s most important national security issue and the fulcrum in its confrontation with the United States is Taiwan.

There is a certain symmetry between China’s position in the Asia-Pacific and Russia’s position in Europe. The latter is by far the most important theater for Russia, even though more than 70 percent⁴ of its landmass is in Asia.⁵ Some three-quarters of the population live in the European part

of the country.⁶ The territory east of the Ural Mountains has long been in effect the resource base from which Russia’s rulers extracted what they needed—from pelts⁷ in the seventeenth century to gas in the twenty-first century—to pay for their pursuits in Europe, where they competed for territory and influence against other major powers, whether the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Sweden, the Ottoman Empire, France, or Germany.



Taken in 1941, this photo shows women digging anti-tank trenches near Moscow, in the Soviet Union. (Photo by Serge Plantureux/Corbis via Getty Images)

The greatest threats to the existence of the Russian state have come from Europe—in the early seventeenth century

when Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth troops occupied Moscow, in 1812 when Napoleon's armies invaded Russia and briefly captured Moscow, and in 1941 when Hitler's armies were stopped just outside the gates of the capital. Its greatest victories have also been in Europe, most notably the defeat of Germany in 1945 and subsequent occupation of Eastern Europe. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia's leaders have consistently perceived the biggest threat to the country's security in the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on the western frontier and acted on that basis—from their opposition to Poland joining the alliance to the war with Georgia in 2008 to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Today, Ukraine is the fulcrum in Russia's confrontation with the West and in particular the United States in its capacity as the leader of the Western coalition.

Thus, China's and Russia's preoccupation with their respective geopolitical priorities in Asia and Europe makes for a perfect match—they reinforce rather than get in each other's way in their pursuit of their objectives. In both theaters, their primary adversary is the United States.

That shared perception of threat is reinforced by a shared sense of grievance against Washington. China and Russia have great-power ambitions, demand to be recognized as such, and complain frequently that the United States has refused to do so. One of Moscow's major and enduring complaints since the end of the Cold War has focused on perceived U.S. hegemony and by default denial of its great-power interests and claims.⁸ The perceived threat of U.S. hegemony is also a major concern for China, whose leaders complain that the United States is trying to constrain its development.⁹

The fourth structural factor is the two countries' economic complementarity. Their economies reinforce each other's strengths.¹⁰ Russia's vast endowment of natural resources complements China's unsurpassed manufacturing muscle. The disruption of Russia's trade with its long-standing commercial partners in Europe has made continuing access to the Chinese market even more important. The loss of direct access to Western technologies has rendered it even more dependent on China as an alternative source of Western technologies and substitutes for what is no longer available from countries that have joined the sanctions regime. All of this is reflected in the expansion of trade between the two countries since February 2022.

A Steady and Mutually Beneficial Rapprochement

The rapprochement between China and the Soviet Union began in the 1980s and has benefited both countries since then. The pivotal event was the visit to Beijing of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989,¹¹ which formally ended three decades of confrontation that more than once had erupted in violent military clashes. China's leader Jiang Zemin then visited Moscow in 1991. With the relationship returned to a positive track, ties between China and Russia have improved steadily without interruption.



Chinese troops on disputed Chenpoo Island hold up Soviet helmets on their bayonet points, 1969. (Alamy)

The benefits became evident to both countries already in the 1990s. By the late 1980s, the Soviet Union had deployed 270,000 military personnel in the Transbaykal Military District, 370,000 in the Far East Military District, and 80,000 in the Siberian Military District.¹² According to a 1981 study, China had deployed 59 divisions, or approximately 700,000 military personnel, on its side of the border.¹³ Better ties made it possible for both sides to reduce these vast and very expensive military deployments. Trade between the two countries also expanded significantly, albeit from a very low starting point.¹⁴ In addition, Beijing and Moscow

continued to make progress on their border dispute, on confidence-building measures, and on managing their relations in Central Asia with the establishment of the Shanghai Five forum in 1996, which was renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001.¹⁵ The two countries established a strategic coordination partnership in 1996 and signed a Treaty of Good Neighborly Friendship and Cooperation in 2001.¹⁶

China and Russia have also shared diplomatic positions increasingly in opposition to the United States and its allies. For example, both expressed strong opposition to and criticism of Washington and NATO during the 1999 war in Kosovo and opposed the 2003 Iraq war.¹⁷ The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, while formally intended not to be directed against anyone, was clearly designed to exclude the United States and keep its influence in Central Asia to a minimum.¹⁸ During the tenure of Yevgeniy Primakov as Russia's foreign minister (1996–1998) and prime minister (1998–1999), China emerged in Moscow's foreign policy thinking as a pillar of the "multipolar world" concept promoted by Russian diplomats as the alternative to the U.S.-dominated "unipolar world" in which major powers such as Russia and China would be marginalized and subordinated to Washington's diktat.¹⁹

A Partnership Beyond Expectations

The partnership between China and Russia has progressed faster and become deeper than anyone had anticipated. The 1998 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) concluded that, in the following five years, their relationship would:

- not deepen much beyond its current state,
- be subject to occasional friction, and
- develop in a manner that is not particularly threatening for the United States and might be stabilizing in Asia.²⁰

The 2000 update to the NIE acknowledged that “over the past two years, Sino-Russian relations have deepened more than we anticipated in our previous estimate.” Still, it sketched out the baseline scenario, in which economic relations would develop slowly in the near term, and that political cooperation would:

be limited by significant differences, including historical mutual suspicions, their respective concerns about each other’s long-term threat potential, divergence over sensitive geopolitical issues—most immediately Russia’s concern with China’s rising power—and preoccupation of both leaderships with domestic priorities.²¹

At the same time, the update offered an alternative scenario. In that scenario, China and Russia could draw closer together and increase their political and military cooperation if Moscow and Washington failed to renegotiate the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the latter decided to proceed with the development and deployment of a national missile defense system unilaterally. And, should U.S. foreign policy be viewed by Russian and Chinese leaders as contrary to their interests, this would contribute to their further rapprochement. Since the 2000 assessment, the relationship between China and Russia has followed the alternative rather than the baseline scenario.

The gap between Chinese and Russian capabilities has also become far more pronounced than it was in 2000. As a result, in official U.S. documents China is now recognized as a peer or near-competitor—“the pacing challenge”—to the United States, while Russia is viewed as an “acute threat,”²² a revisionist power whose reach vastly exceeds its grasp.²³ It is a distinction with an enormous difference that is widely known and recognized in Russia, where the gap between Russian and Chinese capabilities is well understood.²⁴

This challenges the Western assumption that the similar great-power ambitions of China and Russia would clash and pose a barrier to their “partnership without limits,” and that Russia will not accept the status of China’s junior partner.²⁵ For Russia’s political elite, this is evidently less threatening than the West’s insistence on major changes in their country’s politics and foreign policy as a precondition for better relations, as well as—after February 2022—on Russia’s military and political defeat in Ukraine. Partnership with China requires no such concessions. The fact that the Russian public holds consistently positive views of China reinforces this elite preference.²⁶

Thus, contrary to countless predictions and expectations that the gap in capabilities, mutual mistrust, competing great-power ambitions, a history of adversarial relations, and other factors would upend the Chinese-Russian partnership, this has not happened. And there are no indications to suggest that it will in the foreseeable future.

As Russia recovered from its economic slump and political turmoil of the 1990s, and as China's economy continued to grow during the 2000s, trade between them increased dramatically with Russia exporting to China mainly energy and raw commodities, reaching \$55 billion in 2010.²⁷ Construction of the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean oil pipeline started in 2006 and was completed in 2012, with one branch terminating in China and the other on Russia's Sea of Japan coast.²⁸

Arms sales to China have been a pillar of the relationship, enabling Russia's defense industry to survive during the lean decade of the 1990s.²⁹ Arms sales have played a critical role in their relationship with the volume and sophistication of equipment supplied to China increasing over time. In 2015, the first edition of the annual survey of their bilateral relations by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and Fudan University in Shanghai described China as "a key market for Russian military products," and noted that "a number of important Chinese rearmament programs depend on collaboration with Russia."³⁰ That collaboration, according to the survey, had passed "several qualitative development stages and reached the level of joint cooperation in a number of areas, such as aircraft engine building, supplies of S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems, and more." Subsequent editions reported a steady expansion of "military-technical ties," even if at times quoting inconsistent numbers.³¹

The pattern of improvements in the relationship reached a new level in 2012 with the return of Vladimir Putin to Russia's presidency after Dmitri Medvedev's four-year term. It was spurred by a marked deterioration of Russia's relations with the West following its accelerating domestic political crackdown and the Kremlin's push to energize the economic development of the Far East in Putin's



Deputy Premier of China's State Council Zhang Gaoli (right), President Vladimir Putin (center) and Gazprom Management Committee Chairman Alexey Miller (left) attend a ceremony marking the connection of the first link of the Power of Siberia gas pipeline on September 1, 2014. (Kremlin.ru.)

new term and to expand the web of Russian trade and economic relations in Asia,³² as well as by the Russian leader's desire to forge a close personal relationship with Xi Jinping after the latter became president of China in 2013. Putin's personal investment in an ever-closer partnership with China signaled his ownership of the policy and its priority in foreign policy.

The partnership with China intensified further after Russia illegally annexed Crimea and its relations with the West deteriorated even further. Trade between the two countries continued to grow.³³ In 2014,

Gazprom signed a thirty-year gas supply contract with China National Petroleum Corporation. The Power of Siberia gas pipeline to China went into operation in 2019, projected to reach its full capacity of 38 billion cubic meters per year (bcm/y) by 2025.³⁴ Russian officials began discussions with their Chinese counterparts about building Power of Siberia II, with a capacity estimated at as much as 50 bcm/y,³⁵ well before the first one was completed.

It took Russia considerably longer than expected to negotiate the terms for and to build the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean and the first Power of Siberia pipelines, and negotiations regarding both were very difficult with China holding most of the cards.³⁶ The talks about Power of Siberia II are reportedly behind schedule and progressing only haltingly due to the difficulty of finalizing commercial terms with hardnosed Chinese negotiators.³⁷ But there is no denying that these pipelines lock in the infrastructure for energy trade between the two countries for decades ahead, while Russian energy links to Europe have been severely disrupted since early 2022.

Russia's all-out war against Ukraine has accelerated its pursuit of ever-closer economic, diplomatic, and security ties with China. Exceeding prior estimates in speed and scale, their bilateral trade reached \$240 billion in 2023.³⁸ That year, China reportedly accounted for 30 percent of Russian exports and almost 40 percent of Russian imports.³⁹ The break with the West left few options for the Kremlin but to commit to an even tighter embrace of Beijing as its principal geopolitical partner and counterweight to the transatlantic alliance and G7 powers. The redeployment of the majority of Russian troops from the Eastern Military District bordering China to the Ukrainian front was a necessity for a military in need of more soldiers to fight in Ukraine and a sign of confidence that the Far Eastern region was secure.⁴⁰ China's support has been an essential enabler of Russia's war effort, including through the provision of tools and technology to help the latter's defense industry ramp up production of critical armaments.⁴¹

Speaking in Rome, in April 2024, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said that “when it comes to Russia's defense industrial base, the primary contributor in this moment to that is China. We see China sharing machine tools, semiconductors, other dual-use items that have helped Russia rebuild the defense industrial base that sanctions and export controls had done so much to degrade.” The historian Niall Ferguson offered a similar assessment writing for Bloomberg: “Behind the Russian war effort stands the vast economic resources of the People's Republic of China.”⁴² There is no doubt that Russia's trade and economic relationship with China has been a lifeline for its war effort.

With its decades-long record and a solid structural foundation, the Chinese-Russian partnership is poised to last for the foreseeable future. It is hard to predict what could disrupt it, as none of the factors that make up that foundation—politics and ideology, geopolitics, military and security considerations, and trade and economics—are likely to change anytime soon.

After its break with the West, Russia has no other strategic partner that could match China in terms of meeting its needs. But China has the upper hand in this relationship thanks to its economic superiority, technological prowess, geopolitical influence, and growing military capabilities, including its expanding strategic nuclear arsenal that is projected to match or surpass that of the United States by 2035.⁴³ While Moscow is not isolated on the world stage, it is uniquely dependent on Beijing at a critical moment in its history.

The list of Russian asks and expectations of China cuts across the four categories of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic support, including:

- High-level diplomatic visits with symbolic recognition of Russia as an equal partner; and endorsing or at least not opposing its positions in various international fora where its aggression against Ukraine or suppression of domestic dissent may be criticized.
- Accepting and disseminating Russia's rationale for the war in Ukraine.
- Supplying lethal and nonlethal hardware, technology, and know-how for Russia's military and defense industry; intelligence support; joint exercises as a show of support; and military-to-military exchanges.
- Alternative supply routes and sourcing to bypass or substitute for the effects of Western economic sanctions; investment in Russia's economic development; greater purchases of Russian gas and other commodities.

Russian commentators often acknowledge—with surprising candor—that when it comes to trade and economic relations, China can be a difficult partner, and developing those ties can be frustrating for Russian officials and businesspeople, but stress that the strategic aspects of the relationship are even more important than its economic aspects.⁴⁴ The overall partnership is paying off for Russia, as China is delivering what matters most to Russia.

Russia's War In Ukraine And China

Since the start of Russia's all-out war against Ukraine, while blaming the United States for provoking the war,⁴⁵ Chinese leaders have issued appeals to end the fighting and published a proposal for ending the conflict.⁴⁶ Presumably in deference to Moscow's insistence that it is conducting a "special military operation," the text of the proposal referred to a "crisis" rather than a "war." Beijing has also appointed a peace envoy to promote negotiations between Russia and Ukraine.⁴⁷ Xi has reportedly

been privately critical of Putin for his nuclear saber-rattling.⁴⁸ Chinese scholars have occasionally been publicly critical of the war and even predicted Russia's defeat⁴⁹—which in the conditions of strict censorship in China must have been at least tacitly approved by the government.

However, the attention that such statements attract only underscores the fact that they are the exception rather than the rule. Public criticism of Russia, of the war, let alone of Putin personally, is yet to be heard from the highest levels in Beijing. Xi has made no public statements critical of his counterpart, and neither have other senior Chinese officials. Instead, he has joined Putin in denouncing the West for interfering in the internal affairs of other countries⁵⁰—a long-standing Chinese and Russian complaint. Ukrainian diplomats in Beijing reportedly get the “cold shoulder” treatment from Chinese officials and no high-level access.⁵¹ Xi spoke with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy only once, more than a year after the Russian assault began. But the clearest manifestation of China's stance on the war has been in its support for Russia's war effort and the benefits it has derived from their now even more lopsided relationship.⁵²

China's gains from the war are evident across the entire spectrum of its relationship with Russia. Since February 2022, Moscow became not just a junior partner but also a captive of its relationship with Beijing, which the latter can exploit. This includes trade, where China holds most of the cards, drags out the negotiations for the second gas pipeline that Putin wants so much with Russia having lost access to the European gas market, and controls the flow of technology and industrial goods that Russia needs due to Western sanctions.

The war has also given a boost to China's reputation as an influential global actor,⁵³ especially by comparison with Russia, whose reputation in many quarters has sunk to the level of a pariah state. At the same time, the biggest war in Europe since the Second World War is a source of invaluable learning for China.⁵⁴ Its military is studying the tactical and operational lessons of the war, as well as observing the performance of various types of weapons used by both sides.⁵⁵ Chinese experts on trade, finance, supply chains, and civilian technologies can scrutinize the application of sanctions, their impact, and ways of bypassing them or using them as a weapon against other countries.

For the foreseeable future, China's military planners effectively no longer have to take into account the need to secure its 4,200 kilometers border with Russia, after the latter's redeployment of the bulk of its forces from the Far East to wage the war against Ukraine. The open-ended nature of the war in Ukraine and the long-term outlook for the standoff between Russia and NATO in the European theater means that Russia will be in no position to significantly rebuild its forces in the Far East soon.

However, the biggest gain for China from Russia's war against Ukraine is arguably that the United States has been distracted from the Asia-Pacific. The United States has had to divert military resources, political capital, and the time of its senior policymakers, while the unexpected demand

from Europe on U.S. resources has triggered domestic political divisions. Instead of focusing on China as the “pacing threat,” U.S. policymakers now have to deal with future, possibly simultaneous, contingencies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific. Moreover, the possibility—however remote—of becoming directly involved in the war in Ukraine has also revealed a significant isolationist current in U.S. thinking about foreign policy and prompted arguments that the United States should stay out of conflicts in both regions, and therefore should not risk an all-out war with China over Taiwan.⁵⁶

One potential negative from the war for China is that it has demonstrated the inadequacy of the defense-industrial base in the United States and Europe, and thus prompted governments on both sides of the Atlantic to begin to take steps to remedy this situation. But this is not a new development for the United States, where there had already been influential appeals to modernize its defense-industrial base to meet the challenge in the Asia-Pacific.⁵⁷

On balance, the war in Ukraine has benefited China. Notwithstanding their so-called peace plan, Chinese leaders have demonstrated no obvious interest in encouraging Russia to end it.⁵⁸ Beijing’s most immediate security interests are not affected by the war. China is a free-rider in the confrontation between Russia and the West, benefiting significantly from the war and incurring no cost. Considering the economic, military, geopolitical, and reputational benefits, its interests would be well served by the war and the confrontation between Russia and NATO continuing indefinitely. This would be preferable from Beijing’s perspective to Russia’s defeat, which would translate into a victory for the United States, or to Russia’s victory, which would boost its standing and self-confidence and make it a less agreeable partner for China.

A Friendship With Limits

The pattern of relations between China and Russia and the benefits each derives from their partnership is well established. But how would the situation change in the event of a military confrontation between China and the United States over Taiwan, which in geopolitical terms would be similar to Russia’s war against Ukraine? How would China and Russia’s stakes in their relationship be affected?

Answering these questions is complicated and requires a careful cost-benefit analysis for the two countries of different scenarios and courses of action. It must take into account that there are major asymmetries between the war in Ukraine and a confrontation over Taiwan. These have to do with the military nature of the two conflicts, their geography, Russia’s and China’s global economic footprints and unbalanced bilateral economic ties, diplomacy surrounding the two conflicts, and matters of reputation and prestige.

First, is the asymmetry of the military nature, scale, and scope of the two conflicts, and their geography. A Chinese-U.S. war over Taiwan would be between two global powers with sizable nuclear arsenals that could escalate into a global catastrophe, while the war in Ukraine is not being waged directly between two global powers. The latter is confined to the European theater and carries with it a lower, albeit still significant, risk of military confrontation between Russia and the United States, even though President Joe Biden has drawn a clear red line indicating that Washington will not become directly involved.

In the event of a war between China and the United States, Russia would have to take into account the risk of a global catastrophe, which would probably lead it to a more restrained posture regardless of any temptation to inflict damage on the United States as payback for its support for Ukraine. Moscow's stakes in a Taiwan conflict would be very different from Beijing's stakes in the war in Ukraine.

Second, is the asymmetry between Russia's and China's geographic positions relative to the two conflicts. China's physical security is not directly affected by the war in Ukraine, which takes place entirely in Europe. By contrast, despite its preoccupation with Ukraine as well as its traditional focus on Europe and marginalization of Asia, Russia has an obvious important interest in the security of its territory and assets in the Far East and Eastern Siberia that could be affected in the event of a China-U.S. conflict. What is more, these assets have become even more important because they enable the conduct of the war in Ukraine and provide a hedge in the confrontation with the West.

A military confrontation between China and the United States could spread beyond the immediate vicinity of Taiwan. Given the proximity of the United States and its treaty allies Japan and South Korea to Russia, Russian leaders would be concerned about critically important assets along the Pacific coast, from the sanctuary of the Sea of Okhotsk, which is home to some of Russia's newest ballistic missile submarines and a major portion of its second-strike capability, to the major offshore Sakhalin oil and gas projects, the Vladivostok naval base, the oil export terminal of Kozino, and even the Power of Siberia pipeline.⁵⁹ The proximity of these assets to Alaska, the Aleutian Islands, Japan, and South Korea⁶⁰ means that the risk to them from actions by Washington and/or its allies would be a major concern for



Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev (right) meets with air force pilots while visiting Iturup Island, one of four islands in the disputed chain known as the Kuril Islands in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan, on August 2, 2019. (Photo by Alexander Astafyev/AFP via Getty Images)

Russia's national security establishment. Even if a military confrontation between China and the United States over Taiwan does not escalate into a global catastrophe, more geographically contained scenarios are also fraught with negative consequences for Russia.

Third, is the asymmetry between China's and Russia's global economic footprints and importance to each other. Although Western sanctions on Russia following its all-out attack on Ukraine triggered a significant disruption in global trade, it was rather limited in scope, and its consequences were contained in a relatively short period of time. By contrast, even a limited conflict between Beijing and Washington would result in a much greater upheaval in global trade, with disrupted supply chains and other lasting consequences that will not be just as easily contained.⁶¹

A war over Taiwan would have major adverse economic effects on Russia⁶²—in contrast to China's trade and economic gains from the war in Ukraine.⁶³ China has benefited from Russia's split from European markets as a result of Western sanctions and redirection of its trade on Beijing's terms. Moscow has been able to rely on its superior partner to make up for shortages caused by its own mistakes and being cut off from Western technology. It is highly doubtful that China could continue to serve as the lifeline for Russia's economy and its defense industry in the event of a war over Taiwan. And Russia would be just as unlikely to serve as the alternative source of technology and equipment for China in that case.

Another direct consequence of a war over Taiwan would probably be a disruption of maritime traffic with Russia having to reroute its tanker and liquefied natural gas ship traffic to China or other destinations or being cut off from them altogether. Much would depend on the exact scenario of the military confrontation but, for example, a U.S. naval blockade “to prevent oil shipments from reaching the country” would threaten Russian oil tanker traffic to China.⁶⁴

Fourth, is the asymmetry between China's position on Crimea and the Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine and Russia's position on Taiwan, and the complicated international diplomacy surrounding Taiwan. Moscow's stance always—even during the long years of the Sino-Soviet split—has been that Taiwan is an “inalienable” part of China.⁶⁵ Beijing's position with respect to Crimea and other Ukrainian sovereign territories illegally occupied and annexed by Russia has been somewhat unambiguous. China has not recognized them as part of Russia and has sought to distance itself from Russia and its claims⁶⁶ or to avoid answering questions about the issue, offering vague pronouncements about diplomatic solutions and “the legitimate rights and interests’ of all parties.”⁶⁷ In this, China's position is closer to most other countries' positions which have not recognized Crimea and other occupied parts of Ukraine as part of Russia.

By contrast, only a handful of countries recognize Taiwan as an independent country.⁶⁸ Most of the international community has instead adopted with respect to the status of Taiwan and its relationship to China what is generally referred to as the “One China” policy.⁶⁹ The United States

“acknowledges the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China,”⁷⁰ but has categorically rejected Russia’s claims to Crimea and other occupied parts of Ukraine. The European Union does not recognize Taiwan as an independent country.⁷¹ Any suggestion of linkage or similarity between Crimea and Taiwan is certain to be rejected by Beijing. China’s leaders would consider this as an attempt to diminish the legitimacy of its claim of sovereignty over the island.

Lastly, there is the matter of pride for Beijing. Considering the importance of the Taiwan issue as a matter of personal prestige for Xi Jinping, as well as its utmost importance for the Chinese Communist Party and the country as a whole, in the view of China’s leadership the task of “reunification” must be accomplished without outside help.⁷² Beijing considers Washington’s support for Taiwan interference in its domestic affairs. It would almost certainly consider insulting and humiliating any suggestion that “reunification” requires assistance from Russia, which is widely seen in China as a declining power.⁷³

Chinese strategic planners have been drawing lessons from Russia’s war against Ukraine—particularly the fact that despite its overall superiority in relation to its target, Russia was unprepared and had to turn to its partners for help in an enterprise on which Putin has staked his presidency.⁷⁴ Russia’s embarrassingly poor performance in the early stages of the war, massive losses, and the humiliation of having to ask global pariah North Korea for help are almost certain to reinforce Chinese views of Russia as a declining power and offer critical lessons about mistakes to be avoided in the future.

A war between China and the United States over Taiwan may offer some benefits to Russia if Washington is forced to divert resources from the European theater to the Asia-Pacific one. But there are profound differences between Russian and Chinese overall positions that mean that Moscow would face a complicated cost-benefit analysis and almost certainly exercise extreme caution in formulating its course of action.

The Russian Narrative

The Russian narrative emerging from expert articles in mainstream media, policy journals, and multiple online outlets shows more ambiguity about the “partnership without limits” than the Kremlin’s embrace of Beijing would suggest. It reveals suspicions of China, criticism of the lopsided nature of the relationship, and even discussions about potential threats posed by resentment of Russian territorial gains at the expense of China in the nineteenth century.⁷⁵

Russian experts nonetheless unequivocally follow the government line of recognizing Taiwan as an inalienable part of China. The narrative does not contain even a hint of deviation from that position.



Warships from the Chinese and Russian navies are pictured after a joint naval exercise, Joint Sea 2022, in the East China Sea on December 27, 2022. (Photo by Li Yun/Xinhua via Getty Images.)

Some experts further claim that Russia, as a loyal partner of China, is ready to help in the event of a confrontation with the United States over Taiwan.⁷⁶ In June 2022, the prominent commentator Dmitriy Litovkin published an article under the headline “Russian Sailors Demonstrate Intent to Support the Ally in the Battle for Taiwan.”⁷⁷ According to Litovkin, Russia and China have no agreements about mutual military assistance, and their joint exercises in the Pacific do not threaten third countries, but such exercises are clearly intended to demonstrate to the United States and its allies that U.S. hegemony in the Pacific is “conditional.”

Such views, however, are in a minority. Discussions of the Taiwan contingency rarely appear in Russian policy and academic publications, and when they do appear, they rarely draw clear conclusions but leave many unanswered questions about Russian interests at stake and likely course of action. They leave it up to readers to draw their conclusions about Moscow’s likely course of action in that event. When Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declared in October 2021 that Moscow would support Beijing in its legitimate efforts to reunite with Taiwan, Andrey Kortunov, a prominent foreign policy expert from the RIAC with ties to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, sought to downplay Lavrov’s forward-leaning language.⁷⁸ Kortunov avoided dealing with the question of Russian actions in such a crisis by minimizing the possibility of a military confrontation and wrote that:

it is possible that Russian leaders simply do not believe that if events escalate into a sharp crisis between Beijing and Taipei that the United States will demonstrate the resolve to intervene on behalf of the latter. Without massive American support Taiwan will have to surrender to the PLA [People’s Liberation Army] without firing a single shot—the balance of forces between them is too unequal. That is why to the Kremlin, the risks of a large-scale military conflict in the [western] part of the Pacific Ocean seem relatively low, no matter what apocalyptic scenarios military experts invent.⁷⁹

Another prominent academic Valentin Golovachev expressed similar views in January 2024.⁸⁰ He dismissed as unrealistic then president Tsai Ing-wen's earlier claim that Taiwan would get help from democracies all over the world in the event of a military confrontation with China. A military scenario is undesirable for both sides, Golovachev continued, noting that Tsai's successor, President Lai Ching-te, had declared that he would continue her course of cooperation with China on the basis of equality and mutual respect.

In 2021, two of Russia's leading scholars on China, Vasiliy Kashin and Aleksandr Lukin, offered a wide-ranging overview of security cooperation between Russia and China in the Asia-Pacific theater.⁸¹ According to them, it has resulted in greater "security interdependence" between the two countries in their efforts aimed at countering U.S. influence in the region and globally. China's growing military capabilities, they wrote, developed in large measure through cooperation with Russia, would enable its activist global posture, which in turn would weaken the United States and thus benefit Moscow's interests. And, they continued, while Chinese-Russian military exercises were billed as anti-terrorist drills, "they have obviously targeted a modern state with modern armaments." Similarly, Chinese-Russian anti-missile defense computer simulations and tabletop exercises conducted regularly since 2016 are an example of "practical preparations for a possible conflict with a large foreign power."

However, despite such transparent hints at military collaboration against the United States in possible future contingencies, Kashin and Lukin avoided any references to a potential crisis over Taiwan. This conspicuous omission in an article covering other potential flashpoints—the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea—likely indicates the uncertainty surrounding the Taiwan contingency in Russian planning and the difficulty this issue presents for Russian policymakers.

Similar careful hints well short of a clear statement of intent are contained in the 2020 report on Chinese-Russian relations published jointly by the RIAC and Fudan University as part of the two institutions' annual dialogue.⁸² Similar to Kashin and Lukin, the authors noted that "The military strategic cooperation between Moscow and Beijing is turning from a bilateral component of Russia-China relations into a major geopolitical factor of global significance and the U.S.-China confrontation reinforces the trend." They continued:

Military and political relations between the two countries have reached a level where even in the absence of a formal union, a potential adversary preparing an attack on one has to account for various joint response scenarios. Such strategic certainty will act as a deterrent for any hypothetical adversary and their allies. Russia and China retain their own approaches, which may differ on certain individual matters, yet the two states will remain united in their overall strategic assessment of the world order regarding, among other things, the need to contain the destructive trends in security and economic development that are being stoked by the United States in particular.⁸³

With opposition to the United States as the driver of their new level of strategic cooperation again openly acknowledged, the report's authors concluded that "escalating tensions between Beijing and Washington create new challenges and risks for Moscow that are difficult to predict with any degree of accuracy and almost impossible to prepare for."

Those risks are well understood among Russian experts.⁸⁴ Prominent voices in national security have raised the alarm about the already escalating tensions in the Western Pacific,⁸⁵ even against the backdrop of China and the United States looking for ways to manage their differences.⁸⁶

In April 2024, Aleksey Arbatov, the dean of the Russian strategic studies community, commented⁸⁷ on the United States' recent deployment of land-based intermediate-range ballistic missiles in the Philippines—a first in the Asia-Pacific theater.⁸⁸ According to him, this was only the first step, with more advanced U.S. capabilities on the way. These will be aimed primarily at China but, even if they currently do not pose a threat to Russia, "it is not written on the missiles 'against China' or 'against Russia.'" Arbatov argued that:

their deployment in Japan, South Korea would be a different story. Our entire Far East will be within their range then. And that is why Russia has warned, it will respond to that situation symmetrically, cancelling the unilateral moratorium on deployment of land-based intermediate-range missiles on its territory. . . . In the Far East—it is often forgotten—we are neighbors with the Americans. The deployment of Russian intermediate-range missiles in some parts of the Far East can put U.S. territory within range. Chukotka and Kamchatka are very near Alaska. Alaska is literally crammed with U.S. strategic and other important military installations. . . . Either way, the new round of the arms race in the Asia-Pacific theater will harm U.S. security, not just the security of China and Russia.⁸⁹

In addition to various risks from growing tensions in the Asia-Pacific theater, Russia's discussions about cooperation with China reveal considerable doubts about the quality and practical impact of their joint military exercises. Some publications report favorably the growing number and scale of these exercises, but only in general terms and without delving into their qualitative aspects.⁹⁰ More in-depth analyses point to their shallow or demonstrative nature. For example, in 2019, Aleksandr Khranchikhin, a long-time outspoken critic of the rapprochement with China, described military cooperation as "imitation-propagandistic" relations.⁹¹ He referred to the Russian-Chinese long-range aviation patrols in 2019 as having "no military utility whatsoever" and being "purely political."

Others, like Vasiliy Kashin, take a more nuanced approach, focusing on the strategic effects of military cooperation rather than on its lack of operational and tactical depth. In the event of a U.S. attack on China, he wrote in 2019, even in the absence of a formal alliance and mutual defense

treaty between Russia and China, Washington would have to hedge against the possibility of “Russia joining the war.”⁹² This is a low-cost deterrent for China and Russia against the United States.

Looking ahead, repeated references to ever-closer security cooperation and shared threat assessments centered on the United States raise the question of whether Moscow and Beijing are heading toward an outright military alliance. Russian experts consistently state that this is premature, unnecessary, and possibly even counterproductive from Russia’s and China’s point of view.⁹³

The Chinese Narrative

The Chinese narrative mirrors the Russian one in many respects. Chinese scholars have little enthusiasm for an outright alliance. Zhao Huasheng, a leading expert on Russia who regularly participates in the long-running dialogue between Fudan University and the RIAC, examined the pros and cons of a formal alliance in 2021.⁹⁴ Chinese academics, he wrote, do not consider the question of creating an alliance with Russia to be of “first importance.” He offered the following arguments in favor of one:

- China and Russia have adversarial relations with the United States.
- They are roughly equal in military power so neither would have the upper hand.
- An alliance would be based on shared interests rather than friendship, and therefore trust would not be an issue. Thus, “As long as the countries have common interests, the existence of such an alliance is possible.”

Zhao then listed the arguments against an alliance:

- The strategic partnership already represents a “high level of development of relations,” and its full potential has yet to be realized. An alliance would have little impact on practical cooperation.
- China and Russia “already help each other—to the extent possible—in conflicts . . . with other powers: the Diaoyou (Senkaku) Islands between China and Japan, the military stand-off between China and the United States in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait,

the Russia-Georgia war, the Crimea questions. An alliance would not lead the two sides to pursue an entirely different policy. . . . In other words, by joining in an alliance, the two countries would not substantially change their positions in such situations.”

- As allies, the two countries would have different expectations and demands. As high expectations carry the risk of disappointment and frustration, potentially leading to the “destruction” of relations, an alliance would be a double-edged sword.
- An alliance would limit each country’s freedom of strategic maneuver, which neither wants.
- An alliance is a “military bloc which presupposes a united front in the area of military security and mutual support if one side is attacked. One can say with confidence that neither China nor Russia is ready for it.”

Zhao concluded that:

China and Russia should continue their strategic partnership, fully realize its potential without ruling out the possibility of an alliance. Neither side should limit its strategic choice. If the international situation continues to deteriorate, threats to . . . Russia and China will increase. At some critical moment an alliance may become necessary for PRC and Russia.

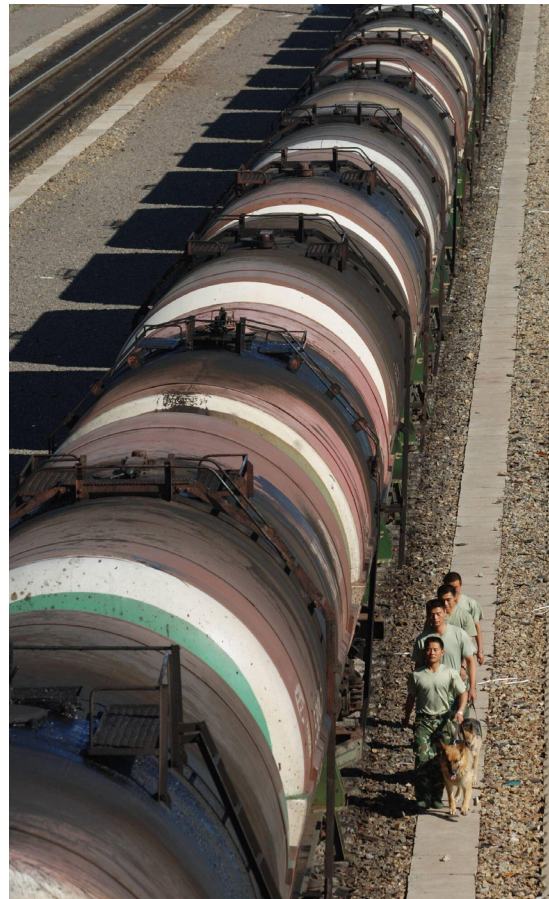
A selective overview of the writings of Chinese experts on relations with Russia suggests that, while they are cool to the idea of an alliance, they broadly appreciate Moscow’s supportive stance with respect to Taiwan, support Russia’s war against Ukraine, and in exchange expect Russia to support China in the event of a conflict over Taiwan, which would likely result in Beijing’s international isolation.⁹⁵

They also appear to have well defined and not overly ambitious expectations of what Russia could do for China in the event of a conflict with the United States. Above all, they recognize Russia’s general contribution to China’s security resulting from the normalization of their relations and the fact that Beijing no longer needs to maintain a very large military presence on the border, as was the case during the Sino-Soviet split. Those forces and the resources to support them are available for other missions.

Moreover, Chinese experts argue that, even though Russia is a strategic partner rather than an ally for China, they share the same adversary in the United States.⁹⁶ In the event of a conflict, Washington could ill afford to ignore Russia’s military presence in the Pacific theater. This presence would act as a force multiplier for China and, “as long as the Russian Pacific Fleet [and] the military forces in the Far Eastern theater made even a slight move or even stood still, the U.S. and Japanese troops would not dare to move south on a large scale.”⁹⁷

Chinese experts expect that in the event of a conflict with the United States over Taiwan, Russia would be the only reliable supplier of two critical inputs into China's war effort: energy and advanced military technology and equipment.⁹⁸ They anticipate that the United States would attempt to impose a naval blockade, try to close the Malacca Strait, and impose an oil embargo on China, in which case the role of Russia "cannot be underestimated."⁹⁹ Zhao Huasheng described its role in such a contingency as "the most important external source of energy that China can conceivably maintain, or even the only external source of oil."¹⁰⁰

Overall, therefore, it appears that the complexities and ambiguities of Russia's calculus in case of a Chinese-U.S. conflict over Taiwan would be accompanied by China's lack of interest of having it as an active partner. Despite high-level assurances that their friendship has no limits, both countries appear to have a clear-eyed understanding of Russia's stake and role should tensions between Washington and Beijing over Taiwan escalate into a full-blown military conflict.



Soldiers patrol along a train carrying Russian crude oil in Manzhouli City, in northern China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, September 13, 2010. (Alamy)

Do Not Count Russia Out

Russian and Chinese experts do not envision any direct role for Russia in the event of a military confrontation between China and the United States over Taiwan, but this does not mean that Russia would be a marginal or irrelevant actor in that contingency. At a minimum, its adversarial relationship with the United States, its proximity to Alaska and U.S. treaty allies Japan and South Korea, its blossoming relationship with North Korea,¹⁰¹ and its economic interests and trade ties with China make Russia a major factor in the strategic context in the Asia-Pacific theater.

The United States' security commitments in Europe, where Russia poses the principal threat to its allies and interests, make Russia integral to any assessment of the U.S.-China correlation of forces in the Pacific. Moscow is uniquely positioned to affect Washington's decisions about the allocation of

its capabilities between the two theaters, which it can do by adjusting its own posture in Europe. A cease-fire and negotiations to end the war in Ukraine would free up U.S. resources—from air defense to airlift to artillery ammunition—to the Asia-Pacific. Conversely, by escalating tensions in Europe along the line of contact with NATO—in addition to waging the war in Ukraine—Russia could put more pressure on the United States. While a U.S.-China war likely would not serve Russian interests because of its disruptive potential, an escalation in tensions would by diverting U.S. attention and resources from the European theater.



Handout photo of a North American Aerospace Defense Command F-22 Raptor flying next to a Russian Tu-95 bomber during an intercept in the Alaskan Air Defense Identification Zone on June 16, 2020. (Alamy)

Beyond the European and Asia-Pacific theaters, Russia's actions, whether out of a desire to help China or driven by opportunism, could serve a mutually useful function by distracting the United States from the Asia-Pacific and forcing it to deal with multiple crises at the same time. For example, Russia could trigger a costly diversion of U.S. resources from Taiwan by provoking a crisis in the Middle East in concert with Iran or Syria.

Russian aircraft have flown missions in international airspace near the coast of Alaska. The North American Aerospace Defense Command

statement on the occasion of one such recent incident described this as occurring “regularly” and as “not seen as a threat.”¹⁰² Russia's Pacific Fleet has also conducted exercises, some with China's navy, that have approached U.S. territory.¹⁰³ Would such deployments, described as nonthreatening in peacetime, be viewed the same way in a crisis, let alone an outright military conflict? And would the Kremlin risk ordering such deployments at a time of dramatically increased tensions? It is impossible to answer these questions with confidence, especially without knowing the other factors likely to bear on Russia's decision-making, such as the state of the war in Ukraine or the NATO-Russia standoff in Europe, the specifics of an unfolding confrontation over Taiwan, and the posture of other actors in the Western Pacific. It appears unlikely that the Kremlin would be willing to engage in such brinkmanship, but it cannot be ruled out.

Even if Russia does not engage in deliberately provocative or hostile posturing, actions it may consider necessary could still prove risky and even threatening to the United States and its allies. For

example, the Russian navy has displayed a neuralgic attitude when it comes to the safety of its bases in Vladivostok. More Russian naval and land-based military facilities are reportedly being planned or built in the disputed Kuril Islands and the Kamchatka Peninsula.¹⁰⁴ In a crisis that Russian analysts claim could involve not only the United States but also Japan, the proximity of these facilities to the latter would heighten Moscow's threat perceptions and necessitate steps that it would consider as proactively defensive but could be seen by others as provocative or escalatory.

Russia's increasingly close relationship with North Korea could provide another trigger of escalation in the region as a result of the existing deep mistrust, lack of established communications, and tendency to proceed on the basis of worst-case assumptions on all sides. One should not assume that they would proceed with caution, transparency, and restraint.

Putting aside the possibility of becoming directly involved in a Chinese-U.S. conflict, intentionally or not, Moscow likely would provide significant assistance to Beijing in the event of one. Russian oil and gas trade with China would be critical to the latter's ability to sustain its war effort. Depending on the state of its defense industry and its requirements in the European theater, Russia could also supply China with weapons and equipment. Other forms of support for China—in addition to assistance with developing its early-warning systems and missile defenses¹⁰⁵—could include intelligence sharing, cyber operations, and access to satellite constellations¹⁰⁶ (although recent reports indicate that the Russian Glonass satellite constellation is inadequate and badly in need of an upgrade, which is likely to be difficult due to Western sanctions¹⁰⁷).

Considering the state and trajectory of Russian-U.S. relations, Russia's assistance to China would likely be free of the concerns about U.S. sanctions that have constrained Chinese assistance to and trade and economic relations with Russia. Still, a Chinese-U.S. conflict could present Moscow with an opportunity to somewhat level the playing field with China and condition some elements of its assistance on concessions from Beijing in other areas, such as more favorable terms of trade, investment, or access to certain technologies, especially since China would not be concerned about the threat of U.S. sanctions at that point.

In all these scenarios, the risk of escalation and unintended consequences would weigh heavily on Russian policymakers. They are highly unlikely to seek direct involvement in a military confrontation with the United States in a theater they see as secondary, which would divert limited resources from Europe and the standoff with NATO. More likely, they would try to exploit the situation to weaken the United States, which they see as the primary adversary, without aggravating the risk of becoming directly involved in the conflict. The crisis would also present the Kremlin with an opportunity to redress a balance that is heavily tilted in favor of Beijing. Consequently, Russia's support for China would most likely be limited to energy deliveries, supplying military hardware, intelligence sharing, and other nonkinetic forms of assistance.

Conclusion

The “friendship without limits” between China and Russia clearly has limits. Beijing’s calibrated support for Moscow since the start of the latter’s all-out war against Ukraine has demonstrated this, and it has been confirmed by the above overview of factors that are likely to influence Russian policy in the event of a confrontation between China and the United States over Taiwan.

This is not to say that the Chinese-Russian relationship is built on shaky foundations or is inherently weak and unsustainable in the long run. To the contrary, it is strong, mutually beneficial, and rests on sound strategic, economic, and political foundations. Its positives far outweigh its tensions or negatives. But it is not an alliance and neither country is interested in transforming their partnership into one.

On balance, China has benefited from Russia’s war against Ukraine, but this is not to say that Russia stands to benefit from a Chinese-U.S. military confrontation. Rather, Moscow benefits from tensions between Beijing and Washington and from the *possibility* of a military confrontation over Taiwan. That possibility helps divert U.S. resources and attention from the European theater. But a war would increase the risks for Russia dramatically. It would carry the risk of a global calamity. Russia’s proximity to the theater of military action and the catastrophic risk associated with it would force a very different cost-benefit calculation on Russian leaders from what they have had to consider in the context of mere Chinese-U.S. tensions.

Russia’s direct intervention in a conflict over Taiwan appears highly unlikely for several other reasons too, because Beijing’s pride and sense of superiority would most likely preclude it from asking for military help to achieve “reunification,” because of the lack of interoperability between Chinese and Russian militaries, and because of the modest Russian conventional military capabilities in the Asia-Pacific theater while the confrontation with NATO is continuing.

China’s measured response to Russia’s war against Ukraine, structured to maximize benefits while minimizing the risk from U.S. sanctions, may well serve as the prototype for Moscow’s assistance to Beijing in the event of a war over Taiwan. That would translate into supplying China with oil and gas, some military hardware, and some nonkinetic military support. Russia would also probably seek to maximize the benefits from this opportunity while minimizing the risks.

This is not to suggest that Russia will not be a factor in the event of a military confrontation over Taiwan. Its long-term adversarial relationship with the United States, its military and naval presence in the Asia-Pacific, and its long-term confrontation and tense military standoff with NATO in

Europe could lead to different scenarios fraught with the risk of a military clash with the United States and/or its allies. The proximity of Russian strategic and economic assets to the United States, Japan, and South Korea carries incalculable risks for all parties involved.

Finally, Russia is primarily a European power. But it is precisely because of its preoccupation with Europe and its perception of the United States as its principal adversary there that it would be a mistake to treat it as a marginal actor in the Asia-Pacific. Its role there cannot and should not be overlooked.

About the Author

Eugene Rumer is a senior fellow and the director of Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program. Prior to joining Carnegie, Rumer was the national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia at the U.S. National Intelligence Council from 2010 to 2014. Earlier, he held research appointments at the National Defense University, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and the RAND Corporation, and served at the State Department and the National Security Council.

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