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A POSSIBLE OMINOUS PARTNERSHIP:

THE CHINA-RUSSIA'S 'FRIENDSHIP WITHOUT LIMITS'

POLICY BRIEF

by Ambassador (Retired) Doru COSTEA

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A Possible Ominous Partnership: The China-*Russia's 'Friendship Without Limits'*

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THE CHINA-RUSSIA'S 'FRIENDSHIP WITHOUT LIMITS'

Ambassador Doru Costea*

Member of the Scientific Council of the New Strategy Center

When future historians will look for the starting point of the collapse of the old international order and the rise of a new world order […] they can begin with February 4, 2022.

Valdai Discussion Club, September 6, 2022

The Ukraine war shows that while the 'no limits' Beijing-Moscow strategic partnership does have limits, it remains threatening.

The United States Institute of Peace, December 15, 2022

Mr. Fu said China was not on Russia's side on the war and that some people "deliberately misinterpret this because there's the so-called 'no limit' friendship or relationship." He added, "'No limit' is nothing but rhetoric."

Fu Cong, Ambassador of the P.R. of China to EU

Interview in The New York Times, April 5, 2023

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Sino-Russian partnership has a record of some 30 years and the war in Ukraine has made it acquire new dimensions, particularly against the backdrop of the concerted courses the two nuclear powers have been following of late. The Chinese are fond of emphasizing that the more complex a bilateral relationship, the more possibilities of contentious issues, yet dialogue and communication make the right tools for overcoming them; in this case, might *hurdles reveal yet another Thucydides'* trap that Russia and China are heading to? The alternative is less reassuring and the already precarious balance of global security seems to be tilting dangerously to a future of instability and fragmented growth, if at all, around the world. The challenges posed by the end-result of the war in Ukraine increase this peril – and so does an effective partnership between China and Russia. An operative dilemma relates to *whether it is possible to take advantage of the limits of the 'friendship without limits' between the two and turn the tide towards a better 'new reality'. After all, the end of* the war shall not end the systemic rivalry.

A GLIMPSE AT HISTORY

A year and more has passed since two of the world's significant powers have officially proclaimed a bilateral relationship that was unconceivable some 50 years ago: by then, China postulated the existence of the three worlds and its victory against the first of them, which only included the hegemonic powers of the USA and the Soviet Union.

'Friendship between the two States has no limits' reads the Joint Statement of the *Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the Int*ernational Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development just 20 days before Russia attacked Ukraine. No wonder that the statement triggered a wave of concerns, the more so as hitherto Russia's intentions to invade Ukraine had been uncertain so that even Ukrainian high-level officials had downplayed Russia's military build-up until late in 2021, to say nothing about Russia's emphatic and repeated denials of any attacks on its neighbor. On his turn, China's top diplomat called the parties to abstain from 'increasing tensions, stoking panic or hyping the war' at the Munich Security Conference some two weeks later the same year.

Unsurprisingly, there had been opposite views about the responsibility of the ominous degradation of an already precarious stability in the area and about the reasons why it could turn into a kinetic conflict. To remind just a couple of remarks in this matter, following the tensions in Donbas in April 2021, the programme director at the Valdai Club considered that 'Zelensky has chosen the wrong timing for an escalation that is

slowly dying out. No one in the United States thought to push Ukraine towards a military-political escalation. Ukraine, like Russia, is now not among the priority issues *of the American administration.'*[1] In contrast to that, Western analysts wrote in September 2021: 'To be sure, this is an opportune time for Russia to raise the stakes in Ukraine. The United States is preoccupied domestically with the COVID-19 *pandemic and a polarized and dysfunctional political environment. Washington's* major foreign policy focus has also shifted squarely to China. Europe is grappling with the resurgent pandemic.'[2]

The overall assessments were looking at Ukraine and Russia through the lens of US, in particular, and of the West, in general, with China lurking somewhere and, perhaps, 'biding her time', as per Deng's piece of advice 40 years before.

The two draft agreements Russia made public on December 17, 2021 seemed to signal the Russian determination to turn the attack hypothesis into reality. Speculations abound about the Chinese request that it be delayed until after the Winter Olympic Games – and they are plausible, if only for China's face-protecting efforts that might have been at their highest, just like in 2008 prior to the Summer Olympics. It seems less speculative that Mr. Putin asked his host, who had told him during his first visit to Moscow 'I have a similar personality to yours,' to stand by him and support his 'special military operation' in Ukraine. The Joint Statement elaborated eloquently on the two powers' shared interpretations and goals of the challenges of the 'New Era' and reaffirmed 'their strong mutual support for the protection of their core interests'. However, neither leader could have anticipated the successive failures of the mighty Russian Army, the valour of the Ukrainians and the consistence of the Western response to the invasion.

President Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin during their talks, Kremlin, Moscow, March 21, 2023, https://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202303/t20230322_11046184.htm

WHAT BRINGS CHINA AND RUSSIA TOGETHER…

It is quite probable that it shall be never known for sure whether president Xi Jinping was actually informed by his guest about the decision to attack Ukraine. An author with the Stimson Centre posited that '*China was, in fact, played'* and the result was a *'Rashomon effect*' even as their relationship *'is clearly motivated by their shared threat* perception about the U.S. But on the other side of the same coin exists distrust and *manipulation between the two.'*[3] The June 2022 removal of a Chinese vice-minister of Foreign Affairs from his position was considered a sign of the Chinese leadership's embarrassment following his public remarks hinting at Russia's advanced notification about the attack and its certain and quick victory on the battlefield.

The well-known record of the Sino-Russian relationship in the post-Cold War era is testimony to their steady and diversifying rise. A cursory look at the evolution of the labels of the partnership between the two countries shows that, in less than two decades (1994 – 2011) the contents was updated and upgraded three times,[4] which would hint to a frantic effort of turning into the best value possible the new circumstances, both domestic and international, after ideological hurdles had been removed. A trend like this needed strong foundations when about two entities of vast size and global ambitions that do not allow for quick and sharp changes of course in the international arena. Such foundations may include components that rely mainly on shared values, outlooks, and practices, to some extent, and their tentative review proves the truly 'special character' of the partnership.

Shared yearning for reviving past glory and in approaching history make both countries look at a past that goes back in time long before their communist age and even beyond the second part of the 19th century. A precise 'Golden Age' of either the tsarist Russia or the emperors' China is missing from both countries' rhetoric and yet, the call to 'Make Russia/China Great Again' comes easily to mind. **Common historical events have favoured a shared 'siege syndrome'** and similarities in the two powers' use of history may issue form the memory of exogenous powers' invasions they experienced in their ancient history: in the 13th century, Mongols attacked the Kievan Rus and the northern Chinese Jin Empire alike, and in modern times so did Japan and Nazi Germany. This syndrome is fuelled by their **belief in the uniqueness and significance** they have in the world, which demand appropriate global acknowledgement and respect.

A widely-circulated joke in the communist era described the future as being certain, in contrast to the past, which was much less so. Indeed, the official interpretations of history seem to be results of a 'Clio therapy'[5] and Putin's notorious July 2021 article is but one testimony of the Russian leader's determination to rewrite history. As for the official approach of history of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the underpinning outlook extolls the achievements of China's 3,000 year-long history and the widely-propagated 'China dream of rejuvenation', while any recollection of events that would stain the CPC's virtues, like the Cultural Revolution and the Tienanmen protests, are

overlooked and condemned as indicators of 'historical nihilism'. The sixth plenary meeting of the 19th CPC Central Committee (November 8-11, 2021) adopted a resolution 'On the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century' that is a telling sample and clear guide to how history is put to work for the interest of the party-state, as per Mr. Xi Jinping's comprehensive explanation.[6]

The sixth plenary session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), chaired by the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, held in Beijing from Nov. 8 to 11, 2021. [Photo/Xinhua]

Moreover, modern historic personalities are commonly revered**:** analysts infer the appeal controversial leaders like Stalin, Mao and others exert on Messrs. Putin and Xi Jinping as disclosed in their decisions and, most of all, in their ways of ruling the respective systems. It is true that Mr. Putin has not resorted to mass purges, yet the physical disposal of representatives of the opposition to his rule is well documented, just like his orientation to revamp the cult of the Great Patriotic War that Brezhnev started by declaring the 9th of May the official Victory Day, in 1965. As for Mr. Xi Jinping, at the 19th congress of the CPC in 2017 he declared: 'The Chinese nation […] has stood up […]' – the almost ad litteram sentence Mao Tse-dong used in September 21, 1949: ' […](W)e are all convinced that our work will go down in the history of mankind, demonstrating that the Chinese people […] have now stood up.'; wide campaigns of mass political education, which are strong reminders of the party's practices under Mao, are on-going and include the use of hi-tech apps as tools of promoting the successes and teachings of the CPC, with the 'Xi Jinping Thought' at the top of the list.[7]

China and Russia share feelings of hostility towards the West. Both states see themselves as targets of malevolent plans concocted by foreign forces, primarily of Western origin, with a view to blocking their rise to a well-deserved place of honour and leadership in the world that was either denied (in China's case) or stolen (in

Russia's); and both are convinced it had been theirs, if not by right, then by merit. Their formal relationship recorded a boost whenever the West did something that was seen as hurting their interests and they adopted close, even outright identical, positions in some of their foreign policy actions: for instance, in the last twenty years, China and Russia were the only Permanent Members of the UN Security Council to jointly veto 14 draft resolutions. Between 2012, when Mr. Putin resumed his presidency, and 2022, Russia vetoed 24 draft resolutions, while China did the same 10 times only; yet, 'in 2001-*10, when Mr Putin's imperial ambitions were more limited and Xi Jinping was* not yet in power, Russia issued only four vetoes; China, two'.[8] They also share the opposition to unipolarity and universality[9] they see as defining features of the current world order; and both are persuaded of the decline of the West in terms of influence, societal cohesion, morals and values.

Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia of the Russian Federation addresses the UN Security Council meeting on Maintenance of peace and security of Ukraine. UN Photo/Laura Jarriel https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1129102

China and Russia strongly emphasize national sovereignty and specificity in defence of their identities. They consider themselves as products of historical processes that are particular to them only and see their societies as civilizational states; to some degree, this puts them above other entities, be they national or international. This outlook also encourages the selective observance, if at all, of the international law, as clearly demonstrated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's program of building artificial islands in the South China Sea; at home, concepts and values like democracy and human rights are given interpretations that are at odds with their arguably universal understanding elsewhere, therefore creating a 'definition gap'[10]. This factor joins other arguments for qualifying both powers as revisionist and, more often, aggressive when about the world order, their different modi operandi notwithstanding (see infra). At the same time, unlike during the Cold War years, neither China, nor Russia are openly following the line of exporting their governing systems –

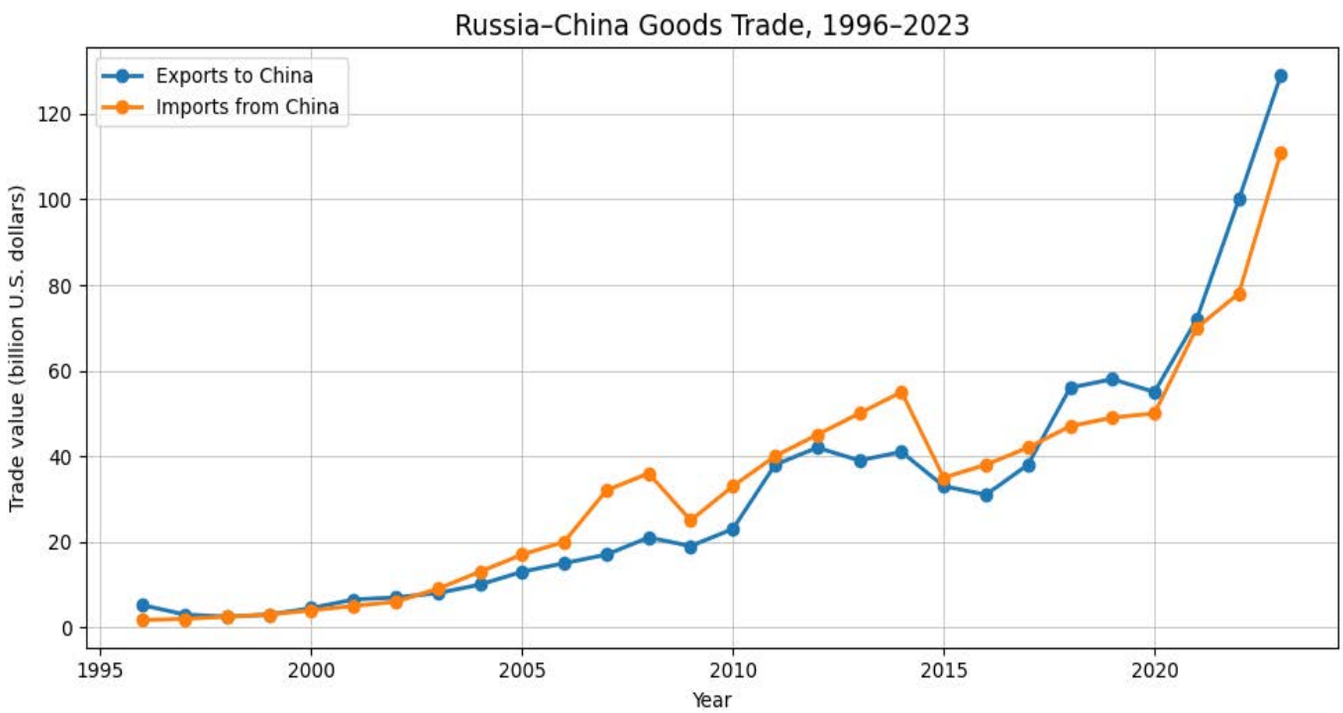
although the Chinese rhetoric is heavily focused on drawing everybody's attention to the unquestionable successes of the country (read: the CPC) in various fields even as it 'blazes a trail for the world to follow', as Mr. Xi Jinping's report to the 19th Congress of the CPC stated.

Western-based organizations are viewed suspiciously. Both states see NATO as an entity under the strong, barely contested leadership of the US and, consequently, voicing and promoting American interests only. This has not hindered either power from attempting to open separate dialogue patterns with the Alliance; however, later development in this direction were unequal for reasons that were partly conceptual and partly pragmatic. As NATO reviewed its concept to include global dimensions, China's attitude developed to interpreting this approach as aggressive and menacing to its 'core interests' particularly in the South China Sea and Taiwan, while Russia's interpretation of NATO's eastward enlargement is well known. Similar attitudes are taken against the EU, mainly after the organization and most of its Member States hardened their positions against blatant, even brutal, human rights violations in China and Russia, alongside with adopting and enforcing economic sanctions. Likewise, Chinese, and Russian accusations of European subversive plans of exporting 'colour revolutions' are familiar items in their media and official statements; this issue is quite visible in Russia's and China's shared apprehension of Ukraine's determination to join the democracies of EU and NATO and reveals the two regimes' apprehension of said 'export of revolutions' targeting their countries themselves.

Domestic politics evolve considerably along similar lines. Governance realities and practices are less shared, although they are close, even identical sometimes to degrees that would warrant questions about mutually inspiring experiences. Besides the heavy upper-hand the state has on various segments of the respective economies, both regimes implement nation-wide policies like silencing the opposition; persistently work to secure centralized administrative control all over the country; support actual non-separation of powers within the state; selectively enforce anti-corruption decisions; and, in an increasingly digitalized world, they both set up internet-like networks that encourage the 'splinter-net' phenomenon, including by promoting related international regulations based on 'national sovereignty'. In relation to this last domain, one may notice a real 'beauty-contest'-like trend: at the second edition of the World Internet Conference that China sets up annually in Wuzhen since 2014, Mr. Xi launched 'four principles and a five-point proposal on global development and governance of the Internet', with respect on sovereignty in cyberspace high among them; moreover, in 2019, the Organizing Committee of the conference released the concept document entitled 'Jointly Build a Community with a Shared Future in *Cyberspace'*.[11] Russia followed suit in March 2023, by tabling a draft cyber treaty at the UN. As for the war in Ukraine, the information control and manipulation in both states is exposed in an official bilateral agreement signed in July 2021 that 'makes [it] clear that cooperating on news coverage and narratives is a big goal for both governments.'[12]

Nationalism is an increasingly strong link between domestic rhetoric and foreign policy in both cases and is steadily used to fuel actions aiming at securing public obedience at home and achievement of 'core interests' abroad, to use a Chinese term. This is arguably a part of the Weltanschauung of the century and, even if the first signs of nationalist thinking and actions in Russia and China came to surface more or less simultaneously by the second part of the 19th century, like they did elsewhere in the world, nowadays it is about nuclear powers that resort to this tool in consequential ways that bode ill for global security and peace.

Other factors may be added to the inventory of factors pulling China and Russia together – e.g., the increasingly tight mutual economic interests as revealed by the latest bilateral figures that show Russia-China trade turnover grew by 29.3% to record-breaking $190 bln in 2022, while Russia's positive balance mounted to $38 bln, that is three times more than in 2021.[13] The economic cooperation has widened beyond the essential sector of energy and raw materials, to reach Russia becoming the third largest-market using the Chinese currency in July 2022; and military interaction, including, but not limited to, defence industrial cooperation on sensitive technology;[14] should this trend continue, it might lead to China increasingly seeing Russia as an 'economic appendage'.[15] The rule of thumb reads that sound economic foundations are crucially important for a meaningful alliance; it ignores, however, the balance of contributions to those foundations and, in this case, the effects of increasing dependencies play a role that could make the difference between the two partners.



Source: Chart generated with by the author, based on International Monetary Fund (IMF) trade data on Russia–China goods trade, 1996–2023.

The spectacular evolution of the bilateral trade is somewhat dimmed by its substance that seem to close a cycle that started several centuries ago. By mid-17th century, a Central Asia very active merchant made quite a fortune due to 'the familiar exchange of Siberian furs for Chinese textiles; put another way, of Russian raw materials for the *sophisticated products of Chinese industry.'*[16] One's imagination is not hard put to find an equivalent pattern half a millennium later.

…AND WHAT KEEPS CHINA AND RUSSIA APART

'Alliances are relics of the past' reads a mantra in China's foreign policy that can be traced back to the 1990s, when the country embraced the 'multidimensional diplomacy' after the less-than positive experience it had been subject to during the ideological alliance with the USSR.[17] Later, Mr. Xi Jinping proclaimed that 'China is the first country to make partnership-building a principle guiding state-to-state relations.'[18] This underlying interpretation of alliances is clearly articulated in China's view of NATO. As for Russia, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it promptly established a military alliance by founding the Collective Security Treaty Organization in 1992. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (est. 2002), a 'scion' of the 'Shanghai Five' (est. 1996) has a military and security component, but its constitution limits the respective activities to fighting 'the Three Evils': terrorism, extremism, separatism, and there is no NATO Article 5-like provision in its purview.

As stated above, **the modus operandi of the two powers differs** when about promoting their views on the international order. Indeed, Russia is prone to resorting to force, mostly military and, of late, economic tools, while China had proved to be much less willing to participate to ongoing kinetic conflicts: the times when China's 'popular support' was offered to North Korea are long gone, while the Vietnamese adventure was of a totally different nature.[19] This does not imply that China would shy away from resorting to military means when about 'defending China's core interests', as plainly evident in the Taiwan dossier; all in all, China favours less obvious means and ways, particularly in the soft- and sharp-power category; however, sometimes China resorts to economic 'punishments' that are not as relevant as they may appear.[20]

In the case of the war in Ukraine, **a significant difference relates to the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons**. To some degree, this doctrinal difference might seem shallow, since both support the resort to these weapons for defensive purposes only; however, Russia's repeated threats of using them has been linked to the probability of picturing some Ukrainian oblasts as Russian lands once annexed, so that an attack against them would be interpreted as an attack on the Russian Federation proper. A sobering view states the 'nuclear weapons in the war in Ukraine are not remarkable in their absence, but rather in how they frame the conflict. By deterring the greater intervention of NATO, the Russian nuclear arsenal has helped prolong the war and *make any conventional resolution to the fighting more difficult to attain'*.[21] Delaying the

end of the war does not seem to be in China's interest, although it is reasonable to consider that 'keeping the US (and the West) busy' with aiding Ukraine is welcomed in Zhongnanhai; but there are other reasons that would make China less enthusiastic in supporting this probable course of action (see below).

The nuclear component of the Ukrainian crisis has revealed what may turn to be a most serious development within the P-5 group: many a learned commentary has been made about the weakening control of the P-5 over actual and aspiring nuclear powers alike, even if their official positions on the latter joining the 'Club' are virtually identical. The most disquieting decision Russia announced on February 21, 2023 on suspending its participation to the New START treaty 'was the latest sign that the decades-long era of formal arms control may be dying';[22] at the same time, it alleviated the pressure that had been hitherto exerted on China to join this nuclear arms control arrangement. Actually, Mr. Xi Jinping had already announced China's determination to 'establish a strong system of strategic deterrence' on October 16, 2022, at the 20th CPC Congress;[23] and this made the US Department of Defense note in its China Military Report 6 weeks later: [China] 'has clearly stated its ambition to strengthen its "strategic deterrent," and has continued to accelerate the modernization, diversification and expansion of its nuclear forces, as well as the development of its space and counterspace capabilities.'[24] Several reports had also been published on steps taken by China to upgrade and expand its nuclear capabilities.[25]

Another possible major difference is the **huge gap between the powers and influence the Chinese and Russian ruling political parties** have on the respective systems: the statute of Communist Party of China is by no means comparable to what the United Russia wields in this respect. As stated above, the CPC is keen on resorting to ideology on ever widening and deepening scales: on April 1, 2023, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the party held 'its fourth group study session on the study and implementation of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese *Characteristics for a New Era'*, and a new campaign of 'mass political education' was launched some two years after the previous one.[26]

The scope and strength of relations with the West is largely different. The above-mentioned shared hostility to the West coexists with stark differences between the two powers' records of their interaction with that part of the world. In China's case, it started with the momentous Sino-American dialogues in the early 1970s and further grew to epic proportions with Deng Xiaoping's 'Reform and Opening Up' approach, and China's joining the WTO by the end of 2001. In contrast to that, in Russia's case neither the famous *détente*, nor the first decade of the post-USSR era match the width and depth of China's cooperation with the West. Unlike Russia, China is at pains to promote closer relations with the EU, in general, and with some of its major Member States in particular, including by praising European endeavours to achieve the 'strategic autonomy' that it deems a signal to the opportunity of weakening the transatlantic relationship; in addressing the Ukrainian war, China also seems to single out the EU as a partner for dialogue;[27] to what extent these positions are sustainable is yet to be seen, although some

echoes may be heard among Western circles for different reasons and goals.

China's reluctance to get involved in armed conflicts, as mentioned above, is further sustained by the over $1 trillion China spent on the Belt and Road Initiative in less than a decade. It is also true that, prior to Russia's attack on Ukraine, China's relations with the West had been somehow mirroring the downturn of Russia's, albeit for partly different reasons. On the other hand, it is a matter of widespread knowledge that the West itself displays a rather heterogeneous image when about its relationships with either of the two powers in terms both quantitative, like trade and mutual investments, and qualitative, like interdependency in various fields.[28] Against this backdrop, a yet unclear question bears on the degree of freedom of movement parties enjoy when considering, and taking, consequential decisions about 'decoupling' from the respective relations. Mrs. Von der Leyen's recent call for 'de-risking' EU's relations with China was welcomed in the US; on the other hand, US statistics read that total *'US goods and services imports from China in 2022 were $564 billion; in 2018 they were only $558 billion'*.[29]

Asymmetrical global policy goals may be identified: despite the revisionist, even revanchist flavour of both the Chinese and Russian orientations in this field, rather diverging ensuing ambitions are revealed in official stances that need to be considered. Russia seems to be focused primarily on Europe, with not-so-hidden goals of restoring something close to the bipolar US-Russia world order of yore and, not quite unlikely, to send a subtle warning to China that what lies west of Russia is Moscow's sphere of influence; should this come to pass, the Putin-defined Eurasian space would counterbalance the Chinese influence on the rest of Asia. For its part, China's aims are higher and go further in terms of attracting to its side the 'global South' in order to secure majorities wherever global topics are put to vote; in so doing, China constantly uses the 'power of example' that is unrivalled by Russia's development-related performance, which is mediocre, to say the least. In this respect, a decade later since its launch, the 'Belt and Road Initiative' remains the most ambitious and heavily funded global project, its many setbacks and sheer ailing of late notwithstanding.

The overall image of China's targets and objectives at various stages of implementation **seem to be more often than not on a collision course with Russia's deeply entrenched interests** in terms of control, presence and, most of all, influence therein. The lacklustre record of the achievements of Mr. Putin's Eurasian Economic Union is likely met with China's condescending attitude when committing to work together with Russia for 'building the Greater Eurasian Partnership in parallel and in coordination with the Belt and *Road'*, as the 4th of February Joint Statement reads; against this background, it is noteworthy that the recent Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation mentions Eurasia no less than 24 times.

Clashing interests elsewhere may be found. Central Asia, East and Central Europe, Africa and the Middle East are among the most visible areas where China and Russia's

partnership are facing headwinds for strategic reasons[30] insofar as economics do include longer-term goals and control on various flows. In this respect, a 'Thucydides' Trap'-like' phenomenon might be taking shape, particularly in fragile, yet not less important areas for both powers, with the caveat that the 'state-of-play' of the 'cooperation' between China and Russia in many of these areas is increasingly complex and dynamic to the verge of turning into open competition and rivalry. Suffice to focus here on Central Asia where, in the words of a respected scholar of the area: 'For Beijing, the longer the Russians remain mired in a conflict with the West, the more *space it creates for them to push into Russia's traditional sphere of influence.* This is why Chinese President Xi Jinping is posturing as a peacemaker in the Ukraine war, even as he is slated to host the leaders of all five Central Asian nations next month in *what Beijing has described as the "first China-Central Asia summit."* […] Just as it is in the interest of the Europeans to not be so dependent on Russia for energy, China is wary of relying too heavily on Russian territory for access to European markets.'[31] And, of course, one may hardly ignore, though, other possible hot-spots in this 'friendship without limits', where India and Vietnam come to mind.

China's approach to global institutions is also different form Russia's. China takes pride in asserting its commitment to the UN since its very beginning, even if that China was not the same as this China; and its rhetoric is heavy on sustaining the UN Charter and its imbued multilateralism. At the same time, China has embarked on 'updating' the multilateral landscape by ways of setting up institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), with a capital reaching $US 100 bln., while the BRICS-founded New Development Bank (NDB) relies on half that amount. Moreover, back in July 2017, at the Hamburg G-20 meeting, Mr. Putin was adamant in his rejection of any state joining the NDB that was involved in implementing sanctions on Russia – whereas no such conditions are applied to states aiming at AIIB membership. One would also remember that, on January 24 2018, China's XINHUA Agency announced that the International Commercial Expert Committee was officially established to be 'a dispute settlement mechanism which connects litigation, mediation and arbitration […] on the basis of China's current judiciary, arbitration and mediation agencies, and by absorbing and integrating legal service resources home and abroad' – a service that brought a legal 'innovation' under the aegis of the Belt and Road Initiative.[32] Recently, a Preparatory Office of the International Organization for Mediation (IOMed) was inaugurated in Hong-Kong that, in the words China's minister of foreign affairs, 'will be *the world's first intergovernmental legal organization dedicated to resolving* international disputes through mediation. It will transcend the limit of litigation and arbitration in which one side wins and the other loses, and it aims to realize win-win cooperation between disputing parties, which is of high significance for promoting world peace, security, and development as well as stability of the international order'.[33]

One would note that China has put forward what may be considered **basic parts of a global outlook** that are embodied in the concept defining the goal of China's foreign policy: '*to build a community of shared future for mankind'*. Documents like

the 'Global Security Initiative' and the 'Global Development Initiative' find virtually no correspondent in Russia's approach of global policies, the new March 2023 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation notwithstanding.

Copies of the Chinese government's new concept paper on the Global Security Initiative.
Source: chinaglobalsouth.com

NOT THAT FRIENDLY MUTUAL PERCEPTIONS

Views that are found beyond top-level statements of eternal friendship and understanding point to undercurrents of mutual mistrust and annoyance between the two powers. There are Chinese historical grievances deeply rooted in the memory of the 'unequal treaties' that costed China, inter alia, the loss of some 600,000 square kms in the north-east, including Vladivostok: a recent official Chinese ministerial document ordered that Vladivostok be henceforth named Haishenwai, the Sakhalin Island be called Kuyedao and the Stanovoy Range be renamed the Outer Xing'an Range in the respective maps.[34] By chance, or by design, this decision was taken 60 years after the first reference to the 'unequal nature of the 19th century treaties' in an editorial published by The People's Daily on March 8, 1963; later that year, on September 27, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 'formally brought up the *'unequal treaties' as a subject that had to be addressed'*.[35]

On the other hand, there are Russian doubts about the feasibility of China's attempt to persuade others, in particular the US, to build a new type of international relations based on mutual benefits.[36] Moreover, the Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) penned a nuanced analysis of how China is seen in Russia: 'Real China, in contrast to the imaginary one, is a vast and rather complex country, with its numerous and varied national interests, aspirations and priorities. Some happen to coincide with those of Russia, some overlap only partially, while

*others diverge altogether. Therefore, it would be hardly fair to define Beijing's foreign policy as "pro-" or "anti-Russian," since they ha*ve always been and will primarily be *"pro-Chinese."* [37]

The war in Ukraine triggered some doubts with Chinese intellectuals about the soundness of reasons that made Russia (read: Mr. Putin) launch the 'special military operation': one author was critical about the Russian president's 'double negation' of the Ukrainian state as created by Lenin and of the Ukrainian national identity: 'the complexity of national identity does not negate the fact that for most people, once an identity is formed, it has a certai*n stability, and to say that a nation is an 'imaginary community' is not the same as calling it an 'illusory community.' Although Russia and* Ukraine have linguistic and religious similarities, this cannot be used to deny Ukraine's independent status as a n*ation'.*[38] This message was contradicted by the Chinese ambassador to France who stated that ex-Soviet states 'do not have an effective status' by the international law 'because there is no international accord to turn into effect their status as sovereign states'.[39]

Another writer stated: *Putin's own rhetoric, more than any 'Western slander,' proves* that there is no realistic justification for Russia's words and deeds in Crimea, because *Putin can simply use the excuse of 'possible' future bloodsh*ed to employ military force to dismember a country! It's like breaking a man's hand in advance on the pretext that *he 'might' stab you in the future, or forcibly breaking up a couple on the pretext that they 'might' engage in future domestic violence. If r*easons like this stand up, then what kind of invasion or conquest is not justified?'[40]

Some Chinese considered that Russia is suffering from 'the New Empire Syndrome': '*Contemporary Russia's conflicts* with neighbouring countries are obviously not about defending certain beliefs and Putin does not believe in socialism, but this does not reduce the danger of Russian expansionism. Russia now recalls the Tsarist period, when the Tsar's Great Russian chauvinism made its neighbours tremble and "fear Russia," and they have become more pro-Western and conservative from the point of view of national security. The world landscape may once again be divided between two camps, defined by their position towards Russia.'[41]

Views like these may not make the majority in the Chinese public opinion, which is rather difficult to gauge because of the questionably reliable opinion-polls in the country; however, it is worth remembering the huge numbers of Chinese internet users and the strict control the state censorship enforces on the respective postings, so that it seems reasonable to surmise the existence of discreet nods from the authorities concerned for such texts to be posted online. Equally telling is how Chinese scholars and members of renowned think-tanks and research institutes like the Beijing Renmin University, Shanghai Fudan University, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences interpret the war and its significance for China's 'major power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics' and its relationship with US and Russia, which they see as the real parties of the conflict. At a debate by the end of December 2022, views were put forward that quoted Confucius' Analects to characterize Russia: 'the will is there, but

not the strength' and emphasized that 'Russia can't come up with an attractive economic model, development model, or political model' that can replace 'decaying [Western] values and models. *Therefore, the form now is to fight back'*; other participants reckoned that Russia's security environment shall deteriorate more than it had been before the war began, irrespective of how the war ends, even if the whole of Ukraine is occupied; and the further weakening of Russia is unavoidable, even if the war is to continue for a longer time.[42]

Wang Yi delivers a keynote speech at the 59th Munich Security Conference in Germany / The Commissioner's Office of China's Foreign Ministry in the Hong Kong.
Source: https://hk.ocmfa.gov.cn/eng/xjpzxzywshd/202302/t20230220_11027395.htm

CHINA'S 'POSITION PAPER' AND RUSSIA

The first point of China's document that was hardly coincidentally released when the world was commemorating the end of the first year of what the official Chinese position calls 'the Ukraine crisis' might be seen as pointing to yet another different principled stance between China and Russia when about the international law; however, emphasizing that 'The sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all countries must be effectively upheld' seems out of touch with the reality of Russia's unmitigated aggression against a state that it had pledged to be under its own security guarantees. At the same time, the sentence clearly plays in favour of China's adamant rejection of any hint, no matter how feeble, at a possible reconsideration of greater autonomy, and least of all independence, of territories like Tibet and Xinjiang – to say nothing about Taiwan and several islands in the South China Sea that China never tires of reminding the world that they are part and parcel of its territory.

There were hardly any unknown pronouncements in China's position paper: as far back as in March 2022, in a videoconference with Messrs. Macron and Scholz, Mr. Xi announced 'four musts', presumably with a view to deal with developments in Ukraine: 'China maintains that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries must be respected, the purposes and principles of the UN Charter must be fully observed, the legitimate security concerns of all countries must be taken seriously, and all efforts that are conducive to the peaceful settlement of the crisis must be supported.'[43]

Although a thorough text-analysis of the position paper is beyond the scope of this brief, a preliminary assessment might highlight the particular Chinese approach of the Ukrainian war as a step of turning the Mr. Xi's 'Global Security Initiative' into value almost one year after he first announced it at the Boao Forum on April 21, 2022. It is also a further piece of evidence regarding China's 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics' that was proclaimed in the early years of Mr. Xi's first mandate; if anything, it supports the consistency of China's outlook and action on its 'Long March' to the country's rejuvenation and sends a strong message, both at home and abroad, of China's determination to continue this quest, as also proved by the publication of the Global Security Initiative Concept Paper, dated February 21, 2023.[44]

Hypotheses multiply on whether the call to negotiations would imply China's getting really involved in them at all. Calls have been heard that Beijing's contribution may be two-pronged: first, by really refraining from supplying Russia with military support; and second, by exerting some pressures on Russia so that 'it stops this aggression prior *to negotiations'*, like Mr. Macron was quoted as saying when announcing his visit to Beijing in April.[45] At the same time, while Mr. Zelensky declared his readiness to talk with Mr. Xi Jinping about China's document in a first dialogue between them since the beginning of the war, just a couple of days after the 'position paper' was released Russia flatly stated 'for now, we don't see any of the conditions that are needed to *bring this whole story towards peace'*.[46] Later on, a Chinese expert noted: *'It's not that we won't make contact, but the question is what would they talk about? '* said Wang Yiwei, the director of the Institute of International Affairs at Renmin University in Beij*ing. He added of Mr. Zelensky: '*His hope for a call was that China would condemn *Russia's invasion and call for Russia to withdraw its troops. That's not realistic.'*[47]

Be it as it may, what is worth keeping in mind is that, under the guise of the position paper, China and Mr. Xi have once again come forward with an initiative on a topical issue of great import for the world at a time when addressing the war in Ukraine is heavy on the 'hard power' side and rather inconclusive when about diplomatic efforts to put an end to it. China's staunch support for 'peaceful development' makes it logical that Mr. Xi should step up and take the mantle of the peacemaker – a move that is somehow surprising, if one remembers the traditional risk-averse attitude China has been embracing for decades; however, it is also natural, since it falls within the Chinese narrative on 'the new type of relationship among major countries, which is part of its 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics' as mentioned above. China 'stood up' indeed: it considered that the time of 'hiding its capabilities and biding

its time' is over and the favourable circumstances to its own global goals are met. The latest move in this direction is the instrumental role China played in the Saudi Arabia and Iran resuming their diplomatic relationship.

There may be yet another significance in China's initiative in terms of its geopolitical interests: oddly enough, both the Western narrative and the Chinese position approach of the future development of the war include negative terms. The Western message focuses on 'Russia should not be allowed to win, and Ukraine should not lose', while China's interests are that Russia should neither be utterly defeated, nor completely victorious – and nor should Ukraine be 'lost' to the benefit of the Western side. Then, geopolitics mingle with geoeconomics in 'The Day After': 'the West *continues to prop up Ukraine. If China doesn't intervene, Russia will soon fail, and this* is where China has the most to lose – not only by potentially losing the bulwark of the Putin regime, but also by losing the economic opportunity to rebuild Ukraine and *instead bleeding out China's pre*-war economic investment in the country. […] In any *mediation, China would seek to preserve Putin's regime,* gain the greatest economic *opportunities for Ukraine's reconstruction, and enhance China's leadership position in* the international arena.'[48]

A 'win-win' situation seems to take shape, since China, and the world, are fully aware that no matter how long the war, it is rather difficult to conceive it shall be put an end to without negotiations; and irrespective of the winning side, talks about post-war reconstruction shall follow. Therefore, China's economic and financial power shall probably be called upon either by a victorious, yet weakened Russia, or by a triumphant West, albeit reluctantly, with a view to contributing to the reconstruction of the Ukrainian infrastructure, industry, and other sectors; China also eyes the opportunity of flooding both the Ukrainian and Russian markets with its consumer goods. Likewise, it stands to reason that China would welcome the chance of expanding its 'help' to Russia in order to alleviate its economic woes, and consequently strengthen the Sino-Russian partnership: The Pre-2030 Development Plan on Priorities in China-Russia Economic Cooperation that was signed by Messrs. Xi and Putin in Moscow on March 21, 2023, is self-explanatory in this respect. However, in an article on the website of China Global Television Network (CGTN), the Director General of RIAC highlighted several challenges to this alluring prospect: the feeble share of the respective national currencies in the bilateral trade, excluding energy, which 'makes many Chinese companies exporting to Russia vulnerable to *secondary U.S. sanctions'*; the surge of the trade turn-over that was 'largely due to the specific conjuncture of the world energy markets' – but 'this conjuncture will not last forever. In fact, the odds are that over time oil and gas prices will go down, in part due to the green transition of the Chinese economy.' And the analysis concludes: 'it might be even more important to gradually move away from basic trade relations to deeper and more comprehensive industrial cooperation. The challenge for Russia is to become an organic part of Chinese technological and production chains, including those in high-tech areas (for example, in the aircraft industry). This goal will not be easy to achieve, as it will require a much deeper knowledge of the Chinese production

culture than Russia has today. However, this is an absolutely necessary task if the two nations are committed to maintaining their strategic partnership for a long-term future.'[49]

The significance of China's position paper further reveals its geopolitical concerns as it considers its relationship with the other two 'sides' of the 'global triangle'. As mentioned elsewhere in this paper, keeping the West (read U.S.) busy in Europe makes it difficult for it to be more active in the Pacific, particularly in South-East Asia, even if latest developments in the Philippines, for instance, look less encouraging to China's plans in the Taiwan file. At the same time, it is not necessarily preposterous to imagine that 'Russia may find itself in an increasingly desperate situation as Ukraine prepares a spring counter-offensive. As a result, for the Kremlin, an escalation in the Pacific cou*ld become a practical necessity'*.[50]

CONCLUSION: DEALING WITH AN UNBALANCED PARTNERSHIP

The end-result of the interaction of the partnership's various factors is perceived in the West as defining China a competitor, while Russia is seen as a threat. Notwithstanding that, both are 'clear and present', albeit in different segments of the global relationships the West is promoting; and they have a visible impact on the quest of rearranging the world after the combined deep shocks of the pandemic and the increasing urgency of effectively and efficiently addressing well-known global challenges. In an American official's words, "I kind of look at Russia as the hurricane. It comes in fast and hard. China, on the other hand, is climate change: long, slow, pervasive."[51] At the same time, the range of unintended consequences of Mr. Putin's invasion of Ukraine both increase the challenges the Western democratic institutions have been facing for more than a decade and provide for obvious opportunities to improve and update their work by implementing steps, some overdue, while others need to be adequately creative so as to fit the circumstances of the 'new reality' that is taking shape.

The war in Ukraine and, most of all, its aftermath, make it compulsory to boost intellectual and analytic resources with a view to designing the guiderails of this new reality. Time is of the essence: the pressures of the horrific tragedies forced upon the Ukrainians and the accumulating hardships other peoples have to endure in the neighbouring countries and thousands of kilometres away are in no need of further elaboration. The tyranny of calendars, military and political, adds to the reasons that enhance the importance of proactive thinking and action: 2024 has become an unusually important year since elections are scheduled in the EU (parliamentary) and in the US and Russia (presidential); and even 2023 in on record for similar consequential events elsewhere in Europe.

Predicting the future of the 'friendship without limits', like any other prediction, is a daunting challenge. The most obvious and perilous is this partnership ending up with a full-fledged alliance between China and Russia, even if the very concept of the alliance may need to change; at the same time, '*if Russia's military and economic*

power continues to be degraded, will the country end up an economic satellite of the *PRC, a kind of 'Eurasian Iran', just as isolated internationally, but far more* dangerous?*'*.[52] On the other hand, the present-day partnership, its limits notwithstanding, is considered to be 'a dangerous convergence*'*, as 'China and Russia *may be in a marriage of convenience, but it is a very effective one'.*[53]

However, coping with the 'new reality' Russia created with its aggression in Ukraine calls for several things to be taken for certain: first, after the war, both Russia and China shall remain where they are; and second, after the war these two powers may look like at least as different from each other as they are now. These overwhelmingly obvious remarks are to be joined by noting the similar endeavours Russia, China and the West are embarking upon with a view to redefining the ways and means of securing their interests, as all of them have already started to capitalize on the lessons and warnings of the upheavals of the global relationship network, including the war in Ukraine. Moreover, this 'global triangle' needs to figure what is to be done because of yet another certainty that shall define the post-war period: the end of the war shall not be the end of the systemic rivalry either. Like Stephen Kotkin said: 'You have to win on the battlefield, but how do you then win the peace as well? What would winning the peace look like? We know you can win on the battlefield and lose the peace, right? '[54]

Before the prospects of peace come around, there is the present danger of the war expanding even more in areas like the Black Sea, following Russia' aggressive promotion of expanding the operation areas of its navy so that Economic Exclusion Zones, including Romania's, come increasingly under threat. NATO and Allies have been busily acting to counter this threat; however, the peril has not subsided and more steps are needed in this direction, as the debate that was co-organized by the New Strategy Centre and the Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), USA revealed when it addressed "The Battle for the Black Sea: Mapping the Center of Gravity for the Eastern Flank of NATO", in the margins of the latest Munich Security Conference.[55]

So far, the China-Russia partnership has been less active, if at all, in the Black Sea region – quite the contrary, when considering China's attempts to secure access to Georgian ports, which were reportedly blocked by Russian countermeasures. A silent, yet not less vigorous competition is underway in adjacent areas to the Black Sea – particularly in the Balkans; and the same applies to Türkiye, Greece and Cyprus that need to be reckoned with in order to complete the famed 'arch of crises' that make the East and South flanks of NATO a truly consequential segment for the European and global security. As mentioned above, the tormented region of the Middle East is yet another competition arena, and not only between Russia and China, particularly with the unseemly race of the two to curry favours of Iran and other autocracies in the area.

The longer-time challenge resides in managing the 'systemic rivalry' between the West and the China-Russia duo as a part of the 'democracy versus autocracy' contest. In, and by, themselves, the roots of this contest may be traced back in the ancient history of human societies, perhaps even before the State itself became mature and fully functional as an organizational pattern of said societies. However, *'There is such a*

thing as too much history. […] (t)he fetishistic obsession with curated versions of nations and empires in the past can blind one to the present and what really matters: people living today and how they and their families wish to live.'[56] Elaborating on this line is beyond the purview of this paper, yet it is practical and, under the circumstances of the war in Ukraine, operational too as it might provide new and even out-of-the-box arguments for developing initiatives and actions that would prevent the whole world from falling into a most probable chaotic 'new reality'.

The reasoning underpinning this assertion is supported by the need to find an answer as appropriate as possible to the question whether the structural differences between these two systems render the conflict between them unavoidable. When Graham Allison wrote about Thucydides' trap, he ended up highlighting 'Why War Is Not Inevitable' and introduced 'Twelve Clues for Peace'[57]; it is true, however, that he less comprehensively addressed Russia's case, nor did he elaborate extensively on the China-Russia partnership.

It is also true that the effects of this partnership on the overall world security and stability turned to a much more threating course following the war in Ukraine. As a 'new reality' was heralded on February 4 and actually born on February 24, 2022, its contents are still evolving and their dynamic hardly facilitates the answer to the dilemma of choosing between 'what is right and what is easy'; while values, moral and otherwise, are clear, initiatives and actions to successfully resolve this major crisis, of which the Sino-Russian partnership is an inseparable part, definitely need more creative efforts.

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