

# Russia and China: On the Same Side in Cold War 2.0

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**The joint announcement by the presidents of China and Russia following their meeting on February 4, 2022 sharpens the conclusion that unlike in the first incarnation of the Cold War, where for the most part these two countries pursued different policies toward the United States, in the new version of this war they form a united front against it. The ideological dimension that separated them has been replaced by a set of fairly similar national-political economic and military interests. In the first round of the Cold War, when the United States faced the Soviet Union, it was easy for Israel to choose a side. But in the new round, the process of taking decisions regarding relations with China, Russia, and even the United States is more complex.**

When Xi Jinping visited Russia in 2019 he called his host Vladimir Putin “my best friend and colleague.” Putin reciprocated with his support for China in its drive to leverage the Winter Olympics (February 4-20, 2022) for political achievements: Putin was the most senior statesman to attend the opening ceremony. However, the agenda for the two countries includes issues of far greater significance than Olympic medals.

Putin’s current top priority is the Ukrainian issue, which for him is a critical test of Russia’s international status. The 2014 invasion of Ukraine was a declaration of intent, and the current massive deployment of Russian troops along the Ukrainian border is designed to achieve a number of objectives. Putin has often repeated his statement that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical disaster of the twentieth century. To Putin, the trend among countries of the former Soviet Union to join NATO, and Ukraine’s desire to follow the majority of East European countries that were part of the Soviet bloc and are now NATO members, perpetuates that “geopolitical disaster.”

The ultimatum given to the United States and its allies to halt NATO’s eastward expansion and remove the strategic weapon systems positioned in Eastern Europe is clear: accept our claims or face the consequences of

the refusal. Almost any response by those on the defensive that is not an absolute rejection of this demand, accompanied by the massive deployment of troops and equipment, could be deemed an achievement by Putin. The very fact of the United States' readiness to enter a process of providing written clarifications is tantamount to yielding to the ultimatum. It shows that Putin has wagered that the West will seek to reach a compromise (such as a declaration of willingness to consult with countries in the Euro-Asiatic region about bringing Ukraine into NATO) that he can present as a victory and a historical correction, albeit partial, of the results of the Soviet Union's collapse.

Even if the Ukrainian file is (temporarily) closed, relations between Moscow and Washington will remain tense: the unraveling of agreements on ballistic missiles, the suspicion that Russia is still interfering in US elections, mutual accusations of espionage, and the continued enforcement of American sanctions on Russia remain in the foreground. A thaw in the tensions surrounding these controversial issues as well as the supply of natural gas and its route from Russia to Western Europe will require an extended diplomatic effort.

The Chinese branch of the emerging front against the United States likewise has claims primarily against Washington. In the US global strategy, China is the number one enemy, with Russia in second place. For China, the issue of Taiwan heads its demands, and attempts by Western governments or parliaments to approach Taiwan in a way that challenges Beijing's "one China" policy encounter aggressive responses, such as the penetration of warplanes into Taiwan's air raid warning space. The Pacific Ocean and Southeast Asia are the arenas for China's struggle against the United States and its partners, just as Eastern Europe and Euro-Asia are the arena for Russia's struggle against the United States and its partners. Indeed, for Beijing, the issue is the mirror image of the Ukrainian issue for Russia. Ukraine was torn from the parent country during the move from one system of government to another in the capital of the former empire. Thus any attempt by the West to see Taiwan or Ukraine as fully independent countries will be met by opposition and the threat of military force.

In the first round of the Cold War, China and Russia were not always on the same side of the barricade. Apart from their different interpretations of the nature of communism, they competed for influence in central Asia and disagreed over the long border between them; perhaps the tension between them included the envy of a declining power toward a rising power. Beyond the challenge posed by the United States as it strives to maintain its spheres of influence and block efforts by China and Russia to expand their international influence, in the era of Cold War 2.0 the latter two countries are also united by their strategic economic interests.

Because of its demographic size, and above all because of President Xi's determination to achieve full equality of power with the United States, China has become a "guzzler" of energy resources. In 2020 China consumed 3.4 billion tons of Mtone (a term that equates consumption of all sources of perishable sources of energy to a quantity of oil) – more than the United States and India combined, countries that are now in second and third place on the list of the world's leading energy consumers. Unlike the United States, China must import more than half the energy resources it needs, and Russia, as the world's leading exporter of oil and natural gas, is a convenient supplier, free of political and economic constraints such as the American sanctions or political conflict with Australia, the largest supplier of gas (a third of all imports) to China. Indeed, while in China, Putin announced a new agreement to sell 10 billion cubic meters (BCM) of natural gas per annum for 30 years, increasing the quantity of natural gas from Russia to China to 48 BCM. Presumably China pays significantly less for the natural gas from Russia than what European consumers pay. Even if the giant consumers and exporters of coal and oil such as China and Russia fail to meet the international timetable for reductions in polluting sources of energy, they have an interest in exploiting them at an accelerated rate. The price of oil recently increased to almost \$100 per barrel (the price of gas is influenced by the price of oil), making it easier for Putin to handle domestic economic problems and show flexibility over oil and gas prices in deals with his economic giant of a neighbor, China.

Thus the joint announcement issued after the meeting between Xi and Putin on February 2, while not specifying concrete moves, did reflect the emerging alliance and the challenge it poses for the United States. In effect, it reflects an ideological clash, no less than a competition for spheres of influence and markets. China and Russia present themselves as supporters of global order and governance based on a more just division of global power. In their opinion, only a minority of countries support a unilateral approach and the use of force to solve problems, involving interference in the internal affairs of other countries and causing harm to their rights and interests. They are calling for a world order based on multi-polarity and with the UN/ Security Council playing a central role.

According to Russia and China, democracy is a universal right and not the monopoly of specific countries. It means participation by citizens in their own governments, with the aim of improving social welfare. However, they do not see a uniform model of democracy, suitable for all countries. Nations can choose different ways to implement and realize their value systems and their historical and cultural heritage. In the words of the joint statement: "It is only to the people to decide whether their country is a Democratic State."

Both Putin and Xi stress their cooperation in the Euro-Asian space common to Russia and China through the Belt and Road Initiative and the Euro-Asian Economic Union (EAEU), as well as the increased cooperation between them in the Arctic region, which is becoming a focus of Chinese interest, in part because the North Sea route shortens the way to West European markets. In addition, in the announcement Russia expressed its support for the "one China" principle, affirming that Taiwan is indisputably part of China. Moreover, both countries oppose the creation of closed camps and blocs, and in particular, the expansion of NATO, and call on the organization to abandon its Cold War ideology.

Discussion of all the topics mentioned in the joint statement, which included reference to climate issues, the global economy, space, the internet, global trade, and disarmament, is beyond the scope of this article.

Important here is its presentation of an orderly doctrine shared by Russia and China of how to deal with the United States on a long, varied frontier. The shared ideological-strategic platform does not resolve the disputes between them, but it challenges the US and its partners by its broad definition of Chinese and Russian claims that go beyond the issues of Taiwan and Ukraine. At the same time, the current cooperation between China and Russia might be temporary, designed to apply further pressure on the United States in the context of the Ukrainian crisis.

An escalation of version 2.0 of the Cold War struggle will make it hard for Israel to find the middle ground to balance its political, economic, and security relations with the US on one side and China and Russia on the other side. In Washington there is much understanding for the dialogue between Jerusalem and Moscow, particularly on the Syrian issue, but the administration is less tolerant of economic cooperation between China and Israel. By standing alongside Iran, China does not make it easier to deal with the dilemmas. The burden of deciding rests on the Israeli government, but Washington can also relieve the consequences of Israeli decisions, for example by providing aid to deal with the possible broader economic outcomes.

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