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“Reverse Kissinger” or Status Quo: What Trump 2.0 Means for the China-Russia Relationship



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Could the American-Russian rapprochement initiated by the Trump administration put an end to the alliance between Moscow and Beijing?

Russia and China have established a new type of relationship that is neither a “strategic alliance” nor a simple “contingency agreement.” Initiated by Moscow from the start in the late 1990s, the “Turn to the East” or “Pivot to Asia” was accelerated by President Vladimir Putin with the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 and completed with the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Russia’s exclusion from European markets forced it to redirect its exports toward Asia, especially China. In 2024, trade between China and Russia [reached \\$244.8 billion](#), an all-time high. Chinese exports to the Russian market are mainly industrial products with high added value while Russian exports to China are mainly raw materials and energy.

China and Russia's excellent trade and political relations are reinforced by a common detestation of the supremacy of the U.S. and Western liberal "values." Furthermore, the close relationship between Putin and Xi Jinping has resulted in around forty meetings and countless phone exchanges. Their bilateral diplomatic cooperation, along with multilateral and regional ties, like in the UN, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or BRICS, is unrivaled.

This multifaceted relationship is complemented by the geostrategic and economic importance that each attributes to each other, along with robust security cooperation. Both regimes prioritize ensuring stability and fighting against the ["Three Evils" \(separatism, terrorism, extremism\)](#), particularly in Central Asia. With Russia providing strategic depth to its north and west, China can concentrate on tensions surrounding Taiwan and the South China Sea. Finally, economically, the energy supplies necessary for China's development are protected from any interruption resulting from an international crisis, unlike those relying on sea routes.

However, Russian-Chinese friendship is not "limitless," as the two leaders like to proclaim. It is marked by historical distrust based on the Chinese memory of the annexation by Russia of 1 million square kilometers of territory during the "century of humiliation." It is also undermined by economic imbalances and Russia's dependence on the Chinese market, particularly for the sale of its energy products.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led to the strengthening of bilateral relations while accentuating the aforementioned challenges. In March 2023, China and Russia [strongly reaffirmed their friendship](#) during Xi's visit to Moscow, just after the start of his [unprecedented third term](#). For the Chinese leader, it was a question of defying the West by visiting Putin despite his international isolation, the great difficulties that his army was experiencing on the Ukrainian front, and the [arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court](#).

On the commercial front, trade between China and Russia [increased by 32.7% between 2022 and 2023](#). However, this progression [slowed down significantly between 2023 and 2024 to stand at 2.9%](#). Beijing wants to diversify its supplies of energy materials by developing its relations with other producing countries and regions (e.g. Myanmar, Central Asia, the Middle East). This is why China is reluctant to build the "Power of Siberia 2" gas pipeline, which could double Russian gas deliveries via the "Power of Siberia 1" gas pipeline.

Russia hoped that Beijing could replace the European market for its natural gas, but the limited capacities of the "Power of Siberia 1" gas pipeline only allowed it to deliver half of the total sales it had made in Europe. Western sanctions and the accelerated ["yuanization" of trade](#) place Russia in a position of near dependence on China. All these elements reinforce the asymmetry of economic and commercial relations and transform Moscow into Beijing's junior partner.

Even in Central Asia, Russia's traditional zone of influence, China is strengthening its position economically, notably through the Belt and Road Initiative, and increasingly in the security domain, while Russia's influence is significantly weakening.

On the political level, pragmatism prevails on the Ukrainian issue. Beijing has never condemned Russian aggression while it simultaneously does not recognize the annexation of Crimea or the four oblasts of Donbas. The “[peace plan](#)” put forward by China on Feb. 24, 2023, is in no way a negotiation plan offering both parties concrete solutions and a timetable with precise stages, but a catalog of sometimes contradictory generalities. It does not harm Russia’s positions or its war efforts in any way, but gives the impression that China “remains active.”

At the same time, Beijing indirectly supports Moscow by buying its energy products and delivering non-lethal and dual-use equipment, allowing Russia to stock up on technology essential to its war effort. Chinese support for the Russian war effort is therefore measured. While keeping Moscow afloat, it aims to ensure that Washington remains mobilized in Europe at the expense of strengthening its presence in East Asia.

The prospect of a reversal of alliances – the [so-called “Reverse Kissinger”](#) – initiated by the Trump administration for the benefit of Moscow and the implicit attempt to break the Russia-China bloc seems for the moment to arouse confusion in Beijing. The Chinese are unsure whether Trump’s continual ranting and promises will still be valid in four years, or even in two if the Republicans lose the majority in Congress. This sudden rapprochement with Putin risks being poorly received by the American public, where [85% of Americans remain hostile](#) to the Russian dictator.

The signals given so far by the Trump administration appear inconsistent. The Rubio tendency, very anti-Chinese, seems to be opposed by the Vance/Musk tendency, more ideological. In addition, Musk has strong economic interests in China, with [his two gigantic Tesla factories installed in Shanghai](#).

On the other hand, the association between Moscow and Beijing remains solid, with Putin hastening to reassure Xi on Feb. 24, 2025, on the phone. This call was followed on Feb. 28 by Secretary of the Russian Security Council [Serguei Shoigu’s visit to Beijing](#), where he met with Foreign Minister Wang Yi and was received by Xi. Despite Trump’s efforts, it remains highly likely that Beijing will continue to follow its pro-Russian policy despite the risks it brings and potential resentment within the Chinese population.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author.



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