

THE FUTURE OF RUSSIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PERSPECTIVES IN THE USA, EU, AND CHINA

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Introduction

The onset of the large-scale Russo-Ukrainian war marked a bifurcation point in the relations between the West and Russia. The rapid occupation of Ukraine, as conceived by the Kremlin, was intended to serve as a prologue to a new redistribution of spheres of influence in Eastern Europe between Moscow and Washington. However, the United States rejected the Kremlin's "proposals" for a radical overhaul of the European continent's security system, and the Russian army faced determined resistance from the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the Ukrainian state and society.

For the current U.S. administration, the fateful step by the Russian president meant the collapse of hopes for the possibility of constructive dialogue with Moscow. In response to aggression against Ukraine, nuclear and energy blackmail by the U.S. and its NATO allies, Washington initiated a program to provide the Armed Forces of Ukraine with weapons and military equipment, directed additional investments towards strengthening the defense capabilities of the countries on the "eastern flank" of the Alliance. At the same time, the White House continued to grapple with the issues of controlling Russia's nuclear arsenal and localizing military actions to prevent NATO involvement in a conflict with Moscow. Consequently, the United States maintains several channels of communication with the Kremlin.

For the EU, the Russo-Ukrainian war has become the most significant security challenge since the Maastricht Treaty. The crisis in continental security architecture has led to a reevaluation of strategic perspectives on the role of armed forces and the European defense industry. However, the EU lacks tools for effective economic pressure on Russia. Against the backdrop of the 2024-2025 election campaigns, there is a challenge to enhance informational influence on European audiences regarding pro-Russian agendas, around which Eurosceptic political forces may unite.

The West has demonstrated an unexpected level of consolidation and support for Ukraine, catching the leadership of the Russian Federation off guard. However, the protracted nature of the conflict has posed a challenge to the stable functioning of the international anti-Putin coalition. In this context, the main challenge is the rise of skeptical attitudes towards Ukraine's prospects for success and the West's strategy in countering the Kremlin over the past two years.

China views Russia as an extremely important strategic partner, with the significance of cooperation increasing after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and amid the sharpening strategic competition between China and the United States. In these conditions, the importance of cooperation with Moscow for Beijing is determined by several factors. Firstly, as a partner and influential international player (including Russia's membership in the UN Security Council) for joint resistance against the West. Secondly, China sees Russia as a source of economically cheaper and logistically accessible energy resources essential for the Chinese economy. Thirdly, Russia is valuable to China in the context of realizing plans to capture Taiwan, both in terms of energy resource and food supply (given the potential disruption of supplies to China from the Middle East and Latin America) and as a means of diverting some of Japan and South Korea's forces from potential involvement in the conflict on the side of the U.S. through the presence of a permanent Russian threat in the region. Additionally, Russia's creation and maintenance of a constant military threat to NATO potentially diminishes Europe's role in assisting the U.S. and Taiwan in the event of a crisis in the Taiwan Strait.

The Future of Relations with Russia – U.S. Perspective

Strategic Stability: Parallel Track of U.S.-Russia Relations

The United States prioritizes maintaining dialogue in the sphere of strategic stability regarding the Putin regime. It is worth recalling that on the eve of the attack on Ukraine, the Russian leadership linked the issue of mutual abandonment of deploying intermediate and short-range ground-based missiles to the West's compliance with Kremlin demands regarding a new division of influence zones in Eastern Europe (the so-called security guarantees from the U.S. and NATO). Thus, Moscow's envisioned reboot of the strategic security system involves restoring the status quo in Russia's relations with the Alliance as it stood at the end of the Cold War. Currently, there is no basis to assume that the Kremlin is ready to reconsider its positions, considering Putin's desire to alter the strategic course of the campaign in Ukraine and impose its own peace terms on the West.

In response, the U.S. leadership has initiated a series of contacts with the Russian government to neutralize Moscow's attempts to influence Western societies through nuclear blackmail and speculation. In the fall of 2022, Moscow limited the rhetoric of top officials on the topic of

nuclear response due to "Western interference". However, the effect proved short-lived. Already in February 2023, Russia suspended its participation in the New START Treaty (SNV-3). On May 25th in Minsk, an agreement was signed on the placement of Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons in Belarus. The next signal was an article published in June by Kremlin-affiliated political scientist Sergey Karaganov, emphasizing the necessity of a nuclear strike on one of the European countries to "warn" the West¹. It is noteworthy that Putin's close circle includes advocates for resuming nuclear tests². For example, the president of the Kurchatov Institute National Research Center, Mikhail Kovalchuk, brother of one of the officials closest to the Russian president, Yuri Kovalchuk, publicly supports such an initiative³.

Nevertheless, despite the evident stagnation of the arms control system, nuclear disarmament, and non-proliferation, the United States intends to continue adhering to the preservation of the mutual constraint regime. This is evidenced by the position articulated by Sullivan in his speech at the annual meeting of the Arms Control Association in Washington on June 2, 2023: "Instead of waiting for the resolution of all our bilateral differences, the United States is ready to involve Russia in managing nuclear risks and develop frameworks for arms control after 2026 (i.e., after the expiration of New START)"⁴.

It is noteworthy that the White House and the U.S. State Department cautiously assessed the Kremlin's latest move when Russia withdrew its ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and conducted coordinated maneuvers of strategic nuclear forces, practicing tasks for a massive nuclear strike in October 2023.

At the same time, the United States prioritizes involving China in the arms control process, as, according to U.S. military estimates, Beijing is expected to have 1,500 nuclear warheads by 2035, bringing its arsenal closer to the potential of the U.S. and Russia⁵. Therefore, Washington prefers to preserve the remnants of the current system of limitations and control of U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals until the foundation for a three-party treaty architecture involving China is established.

¹ A difficult but necessary decision, URL: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/tyazhkie-no-neobhodimoe-reshenie/>

² The Soviet Union conducted its last nuclear weapons test in 1990. The Russian Federation has not officially tested nuclear weapons.

³ The head of the Kurchatov Institute has proposed resuming nuclear tests. URL:

<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/28/09/2023/651592209a794705a0236a7d>

⁴ Russia to Consider U.S. Arms Control Proposal, URL: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-07/news/russia-consider-us-arms-control-proposal>

⁵ The Federation of American Scientists (FAS) assesses Russia's nuclear potential at 5,900 warheads and China's at 400. URL: <https://www.saneuschinapolicy.org/nuclear-weapons-and-arms-control>

The potential trajectory of nuclear developments in Russia and China is outlined in a report from the bipartisan commission in the U.S. Congress, presented in October of the current year⁶.

The authors argue that from the perspective of U.S. national interests and security, the current situation has degraded compared to the peak of the confrontation with the Soviet Union: "The United States is on the verge of facing not one but two adversaries equal in nuclear potential, each seeking to change the international status quo by force if necessary—a situation that the United States did not expect and is not prepared for"⁷.

In particular, the report notes that "the goal of American strategy should include effective containment and defeat of both Russian and Chinese aggression in Europe and Asia using conventional weapons. If the United States, its allies, and partners do not have sufficient conventional arsenals to achieve this goal, the American strategy must be adjusted towards strengthening the role of nuclear weapons"⁸, according to the report's authors.

With the Trump administration in power, an increase in spending on the modernization of nuclear capabilities can be expected. This may occur at the expense of funds directed towards supporting the security of NATO allies in Europe and Ukraine. If the White House remains under Democratic control, in the medium term, the U.S. is likely to invest in the network of alliances and regional partnerships. Within this paradigm, Moscow or Beijing's aggression may be contained at the regional level without affecting NATO territory or directly the U.S.

The Russian-Ukrainian war factor in the 2024 U.S. presidential elections

The results of the U.S. presidential elections will have a decisive impact on the future development of Russian-American relations.

Social surveys indicate that the focus of the American voter is primarily on domestic issues. Key concerns include inflation, access to medical services, control, the opioid crisis, abortions, climate change, and more. Only slightly less than half of the respondents (about 44%) consider it "very important" for candidates to discuss foreign aid issues⁹. According to Ipsos data, 45% of respondents believe that the U.S. should not be concerned about Ukraine's problems. This position is held by 35% of Democrats and 54% of Republicans¹⁰. Therefore,

⁶ Among the authors of the document are: Medelyn Criden, former deputy head of the U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration; Rose Gettemuller, former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State and NATO Secretary-General; Frank Miller, former senior member of the U.S. National Security Council (during the time of George W. Bush Jr.); Marshall Billingsley, former special envoy of U.S. President Donald Trump for arms control.

⁷ America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States". URL: <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ 25% of Americans believe that the United States does not provide sufficient support to Ukraine – survey, URL: <https://www.holosameryky.com/a/opytuvannia-pidtrymka-ukraiiny-amerykantsi/7339235.html>

¹⁰ Ipsos Poll: 2024 Presidential Election, URL: <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-12/Reuters%20Ipsos%20Large%20Sample%20Survey%20%236%20Topline%2012%2013%202023.pdf>

the war in Ukraine will not have a decisive impact on the course of the electoral race, except in scenarios predicting a rise in direct threats of military conflict between the U.S. and Russia.

In the perspective of 2024, the possibility of bringing both sides to negotiations based on parity is quite elusive. Therefore, from an electoral standpoint, the most optimal path for the White House is to ensure support for the Armed Forces of Ukraine at a level sufficient to maintain the front line and exhaust Russia's military resources. Significant progress in favor of Ukraine can only occur with the achievement of technological superiority and a substantial increase in the means to target the rear areas of occupying forces. However, providing the Ukrainian army with the necessary quantity of high-tech American weapons (especially aviation and missiles) requires a significant increase in military expenditure for the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which, according to sociology, is an unpopular decision among the majority of American voters. Additionally, there are objective factors such as technological limitations in the production of the required quantity of ammunition in Western countries.

Therefore, the White House has not consistently pursued an informational policy to explain the impact of the situation in Ukraine on global security and the geostrategic interests of the U.S., fearing the formation of political dependence on the unpredictable development of events on the fronts of the Russian-Ukrainian war. However, due to the unsuccessful advance of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the summer-autumn campaign, the Republican Trumpist wing, to which moderate circles of the party are tilting as the elections approach, has intercepted the informational initiative regarding Ukraine. The latter tends to portray support for Kyiv as an overly burdensome and disadvantageous adventure for the U.S., with Democrats lacking a clear idea of a "strategy for victory in Ukraine"¹¹.

The complexity of justifying a "victory plan" from Washington's perspective is due to the fact that Ukraine's territorial gains do not automatically mean the end of the war or the military-political collapse of the Putin regime. Based on past military failures, the Kremlin will intensify nuclear blackmail, and in the event of internal destabilization in Russia (the precedent of the Wagner PMC coup), harmful speculations about control over Russian nuclear arsenals arise in terms of the prospects for Biden's re-election. Clearly, the White House is not interested in the emergence of such information narratives on the eve of the elections, as they would highlight the shortcomings of the White House's strategy regarding "conflict management".

¹¹ Speaker Johnson: Ukraine funding depends on 'transformative change' to border security, URL: <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/4342873-johnson-ukraine-funding-border-security/>

The future of relations with Russia – the EU perspective

EU: consolidation challenges amid conflict with the Kremlin

The geographic proximity to the theater of operations and significant security risks in the event of an expansion of the war's geography prompted the EU to consolidate. For the first time, the European Union provided military support to a country at war by supplying lethal weapons. By the end of 2023, EU member states had committed over 27 billion euros in military support for Kyiv¹², and more than 34,000 Ukrainian military personnel underwent training in EU countries. Brussels successfully coordinated joint procurement of ammunition, and the European Commission allocated additional funds from the EU budget to support the European defense industry.

However, currently, the accumulated resources in Brussels for restraining Russia are insufficient. In the fall, when a crisis emerged in the U.S. Congress and the Ukrainian offensive shifted with Russia's initiative, the disparity between the U.S. and the EU in arming Ukraine became apparent. In the short term, the EU is unable to replace U.S. assistance, as evidenced by its inability to deliver the "promised" 1 million pieces of ammunition for the Ukrainian Armed Forces by March 2024, pledged in February 2022. Considering the instability of ruling political coalitions in many EU countries, the potential for a sharp increase in defense spending in 2024-2025 is unlikely.

At the same time, this situation has strengthened the belief among political elites in EU countries that European strategic autonomy or strategic responsibility is impossible without a strong European defense industry¹³.

A pan-European indicator of the shift in perception of Russia is the National Security Strategy of Germany, presented on June 14, 2023. One of the key theses of the document is formulated as follows: "Today's Russia is the greatest threat to peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic space in the near future"¹⁴. However, while Berlin maintains confident leadership among EU countries in providing assistance to Ukraine, Germany's defense planning does not correspond to the risks posed by the deployment of Russia's military-industrial base. Chancellor Scholz's announced extensive modernization of the Bundeswehr at the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with a projected budget exceeding 100 billion euros, is currently in its infancy. According to the German Minister of Defense, "By the end of 2023, about two-thirds

¹² The EU has provided over 27 billion euros in military support to Kyiv. URL: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-ato/3786171-es-uze-nadav-ukraini-vijskovu-dopomogu-na-27-milardiv-borrel.html>

¹³ Council conclusions on implementing the EU Global Strategy in the area of Security and Defence , URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/22459/eugs-conclusions-st14149en16.pdf>

¹⁴ Integrated Security for Germany. National Security Strategy, URL: <https://www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/%D0%9D%D0%B0%D1%86%D1%96%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%B3%D1%96%D1%8F-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%B7%D0%BF%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B8-UK.pdf>

of the special fund will be directed to specific projects"¹⁵. For example, the authors of an analytical note from the German Council on Foreign Relations believe that after the end of intensive combat operations in Ukraine, the Moscow regime may need only 6-10 years to restore its armed forces¹⁶. However, such a timeframe is viewed as self-complacency by the German expert community. Ukrainian military experts are convinced that with technological support from China, Russia has the capability to ramp up military production much faster¹⁷.

The Risk of Pro-Russian Populism in EU Countries

The need for sustained support has shown that the EU remains divided in assessing the nature of the threat posed by Kremlin's assertive revisionism. The primary challenge in the context of a consolidated EU policy towards Russia is the rise of Euroscepticism, which incorporates pro-Russian sentiments into its agenda. Over the next electoral cycles, populist parties may achieve political victories in several European countries. The upcoming European Parliament elections in June 2024 present a potential opportunity for Eurosceptic forces to advocate for a return to a "pragmatic" policy towards Russia and, consequently, the lifting of sanctions. At the national level, electoral campaigns in 2024 in several EU countries will feature parties and politicians known for their pro-Russian positions, with significant chances of obtaining convincing results¹⁸. While Eurosceptics are unable to shift the EU's support for Ukraine, their campaigns raise doubts about Ukraine's European future and the correctness of the course chosen by EU leaders.

Therefore, the coming years will be characterized by an increase in Russia's information attacks on European audiences. Local right- and left-radical political forces will continue to be Moscow's allies in disinformation operations, often borrowing certain narrative constructs from Kremlin's anti-Western propaganda.

However, EU consolidation is still possible based on a clear articulation of the threats from Russia. The public demand for such an agenda remains consistently high. According to surveys by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), concerns about divergences and conflicts within the European Union have significantly increased since the beginning of

¹⁵ The Minister of Defense of Germany believes that war in Europe is possible. URL: <https://www.holosameryky.com/a/pistorius-viyna-v-evropi-mozhlyva/7332761.html>

¹⁶ Dr. C. Mölling, T.Schütz, Preventing the Next War, URL: <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/preventing-next-war-edina-iii>

¹⁷ The German intelligence is mistaken: how long Russia can recover for a new war and what Ukraine should do. URL: <https://apostrophe.ua/ua/news/society/2023-12-04/nemetskaya-razvedka-oshibaetsya-za-skolko-rf-smojet-vosstanovitsya-dlya-novoy-vovnyi-i-hto-delat-ukraine/309693>

¹⁸ In 2024: local elections for the Landtag of Saxony (strong positions held by Alternative for Germany), presidential elections in Slovakia (the favorite being Peter Pellegrini, an ally of Ukraine's military assistance opponent, Prime Minister Robert Fico), presidential and parliamentary elections in Croatia (growing support for the incumbent president Zoran Milanovic, known for his Ukraine-skeptical statements), parliamentary elections in Austria (the far-right Freedom Party driving Austria towards becoming a country that may impede the next stages of Ukraine-EU membership negotiations). In 2025, the spread of pro-Russian narratives is possible within the Federal elections for the Bundestag in Germany, as well as parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic (potential comeback for Andrej Babis).

the war, reaching 80% in Poland and 71% in Latvia. Societies in Germany (60%) and France (55%) are also troubled by this issue, although the difference in the level of attention underscores the disparity between Eastern and Western European states in perceiving the level of danger¹⁹.

Sanctions against Russia: How the practice of selective application undermines the economic pressure tool on Russia

As of the beginning of 2022, the EU was the main trade and economic partner of Russia, so there were high expectations of severing economic ties with Moscow. By the end of the nine months of 2023, Russia's exports to Europe had decreased from \$216.7 billion to \$65.3 billion, a 70% reduction. This was due to a significant decrease in the share of Russian energy resources, precious metals, and fertilizers in the EU's imports. Oil supply decreased by 2%, gas by 13%, coal to zero, metals by half, and fertilizers by a third²⁰. Russia's energy blackmail during the summer and fall of 2022 had the opposite effect – it provided an impetus for the final elimination of dependence on Russian energy carriers. However, the EU still leaves loopholes for certain categories of "critically important" Russian raw material imports (a total of 34 positions, according to Investigate Europe²¹), which cannot be replaced due to costliness, scarcity, or require more time. These trade operations brought the Kremlin 13.7 billion euros.

There are no restrictions on "Rosatom" in the 12th sanction package of the European Union. Rosatom will build two new reactors at the Paks nuclear power plant by 2030-2031. In 2023, up to 50% of Russian LNG exports to the European Union, which has not been sanctioned yet, brought about \$12 billion to the Russian budget.

By the end of the first nine months of 2023, the total import of goods from Europe had fallen by less than 10% and amounted to \$59.2 billion²². Thus, European businesses are not prepared to shut down operations in Russia and view the current wartime situation as a temporary disruption that will end with the restoration of economic ties after the conclusion of the hot phase of confrontation.

The results of the embargo on Russian oil, which came into effect on December 5, 2022, are deemed unsatisfactory. In October, over 99% of maritime deliveries of Russian oil were sold

¹⁹ Spirit of ambition: The Ukraine war and European defence integration, URL: <https://ecfr.eu/article/spirit-of-ambition-the-ukraine-war-and-european-defence-integration/>

²⁰ The Federal Customs Service (FTS) disclosed the volume of Russia's foreign trade in 2023. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/14/11/2023/65532b479a79471209aab87e?from=copy>

²¹ Russia: Europe imports €13 billion of 'critical' metals in sanctions blindspot <https://www.investigate-europe.eu/posts/russia-sanctions-europe-critical-raw-materials-imports>

²² In the Federal Customs Service the main trading partners of Russia for the year 2022 were named. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/economics/articles/2023/01/18/959445-v-fts-nazvali-osnovnih-torgovih-partnerov>

at a price exceeding the oil cap set by the G7 countries at \$60 per barrel. The average cost of a barrel of Russian-exported oil in October was \$79.4²³.

Thus, the EU has proven incapable of excluding Russia from the energy chain. Efforts to balance the price for the end consumer indicate that in the coming years, European countries will not be able to completely abandon Russian raw materials.

Despite the sanctions, Russia has adapted its economy to the prolonged war by redirecting the export of energy carriers to Asian markets and parallel importing, which mitigates the deficit of microelectronics necessary for military-industrial complex production. Moscow also plans to increase shipments of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to the international market, including to EU countries.

As part of sanctions containment, the European Commission intends to systematically increase pressure on countries re-exporting non-sanctioned goods to Russia in the coming years. At the same time, recent strategic partnership agreements signed by the EU and several countries, such as Chile or Kazakhstan²⁴, aim to demonstrate that the EU can provide support (through investments and support for local industry) to countries wishing to reduce or diversify their dependence on China or Russia simultaneously.

In Eastern European countries, policies are implemented through the Eastern Partnership and the proposal for candidate status for EU membership. In Central Asian region, through the so-called connectivity policy (development of EU and partner ties) as an alternative to the region's links with China or Russia.

The Future of Relations with Russia – China's Perspective

Russia's role as a crucial partner in countering the United States and creating a new international order

Given that both the United States and China have entered a phase of strategic competition with each other, and in accordance with Chinese strategic documents, the situation around the PRC has deteriorated, and China is preparing for a prolonged struggle²⁵. Russia is the primary partner that assists China in opposing the West. This is confirmed by research from the European Council on Foreign Relations based on over 30 unofficial interviews conducted

²³ Russia's Crude Shipments Are Running Close to a Four-Month High, URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-11-07/russia-s-crude-oil-exports-are-running-close-to-a-four-month-high>

²⁴ European Union concludes a strategic partnership with Kazakhstan on raw materials, batteries and renewable hydrogen, URL: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_6585

²⁵ Full text of the report from the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China: <https://russian.news.cn/20221025/b32a2a0cff064246838b0999eeedeaba/c.html>

with Chinese experts from leading universities, analytical centers, and party organizations²⁶. One conclusion of the research is the belief that it is crucial for China that the United States (considered by Beijing as the main party in conflict with Russia) does not prevail and does not demean Russia. Secondly, the research led to the conclusion that China and Russia, as the two largest authoritarian states in the world with revisionist ambitions, share a common goal of changing the international order led by the United States. Therefore, their partnership, interaction, and coordinated efforts are essential in shaping a new international order that will be more favorable to both China and Russia.

For instance, Tian Feilong, an associate professor at Beihang University in Beijing, argued that the war in Ukraine accelerated the joint Chinese-Russian construction of a "multilateral democratic order" and "resistance to hegemony", with both countries "changing the existing rules of the game to the detriment of the West"²⁷. This sentiment is also partially reflected in the official documents of the countries, including the Joint Statement of Russia and China dated February 4, 2022, in which both sides declared their intentions to "jointly build an even more prosperous, stable, and just world".

The Role of Russia as a Source of Energy Resources for the Chinese Economy

Despite Beijing's assurances that it does not benefit from the so-called "Ukrainian crisis", China has significantly increased its trade turnover with Russia, including the purchase of energy resources, which account for over 70% of supplies from the Russian Federation. In 2022, China's trade with Russia increased by 29.3% compared to 2021, reaching \$190.27 billion. During this period, China's exports to Russia increased by 12.8% to \$76.12 billion, while imports from Russia to China grew by 43.4% to \$114.15 billion. Overall, Russia's positive balance in 2022 amounted to \$38 billion, more than tripling compared to 2021²⁸. Meanwhile, China received significant discounts on the purchase of Russian oil. According to some data, Chinese companies saved about \$6.6 billion in 2022 and \$4 billion in the first six months of 2023 due to lower prices for Russian oil²⁹.

As a result, according to the conclusions of the U.S. Congressional Research Service, in 2022, Russia became the largest source of crude oil for China, surpassing Saudi Arabia and providing approximately 17% of China's total imports. China's planned transition away from coal could potentially lead to a greater role for Russian hydrocarbons (including "green coal" and natural gas). Additionally, the Power of Siberia gas pipeline, expected to reach full

²⁶ China and Ukraine: The Chinese debate about Russia's war and its meaning for the world, ECFR, URL:

<https://ecfr.eu/publication/china-and-ukraine-the-chinese-debate-about-russias-war-and-its-meaning-for-the-world/>

²⁷ 田飞龙：中俄全面合作的性质、功能与新秩序愿景。Tian Feilong: The Nature, Function, and Vision of the Comprehensive Cooperation between China and Russia, URL: <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/141736.html>

²⁸ The trade turnover between Russia and China in 2022 increased by 29.3%. URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/16791461>

²⁹ Six months in China. The first interview with Ambassador Pavel Riabikin. URL: https://glavcom.ua/longreads/piv-roku-u-kitaji-pershe-intervju-posla-pavla-rjabikina-970472.html?fbclid=IwAR3t8q2ODqNx2UBBTw-CgG9BH4c7ankOZGL4mR_lcnu_h3S4t6VjXKlbDok

capacity by 2027, could transform China into one of the largest importers of Russian natural gas³⁰.

The role of Russia as a "strategic rear" for China in the event of a conflict over Taiwan

This role is also influenced by China's ambitions for the so-called "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", which includes gaining control over Taiwan. In the event of a military operation by China against Taiwan, it is evident that China needs to ensure: a) a stable and predictable situation on its northern borders; b) energy and food security, as supplies of energy resources from the Middle East (constituting about 50% of Chinese imports) and agricultural products from Latin America (60% of soybean imports) could be blocked by the U.S. Navy and its allies. In this scenario, Russia would effectively play the role of a strategic rear, forming a self-sufficient system with China, providing the Chinese economy with energy resources and agricultural products in the face of disrupted supplies from other regions. This scenario is supported by both Chinese experts' assessments and the efforts of both countries to increase export capacity for oil, gas, and food through the construction of new infrastructure.

Zhao Huasheng (赵华胜), one of the most prominent Chinese experts on Russia and the director of the Center for Russian and Central Asian Studies at Fudan University's Institute of International Studies, argues for the necessity of maintaining close ties with Russia. Despite "certain frictions", he emphasizes that China needs a "strategic rear in the event of a military scenario against Taiwan"³¹. According to him, as the most significant strategic pressure on China comes from the sea, strong Sino-Russian relations can provide China with a relatively stable strategic rear. While this may not seem crucial in peacetime, its strategic significance for China becomes evident in the face of a serious external shock. Conversely, deterioration in Sino-Russian relations would plunge the entire Eurasian continent into confusion and uncertainty, posing a serious threat to China's security and economic interests. With the stabilization of its internal territory, Beijing can concentrate a significant portion of its energy and military resources on its coastline, surrounding seas, and, most importantly, Taiwan.

Supporting the second factor (ensuring energy and food security) are the intensified efforts of Russia and China to build new infrastructure, allowing for a significant expansion of gas, oil, and grain exports to China. This includes plans to accelerate the construction of the "Power

³⁰ China-Russia Relations, Congressional Research Service (CRS), URL: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12100>

³¹ China-Russia Relations Since Ukraine: What Chinese Scholars are Saying, URL: https://www.sinification.com/p/china-russia-relations-since-ukraine?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=1083330&post_id=124814547&isFreemail=true

of Siberia-2" gas pipeline³², build new oil and gas terminals in border regions³³, and create new logistical opportunities under the intergovernmental agreement on the "New Land Route Russia-China Grain Corridor". This is also confirmed by Zhao Huasheng's assessments: "Economically, Russia may represent only a small fraction (approximately 3%) of China's foreign trade, but in the case of a major international crisis, Russia will become the most important foreign source of energy—and possibly the only foreign source of oil that China could continue to retain".

The military support by Russia for Chinese actions against Taiwan

Despite the current absence of signs of an actual alliance between Russia and China, with obligations to provide military assistance to each other, it is clear that China's strategic goal in the event of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait is to deter/intervene in the actions of U.S. allies in the region, particularly Japan and South Korea. This could be achieved by creating a potential threat to them in the northern direction, with the support of North Korea and Russia. Specifically, in the event of China initiating operations in the Taiwan Strait, Russia and North Korea may conduct large-scale maneuvers in the region, posing a threat to Japan and South Korea, thus preventing them from deploying a significant number of troops to the Taiwan Strait. This compels Seoul and Tokyo to maintain a portion of their forces within their national territories. The reinforcement of military cooperation between China and Russia, involving extensive military exercises and patrols, the practice of joint actions, and troop coordination, supports such a scenario. The joint Russian-Chinese exercises in 2022 demonstrate an increase in their intensity, the range of issues addressed, and the geographical locations involved. Furthermore, an expansion of cooperation in previously restricted areas can be anticipated. This includes nuclear weapons production, given China's plans to increase its nuclear potential from 350 to 1500 warheads³⁴. According to U.S. Department of Defense data, the Russian company "Rosatom" has begun supplying raw materials for nuclear weapons production to China, increasing the importance of cooperation with Moscow for China, including with the aim of achieving global leadership³⁵.

³² Putin approved the acceleration of the construction of Power of Siberia-2. URL:

<https://www.rbc.ru/business/04/09/2023/64f613909a7947c55e1cef69>

³³ Russia and China will build an oil and gas terminal on the border. URL: <https://itek.ru/news/rossiya-i-kitaj-postroyat-neftegazovyi-terminal-na-granice/>

³⁴ Global nuclear arsenals are expected to grow as states continue to modernize—New SIPRI Yearbook out now. URL: <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2022/global-nuclear-arsenals-are-expected-grow-states-continue-modernize-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now;>

China set to expand nuclear arsenal to 1,500 warheads by 2035, US says. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/5313cc68-5fc8-4c0b-bdcb-e5c39245ba3a>

³⁵ Russia Reportedly Supplying Enriched Uranium to China, US DoD, URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3323381/russia-reportedly-supplying-enriched-uranium-to-china/>

Conclusions

The West interprets the Kremlin's war against Ukraine as a local conflict, simultaneously part of a global ideological and economic-political confrontation with the authoritarian regimes of Russia and China. Significant diplomatic efforts from Washington and Brussels have been aimed at preventing the expansion of the theater of military operations beyond Ukraine to minimize the risk of direct confrontation between NATO and Russia. This logic dominates the motivation for supporting Ukraine with weapons and finances. In this paradigm, the issue of restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity at the current stage of the war is not a priority for the West, as achieving Kyiv's maximum goals is seen as associated with uncontrolled security risks for the Alliance. This, in turn, encourages the Putin regime to continue external aggression and seek vulnerabilities in the coalition supporting Ukraine. Therefore, in the medium-term perspective, the context of Western-Russian relations will depend on the course of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

At the same time, the United States maintains an interest in dialogue with the Russian leadership to slow down the erosion of the strategic stability system. Washington seeks to conclude a trilateral agreement on nuclear restraint, involving China in the negotiations. Therefore, communications with the Kremlin will continue regardless of who controls the White House—Democrats or Republicans.

However, political contacts between the EU and the Putin regime will not be restored to their former extent even in the case of a ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia. This is related to a shift in strategic views on the nature of the Russian threat to the project of a Unified Europe.

A crucial factor in Western unity on Russia is the U.S. presidential elections. Assistance to Ukraine has already become a subject of bipartisan struggle in Congress, raising questions about the transatlantic responsibility of the United States.

As a result, the potential advent of Republicans to power is likely to mobilize European governments in the realm of restraining Russia and accelerate the pace of arms production. Therefore, the main focus for the European Union will remain on the long-term task of creating a European defense technological and industrial base that will operate on a continental scale. In the political sphere, Brussels needs to counter Russian information operations coordinated with the narratives of Eurosceptic forces within the EU.

Against the backdrop of the threat of growing populist sentiments due to economic difficulties after the energy "break" with Russia, the European Union will continue to adhere to the practice of exceptions in trade categories with Russia. Maintaining trade ties with Russia will stimulate "gray exports" to Russia through third countries. Therefore, in the near future, Brussels should reconsider its sanctions policy to expand the range of prohibitions and counter

practices to bypass restrictions. Otherwise, the idea of economic pressure on Russia will gradually be neutralized.

China views Russia as an extremely important element in achieving a series of strategic goals, and, therefore, China not only did not condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine but also continues to develop relations with Moscow, providing significant economic, financial, informational, and technological support to Russia. This support ensures the stability of the Russian regime, the functioning of the Russian economy, and the continuation of the war against Ukraine, including the supply of military and dual-use components used in Russia's defense industry³⁶.

Because China considers Russia a crucial partner for its long-term strategic goals, including winning the strategic competition with the West, and will continue to develop relations with Moscow, this brings a series of challenges and threats to Ukraine. Specifically, Chinese support for the Russian economy and industry ensures the stability of the Russian political regime and its ability to wage war against Ukraine for years. Furthermore, increased purchases of Russian agricultural products by China will reduce China's interest in importing from Ukraine. Additionally, deepening relations and interdependence between China and Russia will likely increase the likelihood of Chinese actions directly or indirectly against Ukraine's national interests. This may include expanding military and technological cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, transferring a wider range of military or dual-use products from China to Russia, providing intelligence information in exchange for Russian experience in countering Western weaponry, and more. Addressing these challenges requires building an effective system to protect the national interests of our state from challenges and threats from China, which are likely to increase over time.

³⁶ Russia's Military Capacity and the Role of Imported Components, KSE, URL: https://kse.ua/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Russian-import-of-critical-components.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2-A6oD3y5xFLRZMWmWaLOAr4T-MzSp8Wr2_aoxh09TDteBYSSRAjSWAo0

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