How Does the China-Russia Partnership Impact Security Dynamics in East Asia?

This policy brief addresses the development of the China-Russia partnership in the course of the Ukraine war and assesses the impacts of this process on shifting security dynamics in East Asia. Actors in this region, such as Japan and Taiwan, have recently altered their threat assessments regarding China, increasing defense spending and expanding their security cooperation, both within the region and with the US.

Brief Points

- The China-Russia partnership is expanding but does not deliver sufficient support for Russia in the second year of its war against Ukraine.
- China is concerned about the prospect of Russia’s defeat, but its “peace plan” cannot prevent this outcome, which casts doubt on the durability of this unequal relationship.
- The Ukraine war aggravates the security situation in East Asia, where countries like Japan and Taiwan are reflecting on its lessons and adjusting their defense policies accordingly.

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Introduction

On the eve of the Ukraine war in February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping declared that the friendship between the two countries had “no limits” and there were “no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation.” Secondary evidence suggests that Putin did not inform Xi Jinping about the plan for invading Ukraine, and the point on “no limits” has disappeared from subsequent statements.

The war is not going according to Putin’s plan, and in the last 20 months of heavy fighting it has tested not only the Russian military capabilities, the Ukrainian resolve to resist aggression, and the Western capacity for supporting Ukraine, but also the key parameters and durability of the China-Russia strategic partnership.

Much the same way as Moscow finds it necessary to hide disappointment in the shortage of material support from China, Beijing prefers to camouflage disappointment in Russia’s failure to achieve victory in its high-risk projection of military power. The official discourse at every diplomatic encounter, including during the third Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in October 2023, emphasizes the positive dynamics of the bilateral ties and reiterates that the partnership is “rock solid.” Nevertheless, the real depth of the relationship remains shallow, the military cooperation is limited, and trust is lacking.

Moscow is keen to emphasize the expansion of economic ties, as the bilateral trade in 2022 reached the value of USD 190 billion, primarily because of high oil prices. For China, however, trade and investment flows to the EU and the United States are vastly more important.

China may disapprove of Western sanctions against Russia, but it takes great care not to breach this regime and to risk an enforcement of secondary sanctions, so Russia’s increasing need in importing high-tech goods and machinery remains unfulfilled. The “peace plan” advanced by Xi Jinping before his visit to Moscow in March 2023 was aimed much more at strengthening China’s international profile than at ending the Ukraine war, and it does not answer Russian interests either.

The oscillating trajectory of the China-Russia partnership is keenly monitored by stakeholders in the East Asian security landscape, who are presently less worried about Russian attempts at demonstrating power and more concerned about Chinese leaders’ ambitions and examinations of opportunities created by Western preoccupation with the Ukraine war. This policy brief evaluates such worries and concerns, particularly in Japan and Taiwan, and aims at providing an assessment of possible changes in the variegated impacts of the war on the transformation of conflict settings in East Asia.

New Challenges to the East Asian Peace

The Ukraine war constitutes a major driver of geopolitical tensions, but this escalation has not as yet overturned the phenomenon known as the East Asian Peace. Sources of inter-state conflicts in this vast region are multiple and complex—from the Russia-Japan dispute over the South Kuril Islands to the overlapping claims for control over many islets in the South and East China Seas—and instead of reliable mechanisms for managing these conflicts, the parties used to rely on the habitual patterns of acknowledging disagreements.

The outbreak of war in Europe has challenged these patterns, and Russia’s unprovoked and miscalculated aggression against Ukraine makes it necessary for East Asian states to reassess China’s ambitions and risk calculus.

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China pursues simultaneously the increasingly incompatible goals of returning to the trajectory of stable economic growth and upgrading its capacity for projecting military power. All East Asian states are interested in benefiting from China’s economic dynamism, as they have in the past decades, but they are increasingly worried about Beijing’s channeling of money and technologies into military modernization.

China’s defense budget continues to increase, reaching RMB 1.55 trillion (USD 224.8 billion) in 2023, a nominal 7.2% increase from the 2022 budget of RMB 1.45 trillion (USD 229.6 billion). Expenditures on particular programs are not included, suggesting that real figures might be even higher.

The bulk of Russian military spending goes into sustaining the massive and entirely unforeseen effort at waging the war in Ukraine, but Moscow is keen to demonstrate its capacity for projecting power in the Far East, for instance by conducting snap drills of the Pacific Fleet. The Russian defense-industrial complex is struggling with producing the weapons necessary for compensating the losses in combat operations, so Moscow’s ability to use arms export as an instrument of foreign policy is deeply undercut, and even China is interested mostly in obtaining some technologies, like hypersonic missiles, rather than in importing armaments.

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What worries experts and politicians in East Asia is Russia’s keen interest in an escalation of tensions in the Indo-Pacific theatre, and particularly around Taiwan, which could determine a shift in US strategic attention and a reduction in resource allocation toward supporting Ukraine, resulting in a stalemate on the battlefields. Moscow can hardly attempt to initiate a major crisis, but it might attempt to manipulate an episode of hostilities, for instance an exchange of fire across the DMZ on the Korean Peninsula.

Japan Is Compelled to Strengthen Its Defence

The Ukraine war caused an acceleration of the trend of gradual increase of investments in upgrading military capabilities in Japan. While always trying to maintain caution, the Japanese government now faces three converging sources of threat: North Korean missile tests became more frequent, China’s provocations around the Senkaku islands intensified, and the scope of joint China-Russia naval exercises was increasing. The passage of a joint Chinese-Russian naval squadron through the Tsugaru strait separating Hokkaido from Honshu in October 2021 was particularly alarming for Japanese politicians.

In December 2022, Japan announced that it would increase its defense spending over the
next five-year period to reach 2% of its GDP, equivalent to USD 320 billion, and approved a new National Security Strategy, elaborating its guidelines in the ten-year National Defense Plan. Experts were eager to emphasize in interviews with us the unprecedented guidelines set by these documents and confirmed that while higher spending on military modernization created problems with the state budget, the Japanese public opinion was generally supportive of these ambitions, recognizing the significant aggravation of the regional security environment.

By upgrading its defense posture, Japan is also aiming at expanding security cooperation with the US. By upgrading its defense posture, Japan is also aiming at expanding security cooperation with the US, for instance by finalizing the plan for deploying a new Marine Littoral Regiment at Okinawa. Additionally, Japan seeks to strengthen cooperation with the Philippines and South Korea. Japanese experts acknowledge that Russia is worried by these cooperative efforts and may create some “disturbances,” but maintain that China is the main source of security concerns that could be alleviated by restoring dialogue. The net assessment in Japanese policy debates points to the significant increase of scope of multiple security challenges, but concludes that they remain manageable.

Taiwan Comes under Hard Pressure

Taiwan has been living under the threat of invasion from mainland China for a long time, but the war in Ukraine has certainly increased the intensity of this threat. China’s aggressive posture reached a new high during the unprecedented People’s Liberation Army (PLA) military exercises in August 2022, staged in response to the former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taipei. Large-scale PLA drills around Taiwan were held in April 2023, when President Tsai Ing-wen met with then US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, followed by other aggressive operations.

These demonstrations of military power made a strong impact on domestic politics in Taiwan, which is preparing for presidential elections in January 2024. The democratic choice between a more “pro-China” candidate from the Kuomintang (KMT) and a more “pro-US” candidate from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) may be crucial for the future of the island: more than ever, the elections are driven by a contest over Taiwan’s identity vis-à-vis mainland China, at a time when the majority of the people (61%) identify as Taiwanese only.

Beijing proceeds with the campaign of interference in the Taiwanese elections, and the experts we interviewed expressed concerns that a DPP victory might be perceived in Beijing as a humiliating setback, resulting in a new escalation of pressure. Invasion is an extreme scenario, but the possibility of a naval and air blockade is increasing, and Russia may opt to contribute to this operation.

Joint patrols by Russian and Chinese strategic bombers are regularly coming close to the Senkaku islands controlled by Japan, which Taiwan also claims as Taoyutai islands. The only way for Taiwan to manage this risk, besides relying on US guarantees and arms supplies, is to expand security cooperation with such key neighbors as Japan and South Korea.

The Resilience of Regional and World Orders

When Russia unleashed its aggression against Ukraine, it expected to aggravate divisions in NATO. Instead, so far, we have witnessed the opposite. Perceptions and positions in the Global South are more mixed, but this ambivalence cannot support the discourse still prevalent in Moscow on a complete breakdown of the old “unfair” world order. China is not in full agreement with this rhetoric and prefers to work on a gradual reshaping of the world order according to its interests and values. Beijing, however, also

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needs to account for the re-energized West and strengthened US leadership, which manifests itself not only in sustaining support for Ukraine and enforcing sanctions against Russia, but also in strengthening security ties between democratic states in East Asia.

Sources of inter-state tensions in East Asia are multiple and reliable mechanisms for managing them are nearly absent, but the fast-developing security cooperation between Japan, South Korea and the US produces a check on China’s ambitions, which also drives states like the Philippines to connect with Western alliances. The situation around Taiwan is prone to aggravation because of Beijing’s increasing reliance on military pressure, but strengthening regional solidarity with Taiwan may convince Xi Jinping to moderate his course.

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