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Moscow's Status Management vis-a-vis Beijing's Continued Rise

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Executive Summary

Following the joint announcement of Russia and China's "no-limits partnership" in 2022, the nature of the relationship between the two powers has become a point of intrigue for both analysts and scholars. Contextualized by the dominant scholarly view that the global order is shifting towards multipolarity, it becomes clear that China and Russia appear to exist on an "axis of necessity" in which they leverage ideological and diplomatic convergence to oppose the Western-led rules-based international system. Despite this alignment, research has indicated that Russia's position vis-à-vis China is becoming increasingly subordinate, with Moscow assuming a "junior partner" status in diplomatic spaces such as the United Nations. This report aims to explore Moscow's perception of and relationship with Beijing within the United Nations, including the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council. Ultimately, this report finds that Russia appears to strategically concede its position as a "junior partner" but utilizes tactical divergences in areas such as the UN to maintain influence and control the growing asymmetry of its relationship with Beijing.

Sino-Russian Strategic Alignment in 2026

During the 2022 Winter Olympics, hosted in the Chinese capital of Beijing, Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Russian President Vladimir Putin to issue an official statement on the Sino-Russian relationship. Deemed a "no-limits partnership,"¹ The two countries affirmed commitment to a comprehensive strategic partnership that rejected the rigid formality and opaqueness of traditional Western political and military alliances.² Despite certain divergences in strategy and position, it is largely agreed amongst analysts that Russia and China have become increasingly close over the last four decades, aligning to bolster their common goal of uprooting the current rules-based international order dominated by the West.

Sino-Russian interests appear to converge in several key areas, not limited to trade, multilateral diplomacy, and resentment of Western-dominated institutions.³ However, within the UN, divisions in the two countries' strategic prioritization and positioning have begun to become increasingly clear as Beijing has begun taking a more influential and dominant position in UN proceedings. This has led analysts to question Russia's perception of China's position within the UN. This paper aims to provide a basic analysis of this question. It begins with a discussion of Sino-Russian alignment in the UN General Assembly, identifying key points of convergence and divergence to understand differences in the states' international strategy and positioning relative to one another. Next, Sino-Russian behavior in the UN Security Council is addressed. The final sections summarize key areas of divergence and apply that information to understanding

¹ Kurylo, B. (2024). The limits of the 'no limits' Russian-Chinese partnership: The case of Africa. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 31(2), 121-149.

² Saxena, A. (2021). 75 years of China-Russia relations: Indeed a 'No Limits' Partnership.

³ Ivanov, P. (2023, October 11). *Together and apart: The conundrum of the China-Russia partnership*. Asia Society Policy Institute. <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/together-and-apart-conundrum-china-russia-partnership>

Moscow's international strategy and the Kremlin's position on China's dominance within the UN.

The Global Stage: Diverging Priorities in the UN General Assembly

Over the course of the past decade, voting alignment within both the UN General Assembly and UN Security Council has become a cornerstone of the strategic partnership shared by Russia and China. However, while alignment has remained high for the two powers since 2018, it has shown a gradual decline in specific strategic areas. Between 2018 and 2024, convergence has declined approximately 10 percent, from 77 percent to 67 percent. This decline in convergence is primarily a result of a rising share of opposing votes⁴, although partial splits⁵ have also risen slightly in frequency.⁶

China's growing influence in the UN is undeniable. Chinese-led global initiatives are amongst some of the most heavily discussed topics in the current General Assembly. Specifically, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has impacted UN discourse to a more significant extent than any present Western initiative. Comprehensive analysis of voting alignment has revealed that countries are generally more aligned with China than they are with the US. This phenomenon is largely explained by the surge in votes coming from developing and emerging economies, which tend to be more heavily aligned with China than with the West. Russia is, similarly, heavily aligned with China, a pattern that predates the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.⁷

However, a closer analysis of the divergences between Russian and Chinese votes in the general assembly reveals a different reality: Russia, despite holding a subordinate policy position, offsets its dependence gap through strategic divergence.

Russian voting patterns underscore the understanding held by many analysts that Russia is both internally focused and risk-tolerant in its approach to Western control. This reality becomes increasingly apparent when examining votes in the realm of emerging technology and military oversight. In the area of humanitarian arms control, including regulations that regulate cluster munitions and landmines, Russia has consistently voted against. China, on the other hand, has voted in favor of several notable conventions, including the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM) and Anti-Personnel Landmines Convention.⁸

⁴ Opposing votes refer to situations where one country votes in favor and the other against

⁵ Partial splits refer to situations where one country votes yes or no and the other abstains from voting

⁶ Arcesati, R., & Stec, G. (2025, November 6). *Friends moving apart? China and Russia at the United Nations*. MERICS. <https://merics.org/en/comment/friends-moving-apart-china-and-russia-united-nations>

⁷ García-Herrero, A., & Wolff, G. B. (2024, November). *Russia's trade with China* (Working Paper 19/2024). Bruegel. https://www.bruegel.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/WP%2019%202024_1.pdf

⁸ Andersson, P. (2025, November 6). *Friends moving apart? China and Russia at the United Nations*. MERICS. <https://merics.org/en/comment/friends-moving-apart-china-and-russia-united-nations>

Similarly, in 2024, the countries cast diverging votes on a resolution that called for responsible use of artificial intelligence in military operations, with China voting yes and Russia voting no. A related resolution addressing lethal autonomous weapons systems that arose in 2023 and 2024 saw an abstaining vote from China and a vote against by Russia.⁸ In the realm of UN policy concerning nuclear disarmament and humanitarian responsibility in the realm of nuclear weapons, a rise in opposing or split votes, where Beijing has generally cast supporting or abstaining votes while Moscow has voted against.⁸ This aligns with broader trends in policy, in which Russia has consistently purported a nuclear arrangement that suggests a willingness to strike first in the face of either nuclear or non-nuclear aggression. China, on the other hand, has consistently adhered to its nuclear posture as a second-strike-only country.⁹ Although Moscow's hawkish nuclear doctrine could be interpreted as a bluff designed to deter Western-led escalation through intentional ambiguity in what constitutes a plausible threshold for a first-strike approach.

Presently, from the Russian perspective, the most critical area for Sino-Russian relations in the UN is geopolitics. Due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, the Kremlin is vulnerable to geopolitical and humanitarian intervention and oversight. On five of the Ukraine-related resolutions between 2022 and 2024, China abstained while Russia voted against. However, on other occasions, China has backed Russia and the two countries have voted concurrently. Specifically, China has aligned with Russia to vote against a policy that proposed human rights regulation and oversight.⁸ In February of 2025, the UNGA voted on two resolutions on the conflict in Ukraine, one proposed by the United States and the other by Ukraine. While Russia voted against both, China maintained consistency with its prior strategy and abstained.¹⁰

Another area of interest that is heavily related to the Sino-Russian power balance in the UN is the role played by small-state allies and IOs. As Russia and China, both prominent global powers, have partnered in systematically curbing the influence of US hegemony, they have developed a mutual position in favor of the multipolar world order. Research has identified that, globally, there is greater voting alignment with the China-Russia position than with the dominant Western position pushed by the US. This pattern is especially true for countries within the G-77, SCO, SCO-plus, BRICS, and BRICS plus.¹¹ For emerging economies, alignment with the Sino-Russian "duo" through informal international organizations such as BRICS can be an effective strategy to soft-balance against Western dominance without appearing adversarial.¹²

⁹ Saalman, L. (2022, May). *Navigating Chinese–Russian nuclear and space convergence and divergence* (EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Paper No. 78). Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/eunpdc_no_78_0.pdf

¹⁰ Arcesati, R. (2025, February 27). *Unmoved by U.S. pressure, Asian states support Ukraine's UNGA resolution*. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/02/unmoved-by-u-s-pressure-asian-states-support-ukraines-unga-resolution/>

¹¹ Nurullayev, D., & Papa, M. (2023). Bloc politics at the UN: How other states behave when the United States and China–Russia disagree. *Global Studies Quarterly*, 3(3), ksad034. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad034>

¹² Wedel, G. and Nurullayev, D. (2025). BRICS Accession & State Motivations to Join Informal IOs [Unpublished manuscript]. School of Government and Public Policy, University of Arizona.

By aligning with China in terms of foreign policy, Russia is able to create a prominent anti-Western power dyad to oppose US influence within the UN. This remains true even if Russia is forced to subsume a “junior-partner” position within its relationship with China. Further, while the Kremlin would like to be seen as the flag-bearer of the Global South, recent developments in Latin America and the Middle East have highlighted the limits of Russia’s ability to throw any meaningful weight behind its traditional allies.

While alignment between the BRICS powers within the UN is relatively strong, the BRICS countries have notably declined to express symbolic support for Russian actions in Ukraine through their voting.¹¹ China has maintained its position as an advocate for conflict minimization and diplomatic de-escalation. Moscow’s ability to leverage the influence of the BRICS countries is also limited in other areas of the UN, including the UN Human Rights Council, where BRICS powers have abstained on interventionist measures looking to moderate the war in Ukraine.¹³

While Russia’s diplomatic partnerships with emerging powers are strong, evidence suggests that Russian partnership and engagement through the UN development pillar is limited to political and diplomatic appeal, not investment.¹⁴ China, on the other hand, has leveraged trade relations and strategic loan provision through the BRI to increase dependence on developing partner nations. In this sense, China has effectively created a concrete dynamic of reliance with small-state allies, a power dynamic that Beijing can leverage to exert influence on the international stage.

Convergence and Tactical Splits in the UN Security Council

The UN Security Council (UNSC) is a critical forum for Russia in terms of international strategy. Russia and China have a significant history of alignment within the UN Security Council. The countries have not cast opposing votes since the early 2000s, though the frequency of partial splits, in which one nation votes in one direction or the other, and the other abstains, has risen in recent years.⁸

Moscow has held a permanent position on the UNSC alongside China, the US, France, and the UK since the late 20th century, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As a permanent member, Russia holds veto power over all resolutions – Moscow casting a vote in the negative will immediately disallow a resolution from continued consideration. This power has been instrumental in allowing Moscow to shield the Russia-Ukraine conflict from international

¹³ Roshchin, E. (2025, June 23). *The implications for global governance of China and Russia’s post-2022 alignment*. Center for European Policy Analysis. <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/the-implications-for-global-governance-of-china-and-russias-post-2022-alignment/>

¹⁴ Novoselova, A. (2025). *Russia’s role in UN development work: Influence without investment?* (Policy Brief No. 15/2025). German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS). <https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb15.2025>

regulation. Russia has continually utilized the UNSC as a forum to assert a sovereignty-based narrative in defense of the invasion, leveraging veto power to block intervention from other powers.

Notably, Russia does not need Chinese support to leverage this authority. Nonetheless, China has abstained on many key UNSC votes involving the Russia-Ukraine conflict, underscoring a commitment to its strategic partnership with Moscow. However, regarding multiple other humanitarian resolutions that addressed conflicts in Sudan, Gaza, and Libya, China has expressed support, while Moscow has abstained.

Areas of Divergence and Implications for International Strategy

Just as it is impossible to deny the strong ideological and policy-based alignment that underscores Sino-Russian convergence, it is similarly difficult to ignore the growing dependence gap between the two powers.

China's rapid diplomatic expansion through bilateral alliance-building, engagement with international organizations, and development of the Belt and Road initiative is indicative of the country's transition into the role of a global mediator.¹⁵ By positioning itself as a facilitator in disputes between middle powers in areas as well as playing the role of a financier for development initiatives, China has cemented its position as a diplomatic and economic partner for developing nations in the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia. Set against the backdrop of increasing global multipolarity, it becomes evident that China's power-retention strategy heavily hinges on balancing – Beijing aims to maintain its image as a rational and collaborative global leader, while opposing the West through means that are not openly or directly adversarial.

China's international position, in this sense, stands in contrast to Russia's. Moscow is significantly more open about its anti-Western positioning, an adversarial nature reflected in its behavior in the UN. Despite this divergence, Russia remains strongly coupled with Beijing, a phenomenon that can likely be explained by the growing asymmetry in the two powers' relationship. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China has become an integral economic partner for Moscow, with Chinese exports to Russia increasing substantially. This growth is most pronounced in strategic areas such as machinery and electrical equipment.¹⁶

China is also the largest importer of Russian goods, with trade being dominated by Chinese consumption of Russian energy, the most prominent import being oil.¹⁶ The past five years have

¹⁵ Khan, S. (2025). *Introduction: The diplomatic breakthrough and its global significance*. In *Authoritarian Mediation: Saudi-Iran Strategic Realignment in China's Shadow* (pp. 3–18). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-01388-0_1

¹⁶ Caruso, A., & Rühlig, T. (2025, October 2). *The dependence gap in Russia-China not to vis-à-vis interests in relations: Tracing where pragmatism ends and geopolitical signalling begins*. European Union Institute for Security Studies. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/analysis/dependence-gap-russia-china-relations>

seen a massive increase in Moscow's dependence on Chinese goods, while Russia's importance as a trade partner for China has remained relatively the same.

Scholars have recognized a marked shift in Sino-Russian power relations since the end of the Cold War, with China rising vis-à-vis Russia until the balance flipped, with China becoming the more dominant power. Russia stands as a weaker country, not only on the economic level but also in terms of diplomatic and military influence.¹⁷ As discussed prior, China uses binding influences to develop its relations with small-state allies, formalizing relationships through the creation of economic dependence. While Russia maintains diplomatic partnerships with many of the same powers, the status of these relations are not similarly secure.¹⁴

It follows that Moscow views China as a strategic and necessary partner within the UN, but utilizes strategic divergences in order to create separation. It is against Russian interest to become entirely subordinate to China, however, it is simultaneously true that there is little Moscow can do to minimize the growing power gap between the two nations. As Russia declines in power vis a vis China, it becomes strategically important for Moscow to control the transition as to not compromise its international position.

UN voting patterns reflect a notable difference in the strategic narratives purported by Beijing and Moscow in international spheres. China is willing to diplomatically balance against the West, compromising and collaborating in key areas such as emerging technologies, weapons, conflict regulations, and humanitarian actions. Russia, on the other hand, holds a strong line. Moscow's voting patterns reveal concrete opposition to Western-backed regulations as well as interventionist initiatives across categories.⁸

This division is well exemplified by the UNSC's voting on ceasefire initiatives in Gaza (2023, 2024) and Sudan (2024), where China voted in favor, and Russia abstained.⁸ In the UNGA, China has similarly abstained on resolutions related to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the conflict in Ukraine, while Russia has opposed.⁸

Moscow's Position

Ultimately, an examination of geopolitical relations and UN voting patterns indicates that Moscow views China as a necessary partner within the UN. However, Russia simultaneously exercises strategic caution in managing its alignment with China, buffering the growing asymmetry between the two powers with voting divergences.

¹⁷ Machaffie, J. P. (2022). Russian–Chinese cooperation at the United Nations Security Council: Costly signalling and trust building in the strategic partnership. *China Report*, 58(4), 431–447. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00094455221128349>

Russia's usage of the UN platform has transitioned towards being increasingly focused on the assertion of domestic interests. Though both Moscow and Beijing have remained committed to their support of a UN-based international system, Moscow's role within the UN has shifted since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia's engagement with the UN has become considerably more limited, with Moscow's focus narrowing to the UNSC.¹³ While China is more willing to engage comprehensively with the full spectrum of UN institutions, Russia is not similarly open to frequent collaboration.

While both Beijing and Moscow are aligned in their main position within the context of developing multipolarity, an analysis of voting patterns and diplomatic behavior makes it clear that the two countries maintain different priorities and opinions regarding the system of global governance. For Moscow, the UN is a forum in which to leverage power to advance domestic goals. Russia has been able to utilize its influence within the UN to oppose intervention and regulation that would affect military and technological operations. Russia's power within the UN Security Council has been instrumental in minimizing foreign interference with the war in Ukraine, and despite a lack of support from both Beijing and BRICS allies, Moscow has leveraged its veto power on more than one occasion to strike down resolutions that would bolster Ukrainian territorial integrity and condemn Russian aggression.¹³

Russia has been able to leverage tactical divergences in voting in order to differentiate itself from China and test the opinion and alignment of international partners. China generally maintains a cautious and open position, often displaying willingness to collaborate in areas where Russia is not. This behavior is aligned heavily with China's positioning as a rising "global mediator" and a main pillar of influence in the multipolar world order.

For Moscow, alignment with China in the UN is generally advantageous, allowing the countries to combine influence in opposition to the rules-based international order. Despite the power asymmetry within the Sino-Russian relationship, China poses no substantial threat to Russia as it stands. While Beijing has strategically leveraged divergences in UN voting, including the tactical use of abstaining votes on matters that directly pertain to Russian affairs in Ukraine, China has not indicated that they have any intention of undermining Russia within the UNGA or UNSC. Insofar as China does not move against Russian domestic interests, Moscow benefits from the "junior partner" status despite the power asymmetry.