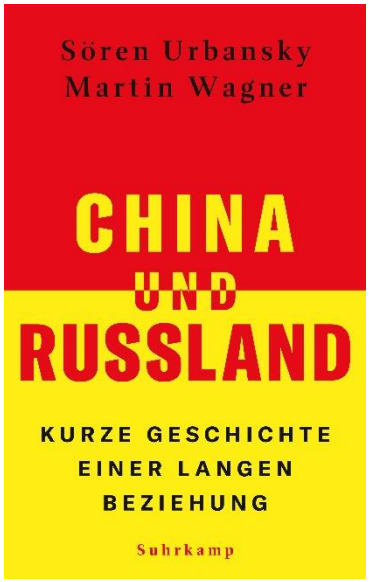

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Distant Neighbors

A Concise History of Sino-Russian Relations

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Kurze Geschichte einer langen Beziehung)

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Introduction

"Without making long-term predictions, we can say that our cooperation is sealed for 10,000 years," Mao Zedong assured his Soviet counterpart. "In that case, it should suffice if we meet again in 9,999 years to discuss cooperation for the following 10,000 years," replied Nikita Khrushchev. Mao's bold prediction did not come true.[1] Yet this exchange between the leaders of the Chinese and Soviet Communist Parties in 1958 reveals an important truth: there has always been a mismatch between the fraternal rhetoric and the conflicting interests of these two states. This is something that was reflected in the language of these Cold War figures, and not without a certain irony. Today, Moscow and Beijing once again sing the praises of a shared alliance. Verbiage such as "a friendship without limits"[2] used by heads of state Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin to describe bilateral relations in the new millennium sound at once menacing and stale. They mask not only common interests but also significant rivalries.

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[1] Library of Congress, Dmitrii Antonovich Volkogonov Papers, Box 26 Reel 17, Archive of the President of the Russian Federation (APRF), f. 52, op. 1, d. 498, ll. 44-77 (First conversation between N. S. Khrushchev and Mao Zedong, July 31, 1958), l. 44.

[2] In the joint declaration by Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin on February 4, 2022, the literal wording is: "The friendship between the two states knows no borders." See Sovmestnoe zajavlenie Rossijskoj Federacii i Kitaj skoj Narodnoj Respubliki o meždunarodnych otnošenijach, vstupajuščich v novuju ėpochu, i global'nom ustojčivom razvitii, available online at: {http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5770} (Unless otherwise noted, all internet sources are current as of September 2024).

The relationship between China and Russia is a crucial force in global politics. In the long run, an authoritarian alliance between Putin and Xi could have far-reaching consequences—perhaps even greater than the alliance between the two communist states in the mid-20th century. China, the world's second-most populous nation, and Russia, the largest country by land mass, are both nuclear powers and members of the UN Security Council. China is the leading exporter, while Russia holds the world's largest stock of natural resources. Although global economic interdependence has decreased since the Covid-19 pandemic and the commencement of Russia's war against Ukraine, the international dependencies on both superpowers remain substantial. Indeed, the mutual reliance between the two countries has only grown in recent years.

As an authoritarian bloc, China and Russia are challenging the United States, the European Union, and democracies around the world in an increasingly blatant manner. Their coordinated geopolitical actions highlight the fragility of the rules-based world order that they seek to dismantle. Moreover, Russia's invasion of Ukraine shows that Moscow, at least, is willing to resort to military force to pursue its neo-imperial ambitions. Meanwhile, China's government is closely watching the war in the heart of Europe. Only time will tell what this means for Taiwan, for instance.

Historically, empires were the norm when it came to the international order of states. Among today's great powers, however, only the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation have maintained this imperial continuity. Both Beijing and Moscow draw their neo-imperial ambitions from their historical legacies. China's claims are rooted in the legacy of the Sino-Manchurian Qing Empire (1644–1911), while Russia bases its ambitions on the Soviet Union and the Romanov dynasty (1613–1917). These continuities, however, are largely constructed.[3]

Their imperialist stance has left a lasting historical legacy on both sides. Although China has long been a great power, its elites have frequently accused Russia of imperialist behavior. For example, they argued that the Soviet Union sought to establish a rule of "new tsars."[4] In Russia, on the other hand, the specter of the "Yellow Peril" feeds into a deep-rooted primal fear of the East.

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[3] Jürgen Osterhammel, "Imperialgeschichten. China und Russland in Zeit und Raum", in: *Osteuropa* 7-9 (2023), pp. 7-20.

[4] On the "new tsars", a widespread slogan during the Cultural Revolution, cf. e.g., "Dadao xin Shahuang!", in: *Heilongjiang Ribao* (March 4, 1969), p. 1.

There is also something peculiar about the superlatives used by Mao and Khrushchev and Xi and Putin. They signal that Sino-Russian relations follow a logic that doesn't fit the common frameworks of diplomatic history or political science. There's no doubt that these grand declarations conceal historical rivalries. But there is something else that makes the relationship between these two countries so unique: their vast territorial expanse, demographic significance, economic strength, and military power all place them in a rivalry that they are incapable of evading. As multi-ethnic country-empires and authoritarian regimes, both China and Russia share the opportunities and challenges of a form of governance that contrasts sharply with that of constitutional democracies. However, their historical points of reference have long been different. While Russia primarily modeled itself on Europe, China's key coordinates were Russia, Europe, and Japan. Since the late 20th century, their rulers have been united by a common adversary: the liberal world order. Their relationship is unique—with no other country in the world do China and Russia share such a crucial connection.

The history of China and Russia's relationship is a remarkable one. The Russian Empire was the first European power with which the Chinese Empire signed a treaty and engaged in diplomacy as equals. Over four centuries of systemic upheaval—shifting from monarchical empires to communist regimes and authoritarian states—these two entities have remained in direct contact, though not without ruptures, misunderstandings, and chance occurrences.

The special nature of Sino-Russian relations can be attributed in part to their geographical proximity as neighbors on the Eurasian continent. Today, Russia stretches across eleven time zones, from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific, while China spans five climate zones, from the subarctic Amur region to the tropical island of Hainan. The two countries are divided by a border of some 4,000 kilometers. Until the early 20th century—when Mongolia was still part of the Chinese Empire and the Central Asian states belonged to the Russian Empire—the border between the two empires was the longest land border in the world, stretching around 12,000 kilometers. Despite this proximity, the societies of the two countries continue to maintain a certain distance. The shared borderland is primarily a sparsely populated periphery for both states. Until 2022, the Amur River had no bridges; and as of 2025, only two crossings exist along the 2,000 kilometers of the Amur River boundary. Despite the political alliance between Beijing and Moscow, these limited connections symbolize the distance that still exists between the two sides.

Chinese and Russian societies have largely remained strangers to one another over the centuries. The political centers of the two empires were distant, and their capitals were located far away from the shared border. Until well into the 20th century, people living in this inter-imperial space considered themselves neither Russian nor Chinese. And the ethnically dominant groups in both countries remain distant from one another to this day—culturally, linguistically, and religiously. Despite the fact that they have some historical experiences in common, they lack a shared canon of cultural myths. The rhetoric of alliance stands at odds with the cultural differences and historical conflicts between them, something that can only be poorly disguised by ever more grandiose proclamations of friendship. It is these kinds of contradiction that we set out to explore in this study.

This book provides a concise history of a long relationship. This history ranges from the first expedition of a Siberian explorer to Beijing in 1618 to the geopolitical alliance between Xi and Putin in the face of the Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. We look at the relationship between the two states and their people on three levels: Firstly, we interpret the historical moments that brought about a change in inter-state relations and whose interpretation was often hotly contested afterwards. Some of these milestones have been largely forgotten or suppressed today, such as Russia's repression of the treaties from the mid-19th century that are viewed as "unequal" from the Chinese perspective, or the border clashes of 1969, which both countries prefer not to look back upon. Secondly, the book analyzes the foreign policy of the two countries from the perspective of their respective domestic policies. The communist revolution in Russia or the opening up of China in the course of its capitalist reforms, for example, were the subject of intense discussion in the respective neighboring country—often as an anticipation of their own future. After all, just as shifts in Sino-Russian relations led to realignments in the geopolitical order, the relations between the two countries were also impacted by international power structures. Russia's territorial expansion into China, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and China's Belt and Road Initiative all underscore how this relationship has been shaped by the imperial rivalries of the 19th century, the strategic three-pronged relationship of the Cold War between the Soviet Union, China, and the United States, and the fragile world order of today. As such, our book is a history of interstate encounters, transnational economic and social interdependencies, and international systemic competition.

Historians long ago rejected a perspective of bilateral relations between countries as a mere tally of armed conflicts and diplomatic agreements.[5] This is also increasingly true of the relationship between China and Russia. For four centuries, factors such as imperial aggression, economic dependencies, outbreaks of violence, migration, cultural exchange, geopolitical tensions, and the legacies of historical conflicts have shaped this relationship, and continue to do so. Another crucial factor in shaping the relationship between the two countries has been the idiosyncrasies of individuals, from statesmen to smugglers. Diplomatic activities, rituals of encounter, symbols of subordination, and gestures of goodwill have all varied over time in response to shifting historical contexts, just as the arenas in which political interests have competed or overlapped have evolved.

This book recounts the story of Russian reconnaissance caravans that took more than two years to reach Beijing, only to be denied an audience with the emperor, and of letters from the Chinese emperor that no one in Moscow could decipher. It tells of Jesuits who drew up a border treaty in the no-man's-land of the steppe, writing it in Latin, and of the fever dreams of scholars in faraway St. Petersburg envisioning a "Russian" California, which remains a swampy borderland. We follow the journey of a young Chinese journalist who set out for the "Red Mecca" but instead found a "land of hunger" in Soviet Russia. And in a minor role, we encounter a Chinese opera diva who shamelessly sings Soviet war songs among the bombed ruins of Mariupol. Without historical figures like these, any recount of the relationship between China and Russia would necessarily be incomplete.

But we also cannot understand the connection between these two states without considering their relationships with other groups. At various times and places, different partners and opponents have shaped the dynamic between the two powers. From the Amur region to Central Asia, nomadic peoples and later independent states have acted as intermediaries. Sino-Russian relations have also been influenced by external powers competing with one or both countries—Great Britain and France in the 19th century, and Japan and the United States in the

[5] A comprehensively understood history of relations, one that considers "relational issues of all kinds" (Jürgen Osterhammel), draws on concepts from diplomatic history, international history, as well as transnational and global history. Recent methodological discussions have emphasized the value of this combined perspective, such as Arvid Schors and Fabian Klose, "Wie schreibt man Internationale Geschichte?", in: Schor and Klose. (eds.), *Wie schreibt man Internationale Geschichte? Empirische Vermessungen zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt am Main 2023, pp. 13-34, here pp. 17-21; Petra Goedde, "Internationale Geschichte im Umbruch: Eine Bestandsaufnahme für die Forschung zum 20. Jahrhundert", in: ibid., pp. 331-348, here pp. 336-337; Paul T. Chamberlin et al., "On Transnational and International History", in: *The American Historical Review* 128/1 (2023), pp. 255-332, and Jürgen Osterhammel, *Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Nationalstaats. Studien zu Beziehungsgeschichte und Zivilisationsvergleich*, Göttingen 2001, p. 9.

20th and 21st centuries. Significantly, the complex interplay between China, Russia, and the world has not always been in step with global trends, but often evolved asynchronously.

The upheavals in both states reshaped the foundation of their relations with one another. Looking at a broader historical span, three distinct logics of exchange emerge, each framing the Sino-Russian relationship in different ways. From the early modern period until the 19th century, the two countries generally kept their distance, only coming into direct conflict as their territorial expansions collided. In the 20th century, communist ideologues in Moscow and Beijing concocted a fictitious unity, under which the Soviet Union took advantage of the asymmetry in power until divergent interpretations inevitably led to a schism. Today, China and Russia still present a united, anti-Western front—though now, Moscow plays the role of the junior partner.

In addition to these temporally determined dynamics, there were recurring phenomena that shaped the relationship between the two states across major historical transitions. As continental empires, China and Russia were always marked by tensions between the center and the periphery, something that has persisted from the 17th century to the present. The exercise of power on the imperial fringes was a late development, and even in the 20th century, imperial rule there was often highly fragile. Geographical and cultural distances remained, and while economic dependencies shifted, these changes often consisted purely in an exchanging of roles. In essence, the relationship between the two empires was defined by a constant interplay of dominance and partnership. Relations have rarely been symmetrical or equal.

The terms ‘China’ and ‘Russia’ are imprecise. Both states construct historical continuities in the present, which they then project onto distant pasts. The predecessor states that they claim to be the heirs of had different names and forms—the late medieval Muscovite Empire and the Soviet Union, Ming China and the Republic of China during the interwar period—none of which are identical to the Russian Federation or the People’s Republic of China of the 21st century. For the sake of clarity, however, we will primarily refer to China and Russia, and where relevant, to the Soviet Union. Despite these distinctions, the character of both as multi-ethnic empires has remained consistent. Although Beijing and Moscow today claim to be nations supported by ethnic majorities, China and Russia have never been nation-states. Instead, they are heterogeneous empires with diverse populations. For this reason alone, essentializing explanations that attribute meaning to supposed cultural characteristics will always fall short of the mark. Metaphors of strength and weakness, along with normative

models sometimes adopted by historians, tells us more about historical self-perceptions of a particular era than they offer actual analytical insights.[6]

Over the past three decades, several studies on diplomatic and cultural history have been published focusing on bilateral relations in the 20th century. The temporary opening of archives in China and Russia facilitated entirely new perspectives on backroom discussions and everyday encounters far from the metropoles. However, a glance at the shelves of any library reveals a striking lack of interest in the long history of relations between the two states. Since the end of the Cold War, only one comprehensive account of Sino-Russian relations has been published in a Western language.[7]

Our book offers an introduction to the history of relations between China and Russia, navigating the historical complexity of this globally influential connection while remaining firmly rooted in the present. Through twelve snapshots, we explore the Sino-Russian relationship in its various dimensions, from high-level politics to everyday encounters along the border. By focusing on moments in which crucial decisions were made rather than providing a chronological account, we highlight recurring challenges and enduring tensions. This selective approach also sheds light on the evolving dynamics of their relations—revealing the unpredictability of the future, which has often turned out differently than contemporary actors had anticipated. Even the very first Russian to travel through China, Ivan Petlin, was surprised by what awaited him.

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[6] Most recently Elizabeth McGuire, *Red at Heart: How Chinese Communists Fell in Love with the Russian Revolution*, New York 2018.

[7] While Philip Snow's remarkable synthesis draws on recent research, the author scarcely ventures to offer his own interpretations, Philip Snow, *China and Russia: Four Centuries of Conflict and Concord*, New Haven 2023. In 1984, Rosemary Quested offered a concise yet dense synthesis, though it lacks a clear characterization of the relationships, Rosemary K. I. Quested, *Sino-Russian Relations: A Short History*, Sydney 1984. Historians in both China and Russia have studied the history of relations between their countries. However, anyone reading some of the older works from these two nations today might believe they are discussing entirely different connections, so stark are the contrasts in their interpretations. This discrepancy was partly due to the censorship both Chinese and Soviet academics faced. It was only with the easing of ideological constraints and increased international academic exchange that a more nuanced understanding emerged, one that sometimes offers insights into the perspective of the other side. Particularly noteworthy are Shen Zhihua et al., *ZhongSu guanxi shigang, 1917-1991*, Peking 2007, and Nikolaj Samojlov, *Rossija i Kitaj v XVII – načale XX veka. Tendencii, formy i stadii sociokul'turnogo vzaimodejstvija*, St. Petersburg 2013.

Chapter 2

Nerchinsk 1689—Setting Borders

The symbolic turning point in the relations between China and Russia, sealed in the east Siberian city of Nerchinsk, deeply affected the Hanoverian polymath. As Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz explained to a European audience: "The Muscovites had expanded their empire immeasurably [...]. In doing so, they had drawn closer to the Chinese Tartars, leading to border disputes." What the empires could not resolve through warfare was instead achieved through negotiations in Nerchinsk during the summer of 1689. In his book *Novissima Sinica* (Das Neueste über China, 1697), Leibniz underscored the role of the Jesuits: "A stable peace was concluded, and as the envoys themselves publicly declared, with such great differences in customs and perspectives, and so much resentment between the peoples, all would have parted without a resolution had they [the Jesuits] not been present."[8]

Jesuit priests in the service of Beijing played a key role in brokering a treaty between Russia and China. The content of the agreements that they penned in Latin on the edges of the steppes revived Leibniz's hopes: in the 1670s, he had already tried to persuade French King Louis XIV to open trade routes to China via Russia. Decades later, he made the same pitch to Tsar Peter I. With the peace treaty between Moscow and Beijing, Leibniz felt vindicated: Russia, he believed, would become the bridge linking the two regions he viewed as representing "the greatest refinement and adornment of humankind—Europe and *Tschina*," as he wrote, instructed his German readership on the proper pronunciation. However, Leibniz's enthusiasm was tempered by a frustrating reality. In his correspondence with the Jesuit fathers in Beijing, Leibniz learned that the Tsar had denied them passage through Russia, just as he had done to the English in the 16th century. The only viable route to the Chinese imperial court was a perilous sea voyage.

Leibnitz was not the only one who viewed the treaty between the two empires as a sensation. The agreement on the steppe border represented a diplomatic breakthrough on multiple levels. It settled the decades-long conflict between China and Russia in the Amur region by defining territorial spheres of influence. The ongoing misunderstandings over

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[8] Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Novissima Sinica, historiam nostri temporis illustratura*, s. l. 1697, pp X2 f., XX3 f. We thank Philipp Winterhager for the translation of the source fragment from Latin into German. Hans Poser, "Leibnizens Novissima Sinica und das europäische Interesse an China," in: Li Wenchao, Hans Poser (ed.), *Das Neueste über China: G. W. Leibnizens »Novissima Sinica« von 1697*, Stuttgart 2000, pp. 11-28.

diplomatic practices were resolved in the Nerchinsk Agreement through a formalized exchange. For the first time in its history, China signed a treaty with another power—and it was not one of the seafaring nations of Western Europe, but the Russian Empire, which, from Europe's perspective at the time, was part of the periphery. While the Treaty of Nerchinsk had a lasting impact on Sino-Russian relations, its success was far from certain.

The episodic confrontations in the sparsely populated, predominantly nomadic imperial borderlands highlighted the need for both sides to territorialize their rule. Only permanent fortified settlements, rather than periodic military expeditions, could enforce their claims to power on the ground. In the mid-17th century, Cossacks in Moscow's service defeated Chinese troops along the Amur, but shortly afterward, the Chinese pushed the boundaries of Russian influence back to Nerchinsk. As the Manchu did not take the decisive step of destroying the fortress there, the Cossacks returned to the Amur. However, the Cossack presence remained weak. In the 1660s, a mere 125 people lived in Nerchinsk, which had been founded less than a decade earlier. In Albazin, near the confluence of the Shilka and Argun rivers, a Cossack detachment under Yerofei Khabarov had occupied the fortified settlement of a Daurian prince in 1651. When Albazin was elevated to a Russian border post in 1671, it was home to around 300 Cossacks and Russian adventurers. Russia's expansion into the inhospitable land along the Amur therefore posed a threat to China on a different level: it challenged the Qing empire's tribute system, in that local tribes could choose which power to align with—and Russia was the cheaper option.[9]

Economic pressures forced Russia to seek contact with China again in the 1670s. After the suppression of a Cossack uprising against Tsar Alexei I in 1671 and the decline of trade with Western Europe due to several wars between England and the Netherlands, the state coffers were empty. In 1674, Russia sent Nikolai Spafari (Nicolae Milescu) on a diplomatic mission to Beijing. Spafari, a Greek-Moldavian aristocrat's son, was an experienced diplomat. As secretary to the Moldavian prince, he had traveled to Potsdam and Paris to meet Frederick William of Brandenburg and Louis XIV. When he attempted to overthrow the ruling prince, the latter mutilated him in Byzantine tradition by severing his nose as a mark of his betrayal. After fleeing, the eloquent Spafari quickly rose up the ranks of the Moscow court, which sent the border-crossing diplomat to Beijing, not least because of his experience on the European diplomatic stage—a fateful decision. Even years later, in 1712, Emperor Kangxi reminded his northern neighbors to send him "reasonable emissaries," but never again anyone of Spafari's

[9] Mark Mancall, *Russia and China: Their Diplomatic Relations to 1728*, Cambridge, Mass. 1971, pp. 23-31, 60.

ilk. The long-reigning Chinese emperor had not forgotten the Russian envoy's behavior in Beijing decades earlier.[10]

Spafari's mission aimed to establish the foundations for trade between Russia and China—the key commodities being furs on the one side and silk on the other. Beijing, on the other hand, was interested in pacifying the conflicts in the border region. However, before they could even get to the heart of the matter, the representatives from both sides failed to even agree on the issue of diplomatic procedures. After a year-long overland journey, Spafari arrived at the Russia–China border in January 1676, where he was received by Mala, Beijing's chief diplomat for the "barbarians." For 50 days, they negotiated matters of diplomatic etiquette, but without success. For ritualistic reasons, neither representative would visit the other in their respective quarters. Nevertheless, they did manage to reach a compromise: agreeing to meet in an improvised tent in an open field. However, on the fundamental issue of which procedures should govern their exchange, they could find no middle ground. With no resolution, the delegations traveled on to Beijing, where the dispute over the rituals escalated.[11]

Spafari insisted on the "custom established in all other countries" of personally delivering the Tsar's letter to the Emperor. In the presence of Han-Chinese officials, the Manchu Mala held firm to the traditional convention of submitting documents to the Emperor only after they had been examined by the court. The Tsar's letter also revealed a lack of understanding about the other side: although the Tsar declared his intention to approach the "most beloved neighbor" with "friendship and love," he simultaneously had to ask the "Bogdykhan" (the holy ruler), as he referred to the Emperor of China, to provide his titles so that he could address him correctly in the future. The Tsar also had a list of his own honorific titles sent to the imperial court, along with previously untranslatable letters from the "Son of Heaven," a list of demands for establishing relations, along with gifts, including sable furs, fabrics, and amber.[12]

While still in Beijing, Spafari attempted to impose his interpretation of European diplomacy, until the imperial officials threatened to refuse him an audience. Eventually, Spafari

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[10] John F. Baddeley, *Russia, Mongolia, China: Being some Record of the Relations between them from the Beginning of the XVIIth Century to the Death of the Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, A. D. 1602-1676*, Vol. 2, New York 1964 [1919], pp. 204-218. His Russianized name "Spafari" was in fact misleading, as it was actually the Romanian term for an aristocratic title, see Mancall, *Russia and China*, 324, fn. 9.

[11] On Spafari's mission: Mancall, *Russia and China*, pp. 65-110.

[12] On the exchange of words between Spafari and Malia in Beijing : Baddeley, *Russia, Mongolia, China*, vol. 2, p. 330. On the Tzarist text : "Gramota carja Alekseja Michajloviča cinskomu imperatoru Šėnczu o posol'stve N. G. Spafarija", in : N. F. Demidova and V. S. Mjasnikov (eds.), *Russko-kitajskie otnošenija v XVII veke: Materialy i dokumenty*, vol. 1 : *1608-1683*, Moskau 1969, pp. 332-334, here p. 333.

agreed to perform the required rituals of respect. However, he hastily and rudely performed the triple kowtow, irritating the officials. His request to be treated as a representative of an equal power was hardly helped by Spafari's claim that the Russian Tsar was superior to the ruler of China. After weeks of waiting, an imperial secretary informed him that Kangxi would not respond to the Tsar's letter and would only establish relations once Russia extradited defectors, secured peace on the border, and sent a different ambassador. Within a few days, Spafari, who had been placed under house arrest, was expelled. However, the failure of his mission had a positive side effect: it allowed Moscow to gather more knowledge about China, particularly about Chinese diplomatic procedures, in much greater detail than during Petlin's and Baikov's times. While Russia failed to establish relations with its eastern neighbor, it set about formalizing its ties with Western European powers. Since the 1670s, Denmark, Prussia, and the Netherlands had maintained permanent representations in Moscow, even though Russia itself did not yet have permanent diplomatic missions abroad.[13]

In the following years, the conflict between China and Russia along the Amur River intensified, soon becoming a central battleground in relations between the two powers. The transformation of the imperial borderlands from a frontier, an open borderland, to a clearly defined boundary was a long process. Initially sparsely populated and located far from political centers of power, the region was shaped by conflicts and cooperation between the local societies on the one hand and by the expanding imperial powers on the other. Historically, the area was dominated by steppe nomads and Tungusic-speaking hunters-gatherers and fishers. Over time, however, these groups lost their political and economic autonomy as the imperial metropoles turned the previously loosely secured frontier into a settled border. This process, moving from a zone referred to in China as the "barbarian frontier" to a developed area, was not completed until the 20th century. Cossacks and Manchu soldiers operating under the banner of the central power, both of which had served as border guards since the 17th century, were only then integrated into the regular armies of both states.[14]

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[13] On Spafari's knowledge production: Afinogenov, *Spies and Scholars*, pp. 39-44. On the formalization of Russian foreign relations with Western Europe: Gleb Kazakov, *Die Moskauer Strelitzen-Revolte 1682: Diplomatische Spionage, Nachrichtenverkehr und Narrativentransfer zwischen Russland und Europa*, Stuttgart 2021, p. 39 f.

[14] Frederick Jackson Turner is regarded as one of the fathers of the frontier thesis, particularly in the North American context. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, New York 1920, pp. 1-38. Herbert E. Bolton expanded upon Turner's idea by placing the focus on the borderlands and foregrounded the interaction between cultural groups. Herbert E. Bolton, *The Spanish Borderlands: A Chronicle of Old Florida and the Southwest*, New Haven 1921. Turner's frontier thesis can be applied to Russia and China to a certain extent. In Russia, parallels can be found in geographical expansion and in the role of the Cossacks, who, like the American pioneers, embodied a particular freedom and independence. However, this frontier mentality in Russia remained limited to the peripheral areas and did not spread to the whole country as it did in the USA. In China,

Domestically, the situation in both empires had changed by the late 17th century. While in Russia, the underage Tsar brothers Ivan IV and Peter I shared the throne, Emperor Kangxi found himself in a position of increasing strength after suppressing Ming-loyalist uprisings in southern China. He ordered raiding expeditions to the north of his empire, aimed at forcing the Cossacks to abandon their fortress at Albazin. When the destruction of surrounding grain fields proved ineffective, Qing troops attacked Albazin in the summer of 1685, razed the Russian border fort, but allowed the Cossacks to withdraw to Nerchinsk. The stubbornness of local actors on both sides undermined the rulers' objectives: in the following year, the Cossacks returned on the orders of the provincial voivode to harvest the grain—whose destruction Kangxi had ordered, but the order had never been carried out on the ground—and to rebuild the fortress settlement. They did so despite the fact that the Tsar's court had already sent a peace mission to Beijing to renounce its claims to the Amur region. Once again, Kangxi sent a punitive expedition, which laid siege to Albazin for months, starving its inhabitants. Only after the arrival of Russian envoys did the Chinese emperor recall his troops.[15]

Expressing his irritation, he sent a letter to the Tsar brothers, assuming that they were unaware of what was happening along their border. Kangxi added that while the Russian ambassadors spoke of "everlasting peace," Russia was doing nothing to bring about such a peace: it was not meeting Chinese demands, not responding to letters, and no longer sending envoys. By this point, however, the Emperor of China had realized that there could be no peace in the Amur region without an agreement with his distant neighbor: "our borders move together with those of Russia," he wrote to the Tsar's court.[16]

Rule in Moscow remained fragile. It was not until the summer of 1689 that a failed plot decided the power struggle in the Kremlin. After two Tsars had died in quick succession, Sofia had been governing on behalf of her incapable brother Ivan and her underage half-brother Peter

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on the other hand, Owen Lattimore's analysis provided a basis for further developing Turner's ideas. Lattimore saw the conflict between the agrarian civilisation of China and the nomadic steppe peoples as central to Chinese frontier history. His view emphasised the manipulative possibilities that both China and the nomads employed in this dynamic frontier region. Owen Lattimore, *Studies in Frontier History: Collected Papers 1928-1958*, Paris 1962, particularly pp. 134-159, 165-179, 469-491, Sabine Dabringhaus, "Grenzzone im Gleichgewicht: China und Russland im 18. Jahrhundert", in : Ronald G. Asch et al. (eds.), *Frieden und Krieg in der Frühen Neuzeit: Die europäische Staatenordnung und die außereuropäische Welt*, Munchen 1999, pp. 577-597, and Andreas Kappeler, "Ruslands Frontier in der Fruhen Neuzeit", in : ebd., pp. 599-613.

[15] On the siege of Albazin: Archeografičeskaja Kommissija (ed.), *Dopolnenija k aktam istoričeskim*, vol. IV, St. Petersburg 1851, No. 8, pp. 26-31, No. 31, pp. 83-85, No. 53, p. 145, No. 116, p. 272, No. 133, pp. 320-327. In more detail: Mancall, *Russia and China*, pp. 111-139.

[16] Baddeley, *Russia, Mongolia, China*, vol. 2, pp. 425-427, here cited p. 426. Kangxi gave his letters to the tsar to a Dutch mission and Italian Jesuits in the hope that they would be forwarded to Moscow, see Joseph Sebes (ed.), *The Jesuits and the Sino-Russian Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689): The Diary of Thomas Pereira*, S. J., Rom 1961, p. 212 f.

since 1682. As Peter approached adulthood, he became a threat to his half-sister's rule. In August and September of 1689, an open power struggle ensued: Peter fled due to rumors of a supposedly imminent assassination attempt by Sofia's supporters, rallied his followers outside Moscow and finally had his half-sister committed to a convent. When the sickly Ivan IV died a few years later, Peter I became the sole ruler of the Russian Empire. His policies are generally considered to have been oriented towards Europe, symbolized by his new capital, St. Petersburg, designed in emulation of Europe. However, as historian Andreas Renner puts it, Peter I also opened "windows to Asia." His reign (officially 1682–1725) was marked by a drive to expand Russia's imperial power into Asia as well.[17]

The foundations for this expansion, though, had been laid by others. While Peter I was fighting for power in the Kremlin at the end of August 1689, Russia and China were concluding the Treaty of Nerchinsk, 5,000 kilometers to the east. When Moscow's representative signed the agreement on August 27, the power struggle in the Kremlin had not yet been decided—Peter I wouldn't prevail until a week and a half later. In an era when such distances seemed unbreachable for both people and messages, foreign policy often did not reflect domestic politics.

For the mission to China that followed Spafari's, Moscow had learned from its mistakes. Instead of sending a diplomat skilled in the European arena, in January 1686, the Tsar's court dispatched Fëdor Golovin, a 35-year-old son of a West Siberian provincial military commander. Instead of trade, his mandate was aimed at settling the border. Rather than visiting the negotiating partners at the imperial court in Beijing, a meeting was proposed at the edge of the steppe, but in a Russian town. However a planned meeting in Selenginsk in 1688 was thwarted by Mongol uprisings, which prevented the Chinese delegation from making the journey.

In the summer of the following year, Golovin, who would later rise to become Russia's chief diplomat and a close confidant of Peter I, gathered his entourage, including Polish translator of Latin Andrzej Białobocki and around 3,000 soldiers, in Nerchinsk. A high-ranking Chinese delegation had traveled there, representing both political and diplomatic continuity. It was led by Songgotu, the emperor's uncle and the first empress's brother, and included the emperor's other uncle, Tong Guogang, and the Manchu Mala, who was experienced in dealings with Russians. The delegation also included Jesuit priests Tomás Pereira and Jean-François

[17] On the power struggle and the authenticity of the attack: Paul Bushkovitch, *Peter the Great: The Struggle for Power 1671-1725*, Cambridge 2006, pp. 159-169 ; Martina Winkler, *Peter I., Zar und Kaiser: Eine Biografie*, Koln 2024. Zur Fenstermetapher: Andreas Renner, "Peter der Grose und Russlands Fenster nach Asien", in : *Historische Zeitschrift* 306/1 (2018), pp. 71-96.

Gerbillon, a Portuguese and a Frenchman, as Latin translators, several Han-Chinese officials, and around 1,500 soldiers. Only the threat of a Russo-Mongolian alliance against Beijing had prompted Kangxi to send such a carefully selected Chinese delegation toward Russia.[18]

The interests of the two empires had been in conflict for decades, both in general territorial matters and local centers of tension. China demanded from Russia that it withdraw from the Amur region, abandon the Albazin fortress, that it crack down on marauding sable-skin hunters, and enter into negotiations over defected tribal leaders. Russia, for its part, which rejected all these demands, was calling for border demarcation along the Amur, trade relations outside of the tribute system, and bilateral diplomacy on equal terms. In the tents on the outskirts of Nerchinsk, these points once again took center stage. But now the urgency of their solution was heightened by the appearance of a third player.

Mongol tribes had joined forces and challenged the Russian and Chinese dominance on the edge of the steppe. The western Mongol Oirats founded the Dzungar Khanate in 1640, which lasted for over 100 years before its territories were incorporated into China and Russia. At its greatest extent in 1688, it stretched from Lake Balkhash in present-day Kazakhstan to Lake Baikal in Russia in the north, and in the south to the inner Chinese provincial border between the autonomous regions of Xinjiang and Tibet. Its Khan, Galdan, whose extradition China demanded in vain from Russia for decades, had significantly expanded his empire at the expense of his neighbors. Even the eastern Mongol Khalkha, whose loose tribal ties had disintegrated in the mid-17th century, fell under Dzungar rule before permanently submitting to Chinese suzerainty in 1691—aligning with Beijing to push back Galdan's Dzungar Empire.[19]

This situation reframed the conflicting interests of Beijing and Moscow. Movement had occurred on both sides in what were previously seen as rigid positions. The Tsar's court allowed Golovin to negotiate over a buffer zone around Albazin, while Kangxi backed down from the demand that Russia abandon Nerchinsk.[20]

Conflicts again flared over the details of the exchange. First, the troops that were to be brought along for protection and as a show of strength needed to be positioned. Then, the delegations had to agree on a symbolic arrangement for their first meeting. According to the extensive memoires of Tomás Pereira, the Portuguese Jesuit in the service of Beijing outside of the city, two tents had been erected next to each other so that the negotiating table could be

[18] On the delegations: Mancall, *Russia and China*, pp. 143, 150.
[19] One of the few, albeit rather factional, complete German accounts: Udo B. Barkmann, *Geschichte der Mongolei oder die »Mongolische Frage«: Die Mongolen auf ihrem Weg zum eigenen Nationalstaat*, Bonn 1999.
[20] On the adjustment of these positions: Mancall, *Russia and China*, pp. 144 f., 151-153.

placed exactly in the middle of them. The Russian tent was luxuriously furnished, with sumptuous carpets and a damask throne. In contrast, the Chinese representatives refused to sit on the floor and hastily had wooden benches constructed. When the delegations first met in mid-August 1689, both sides recited their greetings simultaneously. Symbolic equality could only be established ceremonially.[21]

The Chinese-Russian agreement was drawn up by a third party. Since no compromise emerged on the first two days of negotiations, and the representatives of Beijing and Moscow persisted in their territorial claims, both sides left it to the translators to reach an agreement. In their dual role as interpreters and negotiators, they moved between the two encampments, delivering maps and compromise proposals, and building trust between the foreign powers. Pereira recalled that he had impressed upon the uncle of the Chinese emperor: "you must understand that the Muscovites are reasonable people, not wild beasts." The mediators' role was precarious. In the eyes of the Russians, the Jesuits were in the service of Beijing, both as translators and advisors. Conversely, the priests sensed mistrust from the Chinese because, like the Russians, they were Christians and could communicate directly with Golovin, who knew some Latin. Due to doubts about their loyalty, Pereira and Gerbillon reported that they were replaced by Mongols. However, the likely lack of skill on the part of the Mongolian intermediaries quickly restored mutual trust in the Jesuits. Their position between cultures was key to their success as mediators: since both sides could see them as belonging to their "team", they were able to establish trust between those the parties who were not present at the negotiations.[22]

The core conflict revolved around the border regime. All other disputes could only be resolved in the long term by reaching an agreement on the shared border. At the beginning of the Nerchinsk negotiations, both sides claimed the Amur region as their own historical property and denied the other side's right to exert influence in the area. When Golovin suggested drawing the border between the empires along the Amur River, the Chinese representatives countered that Russia should withdraw to Selenginsk, 650 kilometers west of Nerchinsk, as Golovin later reported to Moscow. Repeatedly, the Qing representatives threatened to break off the negotiations and resume the siege of Albazin. The Jesuits not only succeeded in persuading China's representatives to exercise restraint, but also presented a compromise offer to the

[21] Sebes, *The Diary of Thomas Pereira*, pp. 219-229.
[22] Ibid., pp. 215, 233, 239, 243-245, here p. 225. "The Travels of Father Gerbillon, A Jesuit and French Missionary in China, into Tartary", in : Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, *The General History of China: Containing A Geographical, Historical, Chronological, Political and Physical Description of the Empire of China, Chinese-Tartary, Corea and Thibet*, Bd. 4, London 1739, pp. 214-380.

Russian side: the border would be drawn along the Shilka River, west of the Amur, with the population on both sides to be exchanged, and the Russian fortress of Albazin abandoned. Golovin initially rejected this proposal outright. However, when the Qing troops began to encircle Nerchinsk, he relented and made a counteroffer: Russia would give up Albazin if it could retain Nerchinsk. After two weeks of negotiations, the parties formalized this compromise with the signing of a treaty, accompanied by an oath and vodka. Pereira noted nonchalantly that the Russian "wine made from grain" was "too strong" for the Beijing courtiers.[23]

The Treaty of Nerchinsk was the product of international mediation. Its very form strikingly illustrates this. The first formal agreement that China ever made with a European power was drafted in Latin, Manchu, and Russian, and shortly afterward translated into Chinese and Mongolian. This remarkably short document, made up of just six clauses, portrayed the parties as equals and avoided any symbols of superiority or subjugation. The first two points defined a rough border along the Gorbitsa, Shilka, and Argun rivers. Significant areas of land remained "unmarked," and a solution to this was simply deferred. Clauses three and four provided for the demolition of the Albazin fortress and the expulsion of future defectors. Finally, the treaty stipulated that traders would henceforth only be allowed to cross the border with passports. Both empires committed to punishing crimes in the borderlands with the death penalty.

Diplomatically, China had prevailed. In exchange for the mere prospect of trade, Russia gave up territorial claims and a symbolically significant border fortress. However, in practice, the Nerchinsk agreement resembled more of a declaration of intent than a binding treaty: most of its clauses were largely unenforceable—both with respect to their own subjects and the other party. Still, the agreement marked a significant turning point. For the first time, China and Russia reached an understanding on long-standing disputes, not least concerning the border; and for the first time, they established the principles of their relationship.[24]

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[23] "Statejnyj Spisok F. A. Golovina", in : N. F. Demidova/V. S. Mjasnikov (eds.), *Russko-kitajskie otnošenija v XVII veke. Materialy i dokumenty*, vol. 2 : *1686-1691*, Moscow 1972, pp. 69-641. Sebes, *The Diary of Thomas Pereira*, pp. 237-239, here p. 281. On the negotiation of the border afterwards: Peter C. Perdue, "Boundaries and Trade in the Early Modern World: Negotiations at Nerchinsk and Beijing", in : *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 43/3 (2010), pp. 341-356, here pp. 347-351..

[24] "The Treaty of Nerchinsk, August 27, 1689", in : Mancall, *Russia and China*, pp. 280-283. On the various linguistic variants of the contract text: *Sbornik dogovorov Rossii s Kitaem, 1689-1881*, St. Peterburg 1889 [reprinted as: Michael Weiers (ed.), *Die Verträge zwischen Russland und China 1689-1881*, Bonn 1979]. Their semantic differences are analyzed in: Walter Fuchs, "Der russisch-chinesische Vertrag von Nertschinsk vom Jahre 1689", in : *Monumenta Serica* 4/2 (1940), pp. 546-593.

The agreement also gained significance as a defensive tool against the influence of other parties. When the Mongol leader Galdan sought an alliance with Russia against China in February 1690, the Qing court invoked the Treaty of Nerchinsk and declared any form of Russian support for the Mongols would be a violation of the bilateral agreement. At the same time, the pacification of the borderlands affected the routes via which the still modest trade was carried out. Of the three established routes—from Tobolsk via Bukhara, from Selenginsk through the Mongolian steppe, and from Nerchinsk through Manchuria to the imperial capital Beijing—the latter came to occupy prime position. Largely in order to cover the costs of ongoing wars, Russia established a state monopoly on trade with China in 1698.[25]

The border regime remained fragile. Additional agreements aimed at clarifying the Nerchinsk border in the following years barely succeeded in defining the demarcation of the empires. In sparsely populated areas without clear natural barriers—aside from rivers—the borders had to remain fluid symbols of state claims of domination. In 1727, China and Russia agreed to roughly divide the open steppe in half, erect border markers, and halt nomadic migration. The illusory nature of this objective was revealed just a few months later, when a list was finalized: along the 800 kilometers between the Russian town of Kiakhta and the Argun River, the two empires defined 63 border markers and 15 border posts. At a time when Jesuit astronomers at the Beijing court always recorded the coordinates of their journeys, the location of the scattered border stones seemed noticeably imprecise, for example: “on a summit at the end of the Khurlik range, south of a salt lake.” The posts, too, were a mere illusion. Leaders of nomadic communities were required to remain near specific riverbanks. Soldiers were only stationed at two locations, and one of these posts was manned by just three soldiers. Although the border was scarcely controlled until the 20th century, its establishment served an important function: it allowed the empires to set themselves apart from one another and, in doing so, to define themselves internally.[26]

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[25] Mancall, *Russia and China*, pp. 158-164, 172. "Manchuria" refers to the north-east of China and encompasses the landscapes between the Amur and Ussuri rivers in the north and east, the Liaodong Peninsula in the south and the Great Hinggan Mountains in the west. The name became established in the 19th century. Today, however, the term is avoided in China, although it is historically familiar to the Chinese, as it is primarily associated with the colonial history of Russia and Japan in particular. On this, see Shin’ichi Yamamuro, *Manchuria under Japanese Dominion*, Philadelphia 2006, p. 246 f. and Mark C. Elliott, ″The Limits of Tartary: Manchuria in Imperial and National Geographies″, in : *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59/3 (August 2000), pp. 603-646, here pp. 604-607.

[26] ″The Bura Treaty, August 20, 1727″ and ″Letter Concerning the Demarcation of the Frontier Between Russia and China, Exchanged at Abagaitu Hill, October 12, 1727″, in : Mancall, *Russia and China*, pp. 283-286 and 286-296. On the demarcation of the border: Soren Urbansky, *Steppengras und Stacheldraht: Eine Geschichte der chinesisch-russischen Grenze*, Hamburg 2023, pp. 38-40.

Trade between the two states was given a new foundation with the Treaty of Kiakhta (1727), the second important agreement between China and Russia. Fearing a Chinese trade boycott, the Russian court sent a delegation led by Sava Vladislavich-Raguzinski after the death of Peter I. The Russian-Serbian merchant from the city-state of Ragusa (now Dubrovnik) had to once again take a Latin translator to Beijing. Almost 40 years after the Treaty of Nerchinsk, there was still no one in Moscow who spoke Chinese. Vladislavich-Raguzinski, who had studied in Venice, suggested to the Russian court that they send two young men to Beijing to learn the Chinese language. He succeeded in convincing Chinese officials of the value of this exchange. The trade agreement concluded in Kiakhta stipulated that Russia—unlike any other European power—would be allowed to permanently maintain an Orthodox church mission as a proto-diplomatic representation in Beijing, including accommodations for traders, priests, and language students. Symbolically, this treaty was signed between equal empires, but in reality, Moscow's representative had to travel to Beijing to have the points Russia requested confirmed. A trading post was established near the settlement of Kiakhta at the border, where, along with Starotsurukhaitui on the Argun River, Chinese and Russians could trade freely. A contingent of up to 200 men was now allowed to travel with caravans to Beijing every three years.[27]

Over the years, local economic relationships began to supplant the forms of ritual commodity exchange controlled by the centers. This was because the Chinese imperial court sought to shift trade with Russia from Beijing to the border. While Russian caravans still departed annually for the Chinese capital after 1689, the Kiakhta Treaty placed strict limits on them, and by the mid-18th century, these journeys ceased entirely. The Russian court also played a normative role: by monopolizing trade with China as a state-run affair, it excluded private actors. The primary goods traded were luxury items of the time. Russian state traders exchanged furs and leather for silk, cotton, and initially small amounts of tea. With the Kiakhta Treaty, the nature of transnational trade changed—its locations, forms, actors, and goods. At the Russian border settlement of Kiakhta, the Chinese settlement of Maimaicheng (literally "trade town," today Altanbulag) was established. In the no-man's land between the empires, where fortune-seekers could operate, both legal and illegal trade flourished. By the mid-18th century, the Russian state relinquished its privilege on trade with China. With customs

[27] On Ragusinski-Vladislavitsch's suggestion : "Donošenie S. L. Vladislaviča-Raguzinskogo v Kollegiju inostrannych del o nuždach posol'stva (23.6.1725)", in : N. F. Demidova et al. (ed.), *Russko-kitajskie otnošenija v XVIII veke. Materialy i dokumenty*, vol. 2 : *1725-1727*, Moskau 1990, pp. 33-35. On the treaty: "The Treaty of Kyaktha, October 21, 1727", Mancall, *Russia and China*, pp. 302-310.

exemptions and tax privileges, Kiakhta, the "sandy Venice," grew from a smuggling hub to a monopolistic center for Sino-Russian trade. Russians continued to trade mostly furs, though these were losing their appeal, and trade in textiles from Western European manufacturers began to grow. The Chinese offered fine silk, held a monopoly on tea in Russia for a time, and exported a product that enjoyed great popularity at the time: rhubarb.[28]

At this dual trading post, both goods and people circulated. Kiakhta-Maimaicheng became one of the few places where Russians and Chinese came into contact on a daily basis as early as the 18th century. Without Latin intermediaries, they were left to their own devices and developed their own pidgin, a Sino-Russian mixed language for simple everyday communication. While the ties between the two countries ran deep in the border region through trade, perceptions of the other side at the turn of the 19th century were quite different. While Russian elites and intellectuals developed a taste for chinoiserie, as part of the broader European fascination with Chinese art forms, in China, knowledge about their northern neighbors only really began to spread in the mid-19th century.[29]

The legacy of the Treaties of Nerchinsk and Kiakhta became deeply embedded in both Russian and Chinese traditions. It is hard to understand the cultural history of Russia without acknowledging its penchant for tea. In 1822, the Russian court banned the import of Chinese tea via Great Britain to shore up its own direct imports from China. The routes through which tea leaves traveled from the Chinese mountains to the rest of the world still mark the name of this hot beverage today. In those countries to which Chinese tea originally arrived by land, it is usually called *chai* (from the Chinese word *cha*), including in the transit country Russia (*chai*). Wherever tea came by sea (with the exception of Portugal), it is called *tea*, *thee*, or *Tee* (from a southeastern Chinese dialect word *te*).[30]

In China, the Nerchinsk Treaty laid an important foundation for the state's self-perception as a multiethnic empire. With the rise of the Manchu Qing Dynasty, the imperial

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[28] Klaus Heller, *Der russisch-chinesische Handel von seinen Anfängen bis zum Ausgang des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Erlangen 1980, pp. 10, 20-25, 30, 38. On the fur trade in Russia: Robert Kindler, *Robbenreich: Russland und die Grenzen der Macht am Nordpazifik*, Hamburg 2022.

[29] On Pidgin back then and today: Sayana Namsaraeva, "Border Language: Chinese Pidgin Russian with a Mongolian 'Accent'", in : *Inner Asia* 16 (2014), pp. 116-138. On local trade: Eva-Maria Stolberg, "Interracial Outposts in Siberia: Nerchinsk, Kiakhta, and the Russo-Chinese Trade in the Seventeenth/ Eighteenth Centuries", in : *Journal of Early Modern History* 4/3-4 (2000), pp. 322-336 ; Soren Urbansky, "'Vasily' of China and his Russian Friends: Smugglers and their Transcultural Identities", in : Dan Ben-Canaan et al. (eds.), *Entangled Histories: The Transcultural Past of Northeast China*, New York 2014, pp. 15-33. On entangled perceptions: Nikolaj A. Samojlov, "Rossija i Kitaj v XVIII – načale XX v. Tendencii vzaimodejstvija i vzaimovlijanija", in : *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta* 13/2 (2010), pp. 3-15.

[30] On the transportation paths of tea: Martha Avery, *The Tea Road: China and Russia Meet Across the Steppe*, Beijing 2003. On illegal tea trade and smuggling: D. I. Stacheev, *Ot Kitaja do Moskvy. Istorija jaščika čaju*, St. Petersburg 1870, pp. 35-68.

court's understanding of "China" changed. While the Ming court understood "China" as the core territories of the Han population—the "Middle Kingdom" (Chinese: *Zhongguo*)—the foreign rule of the Manchus and their expansion in all directions led to an understanding that recognized China as a multiethnic empire. It stretched from Manchuria through Mongolia to Xinjiang and Tibet. This shift was reflected in the fact that the Manchu elite abandoned their old self-designation of "Great Qing" (Manchu: *Daicing Gurun*) and began calling their state "China" (Manchu: *Dulimbai Gurun*, synonymous with *Zhongguo*) in Manchu. One of the first documents to use this term was the Nerchinsk Treaty, where China referred to itself as such and understood itself as a multiethnic empire. This imperial self-interpretation continues to this day, but in the guise of new concepts.[31]

In contrast, the Treaty of Nerchinsk has occupied an ambivalent place in the collective memory of China, the Soviet Union, and present-day Russia, and continues to do so. Even in the 1950s, when the two socialist states swore eternal loyalty to each other, historians primarily focused on the feelings of national humiliation that supposedly stemmed from this early-modern treaty. While they repeated the socialist declarations of friendship, they did not root them in the tradition of the Nerchinsk Treaty. On the contrary, the contested territories of the 17th century were claimed as the legitimate possessions of their respective homelands, and the claims of the other side were firmly rejected. "The military conquest of the Amur by the Qing regime," a Soviet historian stated in 1958, "represented an aggression against Russia." The Treaty of Nerchinsk had only come about because the "hostile policies" of the opposing party had supposedly been met with concessions and leniency, as Chinese and Soviet researchers both asserted. The memory of the first joint treaty in the communist brother states remained a contradictory mixture of socialist rhetoric of friendship and national grumbling over perceived losses.[32]

In the 21st century, references to the Nerchinsk peace remain equally paradoxical. Although China and Russia are regimes steeped in history that base their present-day imperial ambitions on supposed traditions, their friendship is conspicuously devoid of historical references. The ahistorical notion of an eternally stable relationship untouched by historical

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[31] Zhao Gang, "Reinventing China: Imperial Qing Ideology and the Rise of Modern Chinese National Identity in the Early Twentieth Century", in : *Modern China* 32/1 (2006), pp. 3-30, here p. 8.

[32] Praskov'ja T. Jakovleva, *Pervyj russko-kitajskij dogovor 1689 goda*, Moskau 1958, p. 3, 13 (quote); Viktor G. Ščeben'kov, *Russko-kitajskie otnošenija v XVII v.*, Moskau 1960, p. 5, 223 (quote). Gong Yuzhi, a high-ranking party theorist of the CCP, recalls that the party's propaganda department used the example of a Beijing professor who called the Treaty of Nerchinsk in the mid-1950s a "loss experience" to construct an internal disciplinary case until Mao Zedong proved the scolded professor right, see. Gong Yuzhi, *Gong Yuzhi wencun*, vol. 1, Schanghai 2000, pp. 299-313.

ruptures papers over concrete painful experiences. Moreover, any potential projection of the authoritarian alliance of the 21st century onto the Treaty of Nerchinsk would weaken the alliance. For both sides, it would raise uncomfortable questions. The compromise of 1689 does not fit into the authoritarian logic of the present, nor can the significant shift in borders in Russia's favor since then be explained by the Nerchinsk agreement. As such, the first bilateral treaty can hardly be framed as the founding myth of an eternal friendship.

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The agreement of Nerchinsk was an international endeavor. Mediated by foreign translators and written in three languages, it caught the attention of observers as far away as Hanover. While the national historiographies of the two signatories often describe it as an act of mutual advantage, international historians emphasize the role of third parties: Jesuits as mediators and Mongols as common enemies.[33] However, the question arises as to how the agreement of 1689 could have been achieved in the first place, and what conditions and mechanisms enabled it. The transformation of tribute diplomacy—which was deeply rooted in both China and Russia and sought to ensure ritualized submission—into a treaty-based diplomacy among equals cannot be explained solely by the involvement of mediating outsiders.

It was the confrontation between the two empires in the steppe that led to the agreement. Three factors provided fertile ground for the negotiations, making both keen to break the escalation dynamics. Since the mid-17th century, groups of Russian Cossack had repeatedly invaded the heartland of the Manchu Empire, and each time, the Chinese had demolished the Russian fortresses, giving both parties a shared concern. Meanwhile, defectors who had evaded submission to the tsar and the emperor were to be sent back to the other side. And there was a common enemy that brought Russia and China together: the rise of united Mongol tribes threatened the fragile balance of power on the empires' borders.

However, it was only the meeting of the emissaries in the steppe that enabled the peace treaty. Three mechanisms facilitated the agreement: European Jesuits, who mediated between the powers and had to maintain their neutrality with respect to Mongol translators, were central to translation, trust-building, and finding compromise. A nearly neutral location, the grasslands near Nerchinsk, allowed the negotiations to take place: since the ceremonial constraints of the imperial courts were absent, as was the courtly public that insisted on ritual observance. And

[33] Mancall, *Russia and China*, pp. 149, 155 ; Perdue, ≫Boundaries and Trade in the Early Modern World≪, p. 342.

the steppe created presence and absence: everything that could not be directly discussed could be clarified through intermediaries who moved between the camps. With its contractual balancing of interests, demarcated borders, and the initiation of nascent trade relations, the Treaty of Nerchinsk laid the foundation for a largely stable relationship between Russia and China that would last for almost a century and a half.

Chapter 12

Kyiv 2022 – Interpreting War

A petite woman stands on a balcony amid the ruins of the Mariupol theater, a bombed-out landmark in the Ukrainian port city. Dressed in a white shirt and black trousers, the opera singer Wang Fang performs the Soviet war anthem "Katyusha" in Chinese. The date is September 7, 2023. Just a year and a half earlier, on March 16, 2022, Russian airstrikes had reduced the theater to rubble, killing several hundred Ukrainian civilians who had sought refuge inside. Outside, on the square in front of the building, they had written the word "children" in huge white letters, clearly visible from the air. The Russian bombers targeted them anyway. Wang Fang's performance provoked outrage. Petro Andryushchenko, an advisor to Mariupol's exiled mayor, responded sharply: "I hope that the ghosts of the [...] Mariupol residents killed by the Russians liked it so much that they will haunt her [Wang Fang] in her nightmares for the rest of her life."[34]

Her choice of song was no happenstance. "Katyusha," a patriotic folk tune from the 1930s, was meant to inspire Soviet Red Army soldiers in their fight against Nazi Germany. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the song quickly gained popularity and became a staple of the Sino-Russian musical repertoire—a folkloric classic that glorifies relations between the two countries through music. It was performed again when Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping celebrated their nations' friendship in Beijing in May 2024.

Denis Pushilin, Putin's proxy in the so-called "Donetsk People's Republic," shared a recording of Wang's performance on the Russian social network Vkontakte, visibly moved by her voice. The footage soon went viral in China, where it aligned with Russian propaganda depicting the war as an "anti-Nazi campaign." Wang's husband, Zhou Xiaoping—an advisor to China's parliament and a well-known nationalist blogger—defended his wife on Weibo, claiming that the theater had been bombed by "Ukrainian neo-Nazis" and that Wang's singing had brought local residents to tears. Ukraine reacted swiftly. Since Wang had traveled to Russian-occupied Donetsk as part of a group of Chinese bloggers, the Foreign Ministry imposed an entry ban on her and her delegation.

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[34] Telegram post by Petro Andrjuščenko (September 7, 2023), available online at: {https://t.me/andriyshTime/13273}.

Meanwhile, in China, news and footage of Wang's performance were quickly censored and scrubbed from search engines. Even Hu Xijin, the longtime editor-in-chief of a nationalist tabloid and a prominent pro-government analyst, weighed in. He warned his nearly 25 million followers that Wang's actions risked creating a feeling among Chinese citizens that they were "involved" in the conflict—which, according to the author, is both untrue and goes against the country's interests. His post, too, was soon deleted. Wang Fang's controversial performance in the ruins of the Mariupol Drama Theater underscores a delicate reality: for Beijing, Russia's war against Ukraine is both an opportunity and a precarious balancing act.[35]

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, fundamentally altered its political and economic relations with China. However, signs of a deepening Sino-Russian alliance had already emerged weeks earlier. While most Western leaders avoided the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics in Beijing that February, China accorded special recognition to Vladimir Putin. Xi Jinping welcomed him as a guest of honor at the State Guesthouse—the first foreign head of state to receive such an invitation since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. During the visit, Putin and Xi issued their Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on International Relations Entering a New Era and on Global Sustainable Development. In this extensive communiqué, they proclaimed a new phase of bilateral relations with "no limits," surpassing the political and military alliances of the Cold War. The declaration also marked the first instance in which Beijing's leadership publicly criticized NATO.[36]

The communiqué sparked global speculation about a rising authoritarian challenge to the liberal world order. For the first time since the mid-20th century, China and Russia seemed to have formed a geopolitical axis. However, international analysts describe their partnership as an "undeclared alliance"—one defined as much by its omissions as by its shared interests.

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[35] Both Ukrainian and international media reported: Olena Čerkasec', "Kitajs'ka spivačka Fan Wan vikonala 'Katjušu' u zrujnovanomu teatri u Mariupoli," in: *Ukraïna Moloda* (September 8, 2023), available online at: {https://umoloda.kyiv.ua/number/0/119/178048}; Tetjana Lozovenko, "U Mariupol' priïchali kitajski blogeri. MZS choče zaboroniti v'ïzd vsim 'gastroleram' z KNR," in: *Ukraïnska Pravda* (September 8, 2023), available online at: {https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2023/09/8/7418945/}; Julia Struck, "Chinese Opera Singer Performs at Destroyed Mariupol Theatre," in: *Kyiv Post* (September 8, 2023), available online at: {https://www.kyivpost.com/post/21413#comments-block}; "Singing in the Ruin," in: *The Economist* (September 14, 2023), available online at: {https://www.economist.com/china/2023/09/14/a-chinese-opera-stars-ode-to-russia-from-a-ukrainian-bomb-site}.

[36] "Sovmestnoe zajavlenie Rossijskoj Federacii i Kitajskoj Narodnoj Respubliki o meždunarodnych otnošenijach, vstupajuščich v novuju ėpochu, i global'nom ustojčivom razvitii" (February 4, 2022), in: *Prezident Rossii*, availabe online at: {http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5770}.

The language of the February 2022 agreement was kept deliberately vague, signaling symbolic support rather than concrete commitments, particularly in terms of military assistance.[37]

Russia's war against Ukraine has inevitably reshaped China's relationship with Russia and the broader world order in which their alliance operates. The failure of what was meant to be a swift military campaign—still euphemistically referred to as a "special military operation" in Russia—has further shifted the balance of power in China's favor. The two countries are not just constantly pursuing shared interests, they are also continually renegotiating the balance of power between them. And yet, the long-term trajectory of their relationship remains uncertain, tied as it is to the war's course and ultimate outcome. One thing is clear, however: Beijing has no interest in seeing Putin defeated. Which leaves at least three possible scenarios. A Russian victory could reduce the current asymmetry that China enjoys. A protracted war, however, might strain bilateral ties, as China seeks to shield its economy from the costs of openly supporting Moscow. Thirdly, Russia's imperialism in Europe could lead to it becoming a vassal in Asia.

Wars have historically shaped Sino-Russian relations. The Korean War (1950–1953) earned the newly founded People's Republic respect in the Kremlin, while the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979–1989) discredited Moscow in Beijing's eyes. Sociologist Gilbert Rozman sees Putin's decision to invade Ukraine as both a sign of confidence in China's support and an act of desperation, reflecting Russia's shift from an equal partnership to a subordinate position. If Putin had hoped to rebalance the relationship, the gamble failed, because since 2022, the power disparity has only grown.[38]

National defense spending highlights the widening gap in military power between China and Russia. In 2021, China's defense budget stood at $285.9 billion, while Russia's was just $65.9 billion. Moscow's military supremacy has grown questionable: the Chinese People's Liberation Army continues to send officers to Russian military academies, valuing the combat experience of Russian instructors—something China itself lacks. And in July 2024, Chinese soldiers even appeared on NATO's Polish border during China's first-ever joint military exercise with Belarus, Russia's closest ally.[39]

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[37] Graham Allison, "Xi and Putin Have the Most Consequential Undeclared Alliance in the World," in: *Foreign Policy* (March 23, 2023), availabe online at: {https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/23/xi-putin-meeting-china-russia-undeclared-alliance/}.

[38] Gilbert Rozman, "How Did the Ukraine War Change Putin's 'Turn to the East'?," in: *Asian Perspective* 47/3 (2023), pp. 349-370.

[39] Frederik Brekk et al., "Gewichtsverschiebung. Russlands Militärkooperation mit China," in: *Osteuropa* 75/7-9 (2023), pp. 253-262, here p. 254

In the first year after the full-scale invasion began, China intensified its contacts with Russia—a country that, due to its international isolation, is increasingly dependent on a deepening of their authoritarian alliance. By 2023, it was clear that Beijing was shaping the bilateral relationship more firmly to its own advantage than it had before the all-out attack on Ukraine. Russia is gradually becoming a junior partner and is being made to pay a high price for this. This self-inflicted dilemma is difficult to resolve, as China projects a caring image on the surface, while behind the scenes, its relations with the US and its allies are more strained than ever.

On February 24, 2022, at the start of the invasion, the Russian Federation broke the defensive consensus that had previously united both countries in their rhetorical opposition to the US-dominated world order. Russia's war against Ukraine now serves as a precedent for the fantasies of world domination among the authoritarian leadership in Moscow and Beijing, radically shaking up the global political landscape. Initially at least, this stance met with vocal international criticism from experts on and in China. Several academics warned that Beijing had little to gain from such a cozy alliance with the Kremlin. For instance, Zhao Long, deputy director of the Shanghai Institute of International Relations, highlights a key difference between the ideas in Beijing and those in Moscow: "Russia wants to destroy the existing international system in order to build a new one. China wants to reshape the current system by taking a more important place in it."[40]

But what exactly was Beijing's stance on Russia's war? There is ample evidence to suggest that the Kremlin did not inform China's political leadership in advance about the scope of the planned invasion. It is true that, under the guise of annual military maneuvers, Russia had been steadily increasing its troop presence along the Ukrainian border since spring 2021—a development that drew worldwide criticism but received no comment from either the Chinese Foreign Ministry or the Ministry of Defense. According to Western intelligence reports, Chinese diplomats reportedly asked their Russian counterparts to postpone the attack until after the Winter Olympics. If such a request was made, Moscow complied: Russian troops invaded Ukraine four days after the Olympic closing ceremony. Political observers in China were, in any case, taken aback by the scale of Russia's invasion. Additionally, there was a noticeable lack of evacuation plans for the several thousand Chinese citizens present in Ukraine when the war began. When the state-led evacuation finally commenced, it was overlooked that many

[40] "Des experts chinois relativisent l'amitié 'sans limites' entre la Chine et la Russie," in: *Le Monde* (March 2, 2023), p. 3.

Chinese citizens had deep roots in Ukraine—such as vlogger Sun Guang. Having lived in Kyiv for over two decades, Sun initially opted against evacuation because his Ukrainian family members would not have been allowed to come with him. Only later did some of them leave.[41]

During the first year of the war, Beijing attempted an almost impossible balancing act: strengthening strategic ties with Russia while preserving the pre-war framework necessary to safeguard China's position in the global economy and international community. Since February 24, 2022, China's government has maintained an ambiguous stance—often described by Western European experts as "pro-Russian neutrality." This ambivalence was already apparent during the first days of the invasion, suggesting that the Kremlin had either not informed Beijing of its plans or had done so only partially. On the very first day of the war, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying denied claims that Moscow had acted with Beijing's backing, insisting that Russia was a great power making its own foreign policy decisions. She also emphasized that Sino-Russian relations were not aimed at confrontation with third parties: "China has no interest in the friend-or-foe dichotomous Cold War thinking and a patchwork of so-called allies and small cliques, and has no intention of following such a path." The following day, another ministry spokesperson, Wang Wenbin, struck a similarly contradictory note. He initially stressed China's respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states—only to immediately qualify this idea, stating: "we recognize the special historical complexities surrounding the Ukraine issue and understand Russia's legitimate security concerns."[42]

Despite Beijing negotiating a rhetorical tightrope between Russia's "legitimate security concerns," which in Beijing's eyes are justified in light of NATO's expansion efforts to the east, and the "sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states," China's government has been supporting Moscow on an economic, geopolitical, and technological level since February

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[41] On the Chinese government's silence regarding the deployment of Russian troops: US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *China-Russia Interactions Leading up to the Invasion of Ukraine: Timeline of Key Events Leading up to the Invasion, Including Points of Russia-China Communication and Engagement*, available online at: {https://www.uscc.gov/research/china-russia-interactions-leading-invasion-ukraine}. On China's possible request to begin the invasion after the end of the Olympic Games, cf. Edward Wong/Julian E. Barnes, "China Asked Russia to Delay Ukraine War Until After Olympics, Biden Officials Say," in: *The New York Times* (March 22, 2022), available online at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/02/us/politics/russia-ukraine-china.html}. On the chaotic evacuation of Chinese citizens from Ukraine: "Thousands of Chinese Nationals Stranded in Ukraine Amid Warnings Over Online Jokes," in: *Radio Free Asia* (February 28, 2022), available online at: {https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/ukraine-chinese-02282022144412.html}. On the fate of Sun Guang and his family: Nicole Gong, "Jingxindongpo 32 xiaoshi. Wukelan huaren koushu cheli Jifu," in: *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* (8. März 2022), available online at: {https://www.abc.net.au/chinese/2022-03-09/chinese-people-evacuating-from-ukraine/100888360}.

[42] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference (24.02.2022)" as well as "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference (25.02.2022)," originally available online at: {https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng}. The referenced sources have since been removed by the Chinese Foreign Ministry. Copies are preserved in the authors' private archives and can be provided upon request.

2022—and is securing benefits for itself in the process: with the volume of bilateral trade between 2021 and 2023 increasing more than one and a half times, totaling some 240 billion US dollars in 2023. In economic terms, the war is a gift from Russia to China, because it has opened up the Russian market to Chinese companies, made imports of raw materials from Russia cheaper, and enhanced the status of the Chinese currency, the renminbi, globally. In 2023, Chinese goods accounted for 38% of Russian imports, while 31% of Russian exports went to China. China has now achieved a virtual monopoly on many goods that Russia imports. For example, car exports to Russia increased six-fold in 2023 compared to the previous year, and exports of trucks and tractors increased seven-fold. Russia has also become China's gas station—and has replaced Saudi Arabia as the country's most important oil supplier. Chinese oil companies such as Sinopec benefited from considerable price reductions after Western oil companies and trading houses left the Russian market due to sanctions. As a result, Beijing is ultimately filling Moscow's war chest, even though it cannot compensate for the losses of its previous customers.[43]

Western sanctions are a key catalyst for these intensified economic relations. At the 7th Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok in September 2022, Putin castigated the punitive measures imposed by the West as short-sighted and dangerous for the entire world. They were doomed to failure, he said, because the Asia-Pacific states were the "new centers of economic and technological growth." The Russian president assumed that most countries in the region would not accept the sanctions regime. The reality is more complex: the Western measures not only have far-reaching and lasting effects on the Russian economy. They also reinforce the norms of the international order, which other non-democratic states cannot escape. This also applies to Central Asia: a look at Kazakhstan, for example, shows that even the states of Russia's "immediate neighbors" do not fully support the Kremlin's policies. Despite Russia's military support for the Kazakh regime in early 2022, Kazakhstan has shown little willingness to publicly or substantially support the Russian position in the Ukraine war. This illustrates the complexity of geopolitical dynamics, which by no means necessarily follow the trends Putin has conjured up.[44]

Despite the closer ties between China and Russia, their partnership is not "without limits". China's economic ties with the G7 countries are many times larger than their ties with

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[43] Alexandra Prokopenko, "What Are the Limits to Russia's 'Yuanization'?," in: *Carnegie Politika* (27. Mai 2024), available online at: {https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/05/china-russia-yuan?lang=en}.
[44] "Plenarnoje zasedanie VĖF-2022. Glavnoje iz vystupleniya Vladimira Putina," in: *Vedomosti* (September 7, 2022), available online at: {https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2022/09/07/939640-plenarnoe-zasedanie-vef-2022}.

Russia: only a few Chinese companies favor Russia over the global market. The same applies to its banking sector. Financial institutions carefully weigh up the risks that doing business with Moscow poses for their global business relationships. Both countries support the move away from the US dollar. However, both Chinese and Russian companies and financial institutions are struggling with the idea of breaking away from the global, dollar-dominated financial system. China's hesitant interest in new gas pipelines also shows that Beijing is anxious not to become too dependent on a single source of raw materials.[45]

What's more, China has also suffered economic losses as a result of Russia's brutal war. Until early 2022, Beijing maintained tangible economic interests in Ukraine and was its most important trading partner. In 2021, around one-fifth of Chinese grain imports came from Ukraine. After the Black Sea Grain Initiative came into force in August 2022—an accord Moscow signed under pressure from Beijing—ships once again began calling at Chinese ports. China's dependence on these imports is particularly problematic, as it produces only about two-thirds of its own food supplies. China's appetite for farmland had even exceeded what the pro-Russian government of Ukraine under then-President Viktor Yanukovych desired in 2013. Chinese authorities had already announced an agreement for a 50-year lease of southern Ukrainian fields covering three million hectares—about the size of the state of Massachusetts in the US—before the Ukrainian side withdrew the following day. Prior to Putin's war, China also showed interest in Ukraine's arms industry, with both the state and private companies investing in the country's infrastructure, including the ports of Odesa, Mariupol, and Mykolaiv. Before the full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukraine served as a crucial transit hub on the "Belt and Road Initiative," acting as a relay on the "New Eurasian Land Bridge" between the EU and China. This position offered an attractive alternative to overland transportation through Russia. From both an economic and geopolitical standpoint, a Ukraine that was not aligned with either Western Europe or Russia posed the ideal trading partner for Beijing.[46]

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[45] Chris Anstey, "There are Limits to China's 'No Limits' Partnership with Russia," in: *Bloomberg* (May 18, 2024), available online at: {https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2024-05-18/bloomberg-new-economy-the-limits-in-china-s-no-limits-russia-partnership}.

[46] Sebastian Hoppe provides a concise summary of the economic interdependence between the two countries before 2022, "Chinas Reaktion auf Russlands Krieg gegen die Ukraine. Strategische Zurückhaltung mit Moskauer Schlagseite," in: *Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik* 15/2-3 (2022), pp. 125-137, here pp. 131-133. About the grain deal, cf. "Ukraine erobert Gebiete im Osten zurück," in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (September 9, 2022), available online at: {https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/ukraine-erobert-russisch-besetzte-gebiete-im-osten-zurueck-18303466.html}. On the failed farmland lease in 2013: Mandy Zuo, "Ukraine to Become China's Largest Overseas Farmer in 3 m Hectare Deal," in: *South China Morning Post* (September 22, 2013), available online at: {https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1314902/ukraine-become-chinas-largest-overseas-farmer-3m-hectare-deal}.

At a political level, China did not condemn Russia's war against Ukraine and always abstained from the corresponding votes at the United Nations, be it the resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 or the one on the humanitarian consequences of the war in Ukraine in 2022. In doing so, China has remained true to its voting behavior of recent decades, symbolically abstaining and thereby asserting neutrality. In the current situation, this tradition aligns with Beijing's geopolitical interests, which in key areas overlap with Moscow's: both oppose the expansion of US-led alliances in Europe and Asia. Beijing also worries that a Russian defeat would bolster global democratization efforts, allegedly led by the United States—to China's detriment. Additionally, China is working to build an anti-sanctions coalition in the Global South.[47]

Finally, Beijing also supports Moscow in technological terms. While China, unlike North Korea or Iran, has so far shied away from direct military aid to Russia, it tolerates and promotes the Russian import of dual-use goods, such as off-road vehicles, machine tools, semiconductors, ball bearings, and other components that can be used for both civilian and military purposes. Given Russia's reliance on these goods, China could be seen as having a special responsibility to intervene. But since this does not align with its interests, it chooses not to. As such, it plays a key role in keeping Russia's war machine running.[48]

Despite China's support, however, the limits of the Sino-Russian alliance became evident during the first year of the war. In mid-September 2022, Xi and Putin met on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. This was the CCP General Secretary's first trip abroad since the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the Russian meeting minutes, the two leaders discussed the invasion of Ukraine. During their conversation, Putin admitted that China's leadership had "questions and concerns" about the invasion while simultaneously thanking China for its "balanced position." These diplomatic phrases suggest that China's harsh criticism of Russia was expressed behind closed doors. Notably, the Chinese minutes made no mention of Ukraine or China's limitless partnership with Russia. Less than a week later, Putin delivered a defiant speech announcing partial mobilization, while shortly afterward, China's Foreign Ministry called for a ceasefire. During the G20 summit on the Indonesian island of Bali in November 2022, Chinese negotiators initially

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[47] China's voting behavior is documented in: Economic and Security Review Commission, *China's Position on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine. Key Events and Statements from February 21, 2022 through April 30, 2024*, available online at: {https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-position-russias-invasion-ukraine}.

[48] Cf. e.g., Markus Garlauskas et al., "China's Support for Russia Has Been Hindering Ukraine's Counteroffensive," in: *Atlantic Council* (November 15, 2023), available online at: {https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/chinas-support-for-russia-has-been-hindering-ukraines-counteroffensive}.

opposed referring to Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a "war" in the joint final communiqué. Beijing's delegation ultimately softened the wording so that the declaration stated that "most" G20 members condemned the war in Ukraine "in the strongest terms."[49]

In the first year after the full-scale invasion, China's pro-Russian neutrality often manifested in hesitant and unilateral proposals to end the conflict. Broad sections of the international community had demanded a stronger role from China. As early as March 2022, even Western European China analysts were discussing Beijing as a potential mediator. However, China initially remained cautious, avoiding deeper involvement in a conflict from which it benefited both economically and geopolitically. It was not until exactly one year after the Russian invasion began that Xi presented a so-called "twelve-point peace proposal," which largely adopted Russian positions. The document reiterated familiar Chinese arguments on the war: it emphasized Beijing's support for the UN Charter and the territorial integrity of states while condemning unilateral sanctions and criticizing the expansion of US-led military alliances. Rather than offering a serious path to peace, the paper aimed to bolster China's image as a responsible world power, particularly among countries of the Global South. For European and American observers, however, it served as further evidence that China is not an independent mediator but an ally of the Kremlin and a supporter of Russian interests.[50]

The war is forcing Beijing to reassess a number of its guiding foreign policy principles. What does this mean for China's Taiwan strategy? While Xi and Putin's joint statement on February 4, 2022, reaffirmed the "One China principle," it made no mention of Ukraine. Xi's

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[49] For the different versions of the minutes of the meeting between Xi and Putin in Samarkand cf. the Russian version: "Vstreča s Predsedatelem KNR Si Czin'pinom," in: *Prezident Rossii* (September 15, 2022), available online at: {http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69356}. For the Chinese version, cf. "Xi Jinping huijian Eluosi zongtong Pujing (15.09.2022)," in: *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, originally available online at: {https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/2022/t20220915_10766678}. The referenced source has since been removed by the Chinese Foreign Ministry. For the manuscript of Vladimir Putin's speech on partial mobilization, cf. "Obraščenie Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii," in: *Prezident Rossii* (September 21, 2022), available online at: {http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390}. On the Chinese call, cf. Evan Gershkovich, "China Calls for Cease-Fire in Ukraine," in: *The Wall Street Journal* (September 21, 2022), p. 4. On the G20 Summit, cf. Christian Shepherd, "In G-20 Talks, China Objects to Calling Russian Invasion of Ukraine a 'War'," in: *The Washington Post* (November 15, 2022), available online at: {https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/11/15/china-xi-ukraine-g20-war-russia/}; "G20 Bali Leaders' Declaration," Bali, Indonesien (November 15-16, 2022), available online at: {https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/16/g20-bali-leaders-declaration/}.

[50] Cf. "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine," in: *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China* (February 24, 2023), originally available online at: {https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805}. In March 2022, Nadine Godehardt and Maximilian Mayer expressed hope that China might take on a mediating role, cf. Nadine Godehardt/Maximilian Mayer, "Der Weg nach Moskau führt über Peking," in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (March 2, 2022), available online at: {https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/ukraine-krieg-warum-russland-nur-mit-china-isoliert-werden-kann-17840124.html}. Alexander Gabuev offers a sharp analysis, "Inside China's Peace Plan for Ukraine," in: *Carnegie Politika* (March 1, 2023), available online at: {https://carnegieendowment.org/russiaeurasia/politika/2023/03/inside-chinas-peace-plan-for-ukraine?lang=en}.

muted support for Moscow's extensive list of demands also sent a signal to the United States that China does not want its relations with the West to be dictated by Putin. Even after a year of full-blown war, there has been no sign that China is aligning its Taiwan strategy with Russia's military approach. Despite short-term tensions in the Pacific and Taiwan's heightened state of alert, the US has more influence on China's attitude toward Taiwan than Russia's actions seem to. Official Chinese statements emphasize the differences between the conflicts. Meanwhile, Russia's war in Ukraine could put China at a strategic disadvantage in any potential naval blockade or invasion of Taiwan, as the unity of the Western alliance and the strengthening of NATO exert an influence on China's planning. After all, these states are unlikely to retreat behind the sanctions regime imposed on Russia. In principle, Taiwan cannot be equated with Ukraine. As an island, Taiwan is easier to defend and is heavily armed. Nevertheless, China is watching Western sanctions against Russia and paying close attention to the weapons systems and tactics used in the war.[51]

Domestic Chinese propaganda criticizes the United States much more harshly than the vague, ambivalent pro-Russian stances articulated on the diplomatic stage. Washington's "hegemonic aspirations" are blamed for the war in Ukraine. For example, mid-March 2022 saw the *Jiefangjun Bao*—the daily newspaper of the People's Liberation Army—run a headline reading, "Fanning the Flames: Diplomacy that Harbours Evil Intentions and Stirs up Trouble," accusing Washington of having "lit the 'fuse' for today's war in Ukraine." The article claimed that "in order to suppress and encircle Russia and compromise the strategic space of this great country, the United States have long resorted to two major 'dirty tricks': firstly, the eastward expansion of NATO and secondly, the incitement of 'color revolutions' in Russia's backyard." While the United States benefits from the escalation, Ukraine is portrayed as the victim of the power struggle, having provoked Russia by turning to the "West." Additionally, Chinese media initially spread anti-American conspiracy theories originating from Russia, such as the claim that the United States were operating bioweapons laboratories in Ukraine.[52]

In both its national and international media, China portrays itself as a neutral and responsible player committed to minimizing global damage. By doing so, Beijing seeks to protect its reputation and avoid being perceived as part of an imperialist, warmongering alliance with Russia. Chinese media often emphasize this self-image as a promoter of global

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[51] Hoppe, "Chinas Reaktion auf Russlands Krieg gegen die Ukraine," p. 133.
[52] "Shanfengdianhuo, Wukelan jushi jinzhang de shizuoyongzhe," in: *Jiefangjun Bao* (March 17, 2022), p. 4. Very similar comments can also be found in other newspapers, for example: "Meiguo dui weiji fu you buke tuixie de zeren," in: *Renmin Ribao* (March 29, 2022), p. 3.

peace and economic stability while expressing understanding for Russia's security and sovereignty interests. They advocate for a "responsible" and "dialog-based" resolution to the conflict. [53]

As the war endures, voices critical of Russia are increasingly silenced in China through censorship and self-censorship. The Foreign Ministry, state media, and other official bodies avoid referring to the conflict as a war, instead calling it a "Ukrainian crisis" (*Wukelan weiji*) or "Ukrainian problem" (*Wukelan wenti*), thereby sidestepping any direct mention of Russia. When the term "war" is used, it is typically to depict the United States as the true warmonger.[54] Not everyone in China subscribes to this official narrative. For example, Wang Jixian, a computer scientist based in Beijing, remained on the ground in Ukraine after February 24, 2022—unlike most of the roughly 6,000 Chinese citizens who left. In the early months of the conflict, Wang published dozens of videos from Odesa, capturing striking everyday scenes from the war-torn region. Over time, he found himself fighting on two fronts: against the Russian invasion and against the Chinese government. His videos, viewed by millions on platforms like WeChat and Douyin, eventually disappeared due to censorship. While his candid commentary earned him supporters, it also attracted waves of nationalist attacks, with critics branding him a "traitor" for associating with Ukraine.[55]

Alongside internet activists, critical commentators are also becoming increasingly marginalized in China. Those who voice dissenting opinions do so almost exclusively from abroad. Feng Yujun, a political scientist at Fudan University in Shanghai, has argued that Moscow miscalculated and ultimately could not win the war—a stance that has further strained relations with Beijing. Similarly, Eastern European historian Jin Yan from the Chinese University of Political Science and Law in Beijing laments: "Sometimes I try to lecture on it, but the lecture gets canceled, and I'm told I can't speak. The hierarchy knows what my stance

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[53] On the media discourse, cf. Nele Noesselt, "Ziemlich beste Rivalen? Sino-russische Beziehungen nach dem Angriff auf die Ukraine," in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 73/26-27 (June 26, 2023), pp. 35-40, here pp. 38-40. On the circulation of Russian conspiracy theories in Chinese media, cf. John Dotson, "Beijing's Propaganda Support for Russian Biological Warfare Disinformation. Part 1: Accusations Concerning the War in Ukraine," in: *Jamestown China Brief* 22/11 (2022), pp. 19-25 and Florian Schneider, "Reality Decoupling. Rumours, Disinformation, and Studying the Politics of Truth in Digital Asia," in: *Asiascape. Digital Asia* 10/1-2 (2023), pp. 181-207, here pp. 190-196.

[54] Cf. "Konflikt, Problem oder Krieg? Chinesische Positionen zur russischen Invasion in der Ukraine," in: *China Spektrum. Report 1* (August 2022), pp. 6-9, available online at: {https://merics.org/sites/default/files/ 2022-08/220894ChinaSpektrumReport01.pdf}.

[55] Wang Jixian's YouTube channel is still available online at: {https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAtIuFy5UAU96ywetJk_QaA}. Cf. also Chris Buckley, "Chinese Blogger Challenges Beijing's Version of the War," in: *The New York Times* (15. März 2022), available online at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/15/world/europe/china-blogger-odessa-ukraine-war.html}.

is, and they know my views aren't the same as the official line, so they think they might as well cancel me."[56]

Russian perceptions of China remain complex. Today, more than nine out of ten Russians view China in a positive light—a sentiment that has steadily increased since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea. Nonetheless, there are simmering fears that Russia's growing dependence on China could reduce Moscow to a vassal of Beijing. These concerns are not limited to nationalist circles; they are widespread enough that state media have ramped up efforts to dispel them. Popular television programs in particular work hard to refute such anxieties. In March 2023, for instance, Nikolai Vavilov discussed Putin's—and by extension, Russia's—high standing in China on *60 Minutes*, one of Rossiya-1's most-watched talk shows. Drawing on questionable evidence, Vavilov cited the publication of around 100 books by Chinese authors and translations about Vladimir Putin. According to Vavilovm, this is reflective of a strong president and a striking political personality, with Chinese state propaganda urging viewers: "Look at Vladimir Putin. Act like him. Without him, there would be no such colossal country." The sinologist and political scientist—whose controversial views often attract significant attention in Russian debates on China despite being the subject of ridicule among experts—believes it is his duty, like that of other opinion leaders, to demonstrate that Russia is on equal footing with China.[57]

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The invasion of Ukraine has, in effect, made the Russian government increasingly dependent on China. Conversely, China remains bound by its partnership with Russia, with Putin's actions impacting both Beijing's national interests and the future of the Sino-Russian alliance. For this reason, China's political leadership is primarily interested in averting a Russian defeat. However, every setback tests the balance of power, and the relationship between the two allies

[56] Interview with Jin Yan, "Russia: Enemy, Friend, or Lesson for China?," in: *Echowall* (17. Mai 2023), available online at: {https://www.echo-wall.eu/podcasts/off/russia-enemy-friend-or-lesson-china}; Feng Yujun, "Warum Russland in der Ukraine verlieren wird," in: *The European* (14. April 2024), available online at: {https://www.theeuropean.de/politik/warum-russland-in-der-ukraine-verlieren-wird}.

[57] Although conducting representative opinion polls in repressive states is challenging, data from the independent Levada Center reveal a clear trend: when asked about their general view of China, 55% of Russians responded positively in November 2013, 70% in August 2021, and 92% in May 2024. Cf. Levada-Centr, "Rossijsko-Kitajskie otnošenija (March 30, 2021)," updated 2024, available online at: {https://www.levada.ru/2021/03/30/rossijsko-kitajskie- otnosheniya/}. For the quote by Nikolai Vavilov, cf. *60 Minut*, Rossija-1 (March 21, 2023), available online at: {https://www.svoboda.org/a/shpion-ili-vassal-/32328015.html}.

is being recalibrated. Rarely in the past four centuries have these two states been equals. Russia's war against Ukraine has further entrenched their asymmetry, positioning Moscow as a weaker partner—a dependency it has maneuvered itself into of its own accord. Only time will tell when and how this dynamic will change.