
RUSSIA-CHINA RELATIONS IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA: FROM COLD WAR RIVALS TO STRATEGIC PARTNERS IN A MULTI POLAR WORLD

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ABSTRACT

In the post-Cold War era, Sino-Russian relations have evolved significantly, marked by a strategic partnership and increasing cooperation within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Their bilateral relationship has undergone a significant transformation from the Cold War to the post-Cold War era. Both countries view the United States as a strategic rival. By working together, they effectively challenge U.S. dominance in global affairs and promote a multi polar world order. Russia's vast energy resources and China's growing energy needs create a complementary relationship that reduces their dependence on U.S. energy markets. The bilateral relationship of Russia and China is also strengthened by their participation in SCO as it enhances. The SCO provides a platform for broader regional cooperation, bringing together multiple countries and fostering a more integrated approach to common challenges and opportunities. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization helps improve Sino-Russian relations and facilitate economic cooperation and trade agreements. The organization has become a cornerstone of their joint efforts to address security threats and enhance economic ties in Central Asia. This paper utilizes secondary data to explore the relationship between Russia and China, as well as their collaboration within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It investigates how the new multilateral institution has assisted in carrying out cooperative policies between the two countries. This institution involves key stakeholders, making each country's policies toward the other more consistent, foreseeable, and informed.

KEYWORDS

Russia-China relations, post-Cold War era, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, strategic partnership, multipolar world order, energy cooperation, Central Asia

INTRODUCTION

Russia-China relations have evolved significantly from being ideological allies at the start of the Cold War to enemies by the late 1960s to a strategic partnership. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization plays a vital role in that partnership, as Moscow and Beijing use it to coordinate policy, build trust, and present a united front internationally (Lo, 2008).

Both countries are major nuclear powers and permanent members of the UN Security Council. Both are among the largest countries by land in the world. They share a border of more than four thousand kilometers, a fact that has shaped their relationship for centuries. Countries with such different histories, political systems, and long-term ambitions arriving at a lasting partnership like this is worth tracing historically, to understand how they got here.

This paper traces the relationship from the Cold War to now, using research on the SCO, and looking at what it means for the wider world, Central Asia, and the US (Nye, 2015).

A Fraught Beginning: The Cold War Years

In October 1949, Mao Zedong announced the start of Communist China. He decided to team up with the Soviet Union, and in 1950 they signed a treaty that made the friendship official. But the Korean War (1950 to 1953), put that friendship to the test. China expected more from the Soviets than it actually got. But things got better after the war. From 1953 onward, the Soviets helped China a lot, sending money and support for about a hundred military and industrial projects, sending thousands of Soviet experts to help them, and investing heavily in building up China's factories and heavy industry. People called the period the "golden years" of their friendship. But there was one thing the Soviets would not fully help with: nuclear weapons. They only gave China a little bit of technical help, and only because China gave them access to its uranium in return. It was a small deal, not a real partnership on that issue, and it left China feeling like it was being treated as the weaker partner instead of an equal one (Akihiro, 2007).

By the end of the 1950s, the growing mistrust between the two countries came out into the open. In 1956, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev gave a speech criticizing Stalin, and since Mao had followed similar policies to Stalin's, he took it as a hidden attack on himself too. Around the same time, the Soviets planned to set up joint military bases in China, and this made Beijing feel that Moscow was trying to control it rather than treat it as an equal partner. The Great Leap Forward was

an economic campaign launched by Mao to prove China didn't need Soviet help, but it backfired badly, causing a famine that killed as many as twenty million people and left China even more isolated. By 1960, there was a split between the two countries: Soviet advisors left China, and aid agreements were cancelled. In 1969, the situation worsened, and soldiers from both sides clashed at the border near Damansky Island, and there was real fear the Soviets might launch a nuclear strike. The relationship only began to heal after Mikhail Gorbachev became the Soviet leader in 1985, leading to the first summit between the two countries in Beijing in 1989.

Rebuilding Trust after the Soviet Collapse

In 1991, when the Soviet Union was broken down into pieces, Moscow and Beijing tried to build up their relations, as they had been enemies before (Aslund & Olcott, 2013). Russia needed to strengthen its roots in Asia again. Even before the 1994 border deal, Yeltsin had already signed a non-aggression agreement with China back in December 1992, and as part of that, Russia agreed to help build China's very first nuclear power plant. Both Russia and China signed an agreement to demilitarize their frontier and make it an arm-free area. In March 1996, Russia lent two billion dollars to China for nuclear reactors for power generation in northeast China. They both started the strategic partnership in 1996 at a bilateral summit held in Shanghai. Both countries tried to shift the world from US unipolarity to a multipolar world.

In 1999, US-led NATO attacked the Chinese embassy and called it an accident, but Chinese officials called it a pre-planned attack. This attack led Russia and China to think seriously about their mutual relations, and they needed to strengthen them through Russian technology. China bought about two billion dollars in weapons from Russia between 1996 and 2001, and about sixteen billion dollars between 2001 and 2008, which covered fighter jets, submarines, and air defense systems. China's J-20 stealth fighter is reported to incorporate technology from a Russian defense project. Both countries coordinated in the UN Security Council to block Western-backed resolutions like Syria, and China didn't take a clear side on Crimea; it just stayed quiet and avoided picking between Russia and the West. Some Russian scholars argue that China's trade relationship with Russia isn't as significant as China's trade with the US.

In 2001, they both signed a "Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation." The treaty covered countering US dominance in the region, settling their shared border, trading weapons and technology, securing energy supplies, and cooperating against militant groups in Central Asia. In 2012, they upgraded the relationship to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination," then in 2014 they signed a roughly \$400 billion gas deal, with Gazprom supplying China's state oil company gas from 2018 through 2048. Along with the gas deal

came a railway bridge across their border, an ice-free port in Russia's Far East, and joint military exercises. Russian analyst Andrei Piontkovsky described the trade relationship as being like a rabbit and a boa constrictor, showing just how much bigger and stronger China is in the pairing. Russia has also pushed back against China economically in Central Asia, turning down a Chinese-backed SCO development bank in 2012, and building its own rival project, the Eurasian Union, which leaves China out.

Academic research in Russia-China relations has grown since the 2000s because the research has moved beyond just geopolitics into things like energy cooperation (Paik, 2012) and institutional building (Dueben, 2013). Despite looking at the relationship from different angles, Elizabeth Wishnick (2001), Richard Weitz (2003), and Marcin Kaczmarek (2015) found a similar theme: a shared dislike of American dominance and a shared preference for a multipolar world order. Carlsson and her co-authors argue that both countries are trying to regain their lost status: China through Western/Japanese imperialism, Russia through the Soviet collapse (Carlsson, Oxenstierna, & Weissmann, 2015). Susan Turner argues, tying back to an old prediction by Charles Krauthammer about the world eventually becoming multipolar with many great powers rivaling the United States, and Russia and China are now actively working to make that prediction come true (Turner, 2009).

Hill and Wishnick both point out that both countries understood that economic ties and mutual benefit were the central force that shaped the relationship and strengthened the partnership after 1991 (Hill, 2002; Wishnick, 2001). Angela Stent argues the real underlying driver of their cooperation is the fact that the United States emerged as the world's sole superpower after the Cold War, which pushed both countries to seek closer ties with each other as a counterweight (Stent, 2020). Iwashita interprets the timing of the 1996 "strategic partnership" declaration as coming right after a US presidential visit to Japan, reaffirming the US-Japan security alliance that counterbalances American strategy in Asia (Akihiro, 2007).

Weitz pointed to a real, ongoing disagreement between the two countries over energy security and arms sales (Weitz, 2003). Russian industry depends on weapons exports to China even as Chinese producers increasingly build more sophisticated systems of their own, narrowing the market Moscow can supply without risking the regional military balance. Unnikrishnan and Dutta observe China's priorities versus Russia's priorities toward other countries, as Japan and Taiwan matter more to China; India matters more to Russia (Unnikrishnan & Dutta, 2023).

Trenin says Russia's pivot toward China and Asia is driven mainly by the practical need to develop Siberia and the Russian Far East, using East Asia's economic energy to help with that, especially since Western sanctions made

China the biggest major economy still willing to trade with Russia, but he calls the actual relationship “coordination without a central command” rather than a real alliance (Trenin, 2015). According to Trenin, China has treated Russia's decline from superpower status pragmatically, as an opportunity for raw materials and as a partner in resisting Western-led interventions, without China ever settling on one clear, comprehensive long-term strategy toward Russia (Trenin, 2015). Paul Bolt concluded they share frustration with the US-led global order and short-term practical needs, but lack a genuinely shared long-term vision, a gap that shows up in disagreements over energy pricing, arms sales, and Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea (Bolt, 2014).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Building an Institutional Home

The SCO was formally established in Shanghai on 15 June 2001, founded by Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. It grew out of the earlier “Shanghai Five” talks, which began in 1996 to build trust between the states and reduce troop concentrations along the shared Central Asian borders. All the founding states had different reasons for joining. Russia was facing financial trouble; the Central Asian states faced even bigger economic troubles of their own; China wanted to shift its military focus eastward instead of concentrating only on Taiwan; and Uzbekistan joined later, in 2001, over concerns about the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. This concern mirrored Beijing's own worries about the Uighur Muslim minority in Xinjiang and Russia's about instability in Chechnya. What started as a narrow border-security dialogue has since broadened considerably. The organization's founding Declaration, issued on 1 June 2001, set out the goal of ensuring peace, security, and stability both regionally and globally, and the 2002 Charter, signed in Saint Petersburg and taking effect in September 2003, established the organization's structure in detail: a Secretariat in Beijing to handle day-to-day administration, and a Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) based in Tashkent, established in January 2004, dedicated to combating what the SCO calls the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism (Chung, 2004). RATS operates through an Executive Committee handling daily operations and a Council of Permanent Representatives made up of counterterrorism ministers from member states; by March 2012 its council had convened twenty sessions.

Annual summits of heads of state remain the organization's highest decision-making body, a tradition dating to the first Shanghai Five summit in April 1996, but they now sit atop a dense structure of ministerial meetings covering trade, defense, transport, health, tourism, environmental protection, education, and culture, alongside representatives from security councils, parliaments, and supreme courts. The Council of National Coordinators has members who meet three times a year to look into everyday operations. The SCO Economic Council

works to strengthen business across the member countries. The SCO Scientific Council handles research collaboration, and the SCO Development Fund works like an investment pool that supports joint projects. By 2007 the organization had launched more than twenty projects in transport, energy, and telecommunications, and in 2005 the heads of government signed agreements establishing rapid-response mechanisms for disasters and emergencies among member states.

The general problem with the SCO's economic ambitions is that they have consistently been bigger than what the member states have actually agreed to do together. In 2009, Russia proposed a common currency for transactions among member states, but it never happened. The SCO also never set up free-trade areas, which has limited how far deeper economic integration can go (Aris, 2008; Kaczmarek, 2015).

Security, Color Revolutions, and the Limits of Alliance

Beijing and Moscow share a deep wariness of what they term “color revolutions”, popular uprisings in former Soviet states that both governments regard as Western-engineered attempts to install pro-Western leaders. China's own sensitivity on this front dates to the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, when Beijing began describing perceived Western efforts to undermine its communist government as “peaceful evolution”; the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan sharpened these concerns considerably, prompting then-Chinese President Hu Jintao to promise what was described as “smokeless warfare” against liberal forces seen as attempting to destabilize China in the same way.

Despite this shared concern, China has consistently been more cautious than Russia about translating it into formal security commitments. At the July 2015 SCO conference in Ufa, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu proposed that the organization develop into a more formal alliance explicitly aimed at preventing colour revolutions across Eurasia; Beijing did not respond favorably. The Peace Mission was a series of military exercises that started in 2005 and were repeated in 2007, 2009, 2010, and 2013. These were technically conducted under the SCO and watched by observers from Iran, India, and Pakistan, but they were largely just Russia and China drills.

In November 2016, China's Premier Li Keqiang suggested two things for the SCO: a free-trade zone and a new development bank. Russia's Prime Minister, Dmitry Medvedev, didn't agree to these proposals, saying that they would be too complicated. Russia tends to focus on its own neighborhood, while China's ambitions have grown more global under its leader Xi Jinping. Even though they are partners, they don't always want the same kind of cooperation.

Energy Security and the New Silk Road

Energy has arguably done more than any single factor to cement the practical, day-to-day relationship between Russia and China. The dynamic reflects what some analysts call a “New Great Game” (Pradhan, 2022): Russia and Iran hold abundant oil and gas reserves that they export, while China and India, with their large and rapidly growing economies, must import much of the energy they consume; Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, meanwhile, sit astride the transit routes connecting the two groups. The SCO region as a whole is strikingly resource-rich, holding an estimated twenty-five percent of the world's proven oil reserves, fifty percent of its natural gas reserves, and fifty percent of its uranium deposits, even though its members together account for only about a quarter of global GDP, reflecting economies still in the process of industrial and technological development.

Bilateral energy cooperation accelerated sharply after 2006, when Vladimir Putin, during a visit to China, reached agreement with Chinese leaders on a series of energy-supply arrangements involving the China National Petroleum Corporation, including a notable agreement with Gazprom (Fredholm, 2005; Paik, 2012). Plans soon followed for a natural gas pipeline running from Russia to China, initially projected to begin operations in 2011 at a cost of roughly ten billion dollars, alongside an agreed pricing formula for gas supplies, groundwork that eventually culminated in the 2014 mega-deal. This energy relationship also carries a strategic dimension: it reduces China's reliance on oil shipped through vulnerable chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca, and it gives Russia a market less exposed to the sanctions increasingly applied by Western governments.

China's Belt and Road Initiative, unveiled by President Xi Jinping in a 2013 speech at a university in Astana, Kazakhstan, grew out of an idea for a new “Twenty-First-Century Silk Road” trade network and now spans an ambitious set of infrastructure projects connecting some 4.4 billion people and a combined GDP of roughly twenty-one trillion dollars. In China's telling, resolving the long-disputed western section of the old Sino-Soviet border, more than three thousand kilometers of frontier that had caused friction for centuries, within just eight years of the SCO's founding was itself an unprecedented diplomatic achievement, one that gave Beijing confidence-building groundwork with seven bordering or nearby SCO states covering roughly three-quarters of its total land border.

Among the most striking elements of the Belt and Road Initiative is the “Polar Silk Road,” outlined in a 2018 Chinese government white paper on Arctic policy. A ship travelling the traditional maritime route from China to Europe typically takes around forty days; a route across the Arctic along the Russian coast could cut that journey by up to two weeks, offering an alternative to congested chokepoints such as the Suez Canal and the Strait of Malacca. To pursue this route, China has partnered with Russian gas companies, opened a major consulate

in Iceland, funded a rail link between China and Finland, deepened ties with Norway, and invested in Greenland to reduce the island's economic reliance on Denmark, though of all these partnerships, cooperation with Russia remains by far the most consequential, given Russia's size and its control over the Arctic coastline the route depends on.

China has consistently supported linking the Belt and Road Initiative with Russia's own regional project, the Eurasian Economic Union, formed in January 2015 out of the earlier Eurasian Economic Community, and it has backed a larger role for the SCO in developing the associated Silk Road Economic Belt, particularly across Central Asia, where the Eurasian Economic Union's institutional reach is strongest. Chinese government ministries formalized this thinking in the 2015 policy document "Vision and Actions for Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road," which marked a shift from planning toward active implementation and explicitly framed the SCO as a vehicle for both bilateral and multilateral cooperation on the initiative.

Partners, Not Twins: The Limits of the Relationship

For all its depth, the Russia-China relationship is not a seamless alliance, and the SCO's own internal dynamics illustrate why. For the smaller Central Asian member states, the organization functions less as a bloc under joint Russian-Chinese leadership than as a forum in which Moscow and Beijing balance each other, giving Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan room to extract better terms from both. So far, all SCO member states appear satisfied with an organization built on formally equal and mutually beneficial partnerships, even as the great-power dynamics beneath the surface continue to shift.

Russia retains greater political influence in Central Asia than China, despite China's now-significantly larger economic footprint in the region, a footprint that, by most measures, has grown well beyond what Moscow anticipated when the SCO was founded in 2001, with real implications for local economies and business environments. Disagreements persist over relations with Japan, the reliability of Russian energy supplies to China, and, perhaps most sensitively for Moscow, the scale of Chinese migration and economic activity in the sparsely populated Russian Far East. Many of Russia's tactical nuclear weapons, notably, remain positioned with China in mind, a quiet hedge against the long-term uncertainty of even a close partnership. Some Russian policymakers have also grown wary of the widening gap between Chinese and Russian military and economic power, even as both governments publicly emphasize the strength of the relationship.

The United States, for its part, has sought to position itself so as to prevent any prospective anti-American alliance from consolidating between Moscow and Beijing, meaning the SCO's central challenge is not only balancing Russian and

Chinese interests internally, but managing the reality of persistent American engagement in Central Asia. Analysts broadly agree that the SCO's internal cohesion matters more to its long-term survival than its posture toward Washington: without unity between its two largest members, the organization would struggle to function at all, let alone serve as an effective counterweight to Western influence.

Joint Statements and Shared Priorities

Beyond formal treaties and summits, SCO member states have increasingly used joint declarations to signal coordinated positions on pressing global issues. At the September 2022 summit in Samarkand, the presidents of Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan issued a statement on ensuring reliable, sustainable, and diversified supply chains, driven by concerns over the economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The statement opposed unilateral economic policies that disrupt supply chains and harm the multilateral trading system, and it committed member states to securing international transport routes, lowering trade barriers for critical goods, expanding settlements in national currencies, promoting e-commerce, and supporting small and medium-sized firms in adopting digital platforms, alongside a broader push to develop high-tech production chains and support the digital and low-emission transformation of regional industry.

An earlier joint statement, issued at the July 2015 Ufa summit, addressed the rising global drug trade, which member states described as a serious challenge to both international security and sustainable economic development. The statement reaffirmed commitment to the existing international drug-control framework built on three United Nations conventions, called for coordinated action against illegal narcotic cultivation and the emergence of new synthetic drugs, and singled out Afghanistan's high level of drug production as a particular threat to regional security, a concern the member states pledged to address through both bilateral and multilateral cooperation, and one they intended to raise collectively at the United Nations General Assembly's 2016 special session on the global drug problem.

Statements of this kind underscore a broader pattern: even where the SCO struggles to deliver binding joint policy, on free trade, a common currency, or a formal defense pact, it has proven effective as a platform for aligning rhetoric and signaling shared priorities on the international stage, from counterterrorism and supply-chain resilience to opposition to unilateral foreign interventions, which China and Russia have jointly criticized in cases ranging from Libya to Iraq, generally invoking the primacy of United Nations Security Council authorization and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states.

The Long Arc of Bilateral Diplomacy

Tracked closely over more than two decades by the analyst Yu Bin in his quarterly reviews, the bilateral relationship between Moscow and Beijing shows a pattern of steady, if uneven, deepening (Bin, 2007, 2009; Pannier, 2020). The turning point came in 1999: the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the Kosovo conflict pushed both governments to move, in Yu Bin's framing, from a focus on economic relations toward strategic cooperation, from routine high-level talks toward genuine crisis consultation, and from largely symbolic gestures toward concrete actions aimed at reducing reliance on the United States, even as both countries, notably, still valued their individual relationships with Washington more than their relationship with each other at that stage.

The relationship cooled somewhat around 2000, as leadership changed in the Kremlin and Vladimir Putin approached China with notable caution even while pursuing an assertive Russian foreign policy elsewhere in Asia, a caution that left China somewhat uneasy, particularly given uncertainties in its own relations with Taiwan and the United States at the time. That caution soon gave way to renewed momentum: by the second half of 2000, Putin had begun an intensive round of diplomacy with Chinese leaders, meeting them three times in under two months as part of a broader strategic effort to strengthen ties with Asia.

The year 2001 proved pivotal on several fronts at once. Moscow and Beijing finalized the language of their historic friendship treaty, signed that July in Moscow; they worked together to stabilize Central Asia through the transformation of the Shanghai Five into the fully institutionalized Shanghai Cooperation Organization; and Jiang Zemin and Vladimir Putin held the first of three summit meetings that year in Shanghai. Much of this activity was a direct response to Washington's consideration of withdrawing from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which both countries saw as a cornerstone of nuclear arms control. When the treaty was allowed to expire and the United States adopted a more assertive nuclear posture, and as President George W. Bush visited China twice while planning a visit to Russia, both Moscow and Beijing found themselves increasingly focused on countering renewed American strategic engagement in Central Asia following the fall of the Taliban after September 11.

Through the early and mid-2000s, the two countries' agendas diverged in tone even as high-level trade continued to grow: Putin cultivated a high international profile, including regular appearances at G8 summits, while Chinese leaders took a more measured, economically focused approach that prioritized neighboring states and regional issues over major-power politics. By 2005, strategic considerations had come to dominate the agenda more clearly, with the first China-Russia inter-governmental dialogue specifically on security matters, several rounds of talks between senior military officials, and preparations for the

first-ever joint military exercise that autumn, all unfolding against the backdrop of a series of “orange revolutions” in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan that unsettled both Moscow and Beijing.

CONCLUSION

Russia and China’s relationship after the Cold War shows how two former rivals can become partners when their interests are similar. Their cooperation in trade, energy, and military affairs has made this relationship stronger (Lo, 2008; Stent, 2020). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has also helped bring the two countries closer. It has provided a platform for cooperation in security and counterterrorism. It also helped resolve long-standing border disputes and led to the creation of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS). The SCO has continued to grow, with countries such as India and Pakistan joining it. However, its members still have different interests, so it cannot be considered a fully united political or military alliance.

The effects of this partnership can also be seen outside the SCO. Russia and China have strengthened their positions in Central Asia and have become more active in other regions. At the same time, the influence of Western countries, especially the United States, has faced new challenges. However, this change is not the same in every region (Pradhan, 2022). Energy cooperation has become an important part of the relationship, particularly because China depends heavily on Russian energy resources. Russia and China have also tried to increase the use of alternative currencies in trade. These efforts have raised questions about the future of the U.S. dollar, although they do not mean that the dollar will lose its leading position soon.

Military cooperation has made the relationship even more important. Joint military exercises and defense cooperation have encouraged the United States and its allies to review their security policies. Other countries have also had to respond to these changes. Some European states have shown greater interest in defense independence, while several Asian countries have strengthened their security ties with Washington because of China’s growing influence. This shows that countries are not simply choosing between two fixed blocs. Many are trying to balance their security needs, economic interests, and relations with the major powers.

Russia and China’s closer cooperation has also affected debates about international institutions. Both countries have called for changes to global governance, arguing that developing countries should have a greater voice (Nye, 2015). However, this does not mean that Russia and China have exactly the same goals. Differences in their interests and priorities still limit their partnership.

The future of Russia–China relations will depend on how well the two countries manage these differences. Some scholars describe their relationship as a partnership of convenience, while others believe their cooperation has become much deeper (Bolt, 2014; Trenin, 2015). Both views help explain the relationship. What is clear is that the international system after the Cold War has become more competitive and less dominated by one power. Russia and China have contributed to this change by strengthening their cooperation and increasing their influence. Despite its limitations, the SCO remains an important platform for understanding this partnership.

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