



Russia-China Strategic Partnership in the Context of the Crisis in Europe

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Introduction

When future historians will look for the starting point of the collapse of the old international order and the rise of a new world order where a small group of powers can no longer claim undivided leadership, they can begin with February 4, 2022. The months of preparations for and the start of the 24th Winter Olympics in Beijing were not only accompanied by expectations of a huge sports celebration but also a general anticipation of a military conflict in Europe, which was stronger than it had ever been since the end of the Cold War. On the opening day of the Games, the leaders of Russia and China held talks that lasted more than two and a half hours and led to the adoption of a joint statement, in which Eurasia's largest great powers outlined their shared views. It was also reported that Russia and China were discussing a \$117 billion energy deal, which was evidence of their serious approach to the nascent period in the global economy.

Those statements and initiatives reflected the essence and scale of Russia-China relations on the eve of a dramatic international crisis: the clash between Russia and the West over Ukraine and the architecture of European security as a whole. The subsequent events, including Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, which began four days after the end of the Olympic Games, the economic war of the West against Russia, and China's response, took place in the new historical period marked by changes in the global rules of the game and the redistribution of power. At its initial stage, China and Russia demonstrated an impressive ability to present a united front.

The past achievements of Russia-China interaction became more prominent as the military-diplomatic crisis transitioned into the acute phase. These developments have revealed both the structural strength of their cooperation and the challenges they will have to deal with together. The conflict has also outlined more clearly the limits of the negative impact which Russia and China's adversaries can have on their economic relations. Russia and China are part of the global economy, and their foreign economic ties developed in conditions of Western domination. Therefore, their current interaction will be inevitably affected by the economic war being waged by the United States and its allies against Russia. The focal point is whether Russia and China and their companies will be able to expand their cooperation and maintain their role in the global economy under these circumstances.

The strategic partnership between Russia and China is not aimed at controlling the global economy and international politics. Its main goal is to guarantee their sovereignty and the possibility of stable development for all countries. Their partnership

is not based on aggressive wars or the sabotage of international institutes. On the contrary, Russia and China have been consistently upholding the central role of the UN and international law and have been advocating the equality of all global political players and restraint in the use of military force. In other words, it is a new type of strategic partnership that is not aimed at preserving their monopoly positions, as the West is doing, but at creating a new type of relations between powers in the 21st century. Russia and China have unique experience of interaction in BRICS and the SCO, the communities without a dominant leader.

The real nature of Russia-China practical cooperation at the bilateral level has so far not been properly assessed. Russia and China and their companies have not yet created the mechanisms of interaction on more serious matters amid the constant Western pressure and sanctions. They are working together at the diplomatic level to protect their views at the UN and other international organisations. As the West adopted a harsher attitude towards Russia, China's position became more stable and consistent. It rules out the possibility of any difference of opinion or even the lack of tactical coordination between Moscow and Beijing. The West seems to be aware of this.

There are three basic levels in the development of Russia-China relations. **First**, they are pursuing a coordinated policy on the global scale and regarding the main aspects of the European crisis. **Second**, they have launched the process of economic rapprochement and openness, including in transport, trade and the exchange of technologies. **Third**, they are readjusting their practical interaction to protect its participants from attacks by the United States and its allies and to create conditions for effective cooperation and mutual assistance.

Over the past 20 years, Russia and China have been steadily moving towards a level of mutual understanding that made possible the joint statement they adopted on February 4, 2022, and subsequent decisions. Russian and Chinese experts have not only pointed out their countries' achievements but also tried to draw their governments' attention to arising problems. In the context of their experience of relations with the West, many people in the United States and Europe decided that this can be interpreted as instability in Russia-China relations and predicted that they would face new difficulties and even fall apart amid the growing pressure by the West. The developments of the past few months have shown that these expectations have not materialised.

Dynamics of Russia-China political relations in 2022

China and Russia already had experience with jointly responding to acute crises prior to the special military operation (SMO). In January 2022, Kazakhstan was swept by massive unrest threatening to turn into a coup attempt. At that time, the Chinese diplomatic service was operating under Covid restrictions. Chinese diplomats had to minimise direct contact with the host country's representatives. This probably explains why China's reaction was somewhat slow in the first days of the crisis. The main role in settling this crisis belongs to Russia that organised the dispatch of CSTO troops to Kazakhstan. China supported Russia's efforts to stabilise the situation in Kazakhstan, including the sending of troops.¹

Shortly after that, less than three weeks before the SMO, on February 4, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Beijing to attend the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympic Games. This was the first meeting of the two leaders in more than two years and it was accompanied by the signing of important joint documents. These include the Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development.

Adopted against the backdrop of the sharp aggravation of the conflict in Ukraine this declaration was about narrowing gaps in the sides' positions on a number of major issues. The signatories expressed their disapproval of NATO's expansion and the destabilising activities of outside forces in their common adjacent areas.²

¹ China says it supports Russia deploying forces to Kazakhstan to quell unrest // Reuters. 11.01.2022. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-says-it-supports-russia-deploying-forces-kazakhstan-quell-unrest-2022-01-11/>

² Совместное заявление Российской Федерации и Китайской Народной Республики о международных отношениях, вступающих в новую эпоху, и глобальном устойчивом развитии. [Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development] // President of Russia. 4.02.2022. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>

At the same time, Russia and China concluded economic agreements that were of special importance in the context of the future developments of Russia-West relations. One of these agreements provided for the supply of additional huge amounts of Russian oil to the PRC through Kazakhstan's infrastructure, and another was for the supply of gas to the PCR via the Far Eastern route.³ Subsequently, the circumstances of the visit prompted the West to accuse the Chinese leaders of knowing about the SMO in advance and supporting it. Moreover, China was accused of transferring to Russia intelligence information given to Beijing by the Americans in the hope of persuading China to use its influence with Russia on the Ukrainian issue. The Chinese Foreign Ministry denied everything. That said, it was clear before the SMO that Russia and China were drawing closer to each other amidst growing tensions in Europe.

On the day when Russia launched its SMO in Ukraine, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi spoke by phone. Lavrov told Wang Yi that Russia refused to accept the violation of commitments by the US and NATO, the latter's expansion to the east and the failure to comply with the Minsk Agreements.⁴ Wang Yi emphasised that despite support for the territorial integrity of all countries, China understood the complexity and special historical context of the Ukrainian issue, as well as Russia's legitimate security concerns. On the following day, February 25, the Chinese representative on the UN Security Council abstained from voting on the resolution to end the Ukraine conflict.⁵ On the last day of February 2022, after the imposition of restrictions on the use of SWIFT by the Russian economic operators, the Chinese authorities made it clear that sanctions would not interfere with normal Russia-China trade.⁶ In general, this line of conduct was typical of the PRC during the previous escalation of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014.

³A.V. Gereikhanova. В ходе визита Путина в Китай подписаны контракты по газу и нефти. Главное [Gas and oil contracts signed during Putin's visit to China] // Rossiyskaya Gazeta. 04.02.2022. URL: <https://rg.ru/2022/02/04/v-hode-vizita-putina-v-kitaj-podpisany-kontrakty-po-gazu-i-nefti-glavnoe.html>

⁴Chinese, Russian FM's hold phone conversation // Xinhua. 24.02.2022. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220224230744/https://english.news.cn/20220224/e5c271a213db463d9e1c97336f1f2399/c.html>

⁵Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution on Ending Ukraine Crisis, as Russian Federation Wields Veto // United Nations. 25.02.2022. URL: <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14808.doc.htm>

⁶China says US sanctions over Ukraine should not affect right to trade with Russia // South China Morning Post. – 28.02.2022. URL: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3168725/china-says-us-sanctions-over-ukraine-should-not-affect-lawful>

In early March 2022, the Chinese Ambassador to the UN abstained from voting on two more resolutions. After this, Spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry Wang Wenbin explained China's position in more detail: "Regrettably, the draft resolution submitted to this emergency special session for vote has not undergone full consultations within the whole membership. Nor did it take into full consideration the history and complexity of the current crisis. It did not highlight the importance of the principle of indivisible security, or the urgency of promoting political settlement and stepping up diplomatic efforts. These are not in line with China's consistent position. Therefore, China had to abstain in the voting."⁷ Thus, in the UN Security Council, China acted as an important player, a third power centre between the Western bloc, which regularly tries to advance resolutions condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine, and the Russian Federation.

China's restrained and careful position made it possible to discuss the possibility of it mediating between the parties of the conflict. On March 7, Foreign Ministry Wang Yi told the press that China is "prepared to continue playing a constructive role to facilitate dialogue for peace and work alongside the international community." He expressed readiness to carry out necessary mediation (between Russia and Ukraine).⁸ Discussion of China's potential mediation continued in February-April 2022 but ultimately came to naught. While showing support for settling the conflict via negotiations, China was trying hard to avoid assuming the duties of mediator in Russia-Ukraine relations, despite pressure from some quarters, including the West. This position of China was based on respect for European security and an understanding of the causes of the military-political crisis in Europe.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi explained the five points of China's official position on the SMO as early as on February 26. Its abridged version is as follows:

⁷ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on March 3, 2022 // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 03.03.2022. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20220323232830/https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202203/t20220303_10647695.html

⁸ State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 07.03.2022. URL: https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:0mVj3_qmvlcJ:https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220308_10649559.html+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=firefox-b-1-d

- China strongly supports respect and defence of sovereignty and territorial integrity by all countries as well as observance of the goals and principles of the UN Charter.
- China favours a concept of universal, comprehensive, and sustainable security through cooperation. Wang Yi emphasised that “in conditions... of NATO’s eastward expansion, Russia’s legitimate security demands must be taken seriously and resolved accordingly.”
- China is watching the Ukrainian crisis and “the current situation is not what it wants to see. It is very important for all parties to display the necessary restraint to prevent the situation in Ukraine from escalating and even spiraling out of control.”
- China supports and encourages all diplomatic efforts facilitating a peaceful settlement of the Ukrainian crisis. China welcomes a direct dialogue and talks between Russia and Ukraine as soon as possible.
- China believes that the UN Security Council should play a constructive role in resolving the Ukrainian problem and should prioritise peace and stability in the region and security of all states. The UN Security Council should take steps that alleviate rather than fuel tensions and that facilitate a diplomatic settlement rather than contribute to further escalation.⁹

During a virtual summit with the leaders of France and Germany on March 8, Chinese President Xi Jinping largely repeated what was earlier said by representatives of the PRC Foreign Ministry.¹⁰ However, the issue of the anti-Russia sanctions’ effect on the global economy did come up at the top-level meeting, especially their adverse effect of energy, logistics, finance, and global supply chains. Xi Jinping emphasised China’s humanitarian role in the conflict. After his statement, in March Chinese officials (for instance, Foreign Ministry

⁹ Ван И изложил пять пунктов принципиальной позиции Китая по украинскому вопросу [Wang Yi sets forth five items of China’s consistent position on the Ukrainian issue] // Xinhua News. 26.02.2022. URL: http://russian.news.cn/2022-02/26/c_1310490077.htm

¹⁰ President Xi Jinping Holds a Virtual Summit with Leaders of France and Germany // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. 08.03.2022. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220308_10649839.html

Spokesperson Zhao Lijian) began to talk regularly about China's humanitarian aid to Ukraine.¹¹

During the same period, a new information agenda was in the making – China accused the United States of paying more attention to humanitarian issues in Ukraine than in other conflicts, for instance, in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia.¹² This issue is important for understanding the Chinese position because it reflects the view of the conflict by one of the key non-Western international actors – as distinct from the West, China does not consider military actions in Ukraine as something special but looks at this conflict as one of many other crises.

In March, China's position on the future of economic relations with Russia took its final form. At first, Ambassador of China to Russia Zhang Hanhui urged the filling of vacant niches in the Russian market,¹³ and later Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin announced the continuation of normal Russia-China trade.¹⁴ Against this background, Anhui Province hosted a meeting of the Russian and Chinese foreign ministers on the Afghan problem. Together with other involved parties (Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), the ministers emphasised their commitment to help overcome the problems related to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.¹⁵

In April 2022, Chinese authorities several times refused to cast blame on the Russian military for attacks on civilians. Following the lead of Russian authorities, they urged independent investigations of such

¹¹ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on March 15, 2022 // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 15.03.2022. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20220324190924/https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202203/t20220315_10651967.html

¹² Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on March 18, 2022 // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 18.03.2022. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202203/t20220318_10653105.html

¹³ Beijing Tells Chinese in Russia to Help Fill Economic Void // Bloomberg. 22.03.2022. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-22/beijing-tells-chinese-firms-in-russia-to-help-fill-economic-void?sref=mxblZFb4>

¹⁴ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on March 22, 2022 // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 22.03.2022. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20220322195453/https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202203/t20220322_10654171.html

¹⁵ В Китае началась третья встреча глав МИД стран – соседей Афганистана [A third meeting of the foreign ministers of Afghanistan's neighbours started in China] // Izvestia. 31.03.2022. URL: <https://iz.ru/1313300/2022-03-31/v-kitae-nachalas-tretia-vstrecha-glav-mid-stran-sosedei-afganistana>

incidents.¹⁶ In addition, in April, several official Chinese statements were devoted to the need to overcome the bloc-based mentality of the Cold War times. Interestingly, in that period, such ideas were put in a broad context of growing tensions in the Asia-Pacific Region. In this connection, the Chinese Foreign Ministry explained the reasons behind the success of Russia-China relations: “Both sides are rising above the Cold War model of a political-military alliance and pledge to develop a new model of international relations based on non-alignment, non-confrontation and non-targeting of third countries. This is entirely different from the Cold War mentality that prompted some countries to form small groups and play a zero-sum game.”¹⁷

In May – early June, Russia-China governmental cooperation was aimed at demonstrating the strengthening of economic ties. Ambassador Zhang Hanhui once again noted the positive trends in the development of Russia-China trade and economic relations, including the energy area and the use of national currencies for settlements,¹⁸ while Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov predicted faster than usual growth in Russia-China economic activities,¹⁹ particularly in investment and finance.²⁰

On June 15, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping talked by telephone about the opening of the first automobile Blagoveshchensk-Heihe Bridge across the Amur River.²¹ The leaders emphasised their “commitment

¹⁶ Remarks by Ambassador Dai Bing at the UN Security Council Briefing on Ukraine // Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China. 11.04.2022. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20220411161914/http://chnun.chinamission.org.cn/eng/hyyfy/202204/t20220412_10666813.htm

¹⁷ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on April 29, 2022 // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 29.04.2022. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20220429182148/https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202204/t20220429_10680765.html

¹⁸ Посол КНР в РФ: продвинем военно-техническое сотрудничество на новый уровень [PRC Ambassador in the Russian Federation: Let's move military-technical cooperation to a new level] // TASS. 05.05.2022. URL: https://tass.ru/interviews/14554551?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com

¹⁹ Лавров полагает, что экономические связи России и Китая будут расти быстрее [Lavrov believes Russia-China economic ties will grow faster] // Gazeta.ru. 23.05.2022. URL: <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2022/05/24/17794184.shtml>

²⁰ Russia's relationship with China is better than an alliance, says ambassador // South China Morning Post. – 02.06.2022. URL: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3180156/russias-relationship-china-better-alliance-says-ambassador>

²¹ Xi talks with Putin over phone // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 15.06.2022. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20220615154039/https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202206/t20220615_10703804.html

to expand cooperation in energy, finance, processing industries, transport and other areas in light of the global economic situation aggravated by the West's illegal sanctions policy.”

In their statement on June 15, Russia and China mentioned the unchanging nature of their economic cooperation that continues to move forward regardless of sanctions pressure from outside forces. This rhetoric of the two countries became particularly pronounced with the increase in sanctions imposed on Russia at the beginning of summer. It is also worth noting China's willingness to view the events in Ukraine in a broader context of diverse international conflicts without treating this one as somehow sacrosanct. This view obviously differs from the Western position.

To sum up, Chinese political rhetoric around the special military operation evolved significantly from February to early June 2022. The Chinese authorities gradually moved from carefully choosing its words and refusing to directly support Russia in early spring to an increasingly pro-Russian position in their official statements. It is worth noting that Chinese officials stressed Russia's well-grounded concern over the security problems in Europe. In this way, the evolution of Chinese rhetoric shows that China views the Ukrainian problem from the position of a great power that is aware of its responsibility for global security. Beijing understands that Russia would not have opted for a military-technical solution had the Western countries been ready to engage in meaningful dialogue and compel the Kiev authorities to fulfil their commitments.

The quality of bilateral relations is also demonstrated by the fact that after February 24, Russia and China continued their military-technical cooperation as usual and conducted joint exercises and other events planned before. In May 2022, long-range bombers of the two countries conducted a joint air patrol over the Sea of Japan and East China Sea.²² Chinese military are expected to take part in the Vostok-2022 drill in the Russian Far East in September 2022. Reports of China's intention to supply Russia with arms, which appeared with the start of the SMO, still have not been confirmed. Indeed, there is no information about Russia ever considering the possibility of asking China for arms supplies. In other words, this reporting in the US and West European media was obviously intended as a provocation.

²² Китай объяснил совместное с Россией патрулирование Японского моря [China explains joint patrolling of the Sea of Japan with Russia] // Vesti. 24.05.2022. URL: <https://www.vesti.ru/article/2763630>

Economic cooperation in changing circumstances: Successes and setbacks

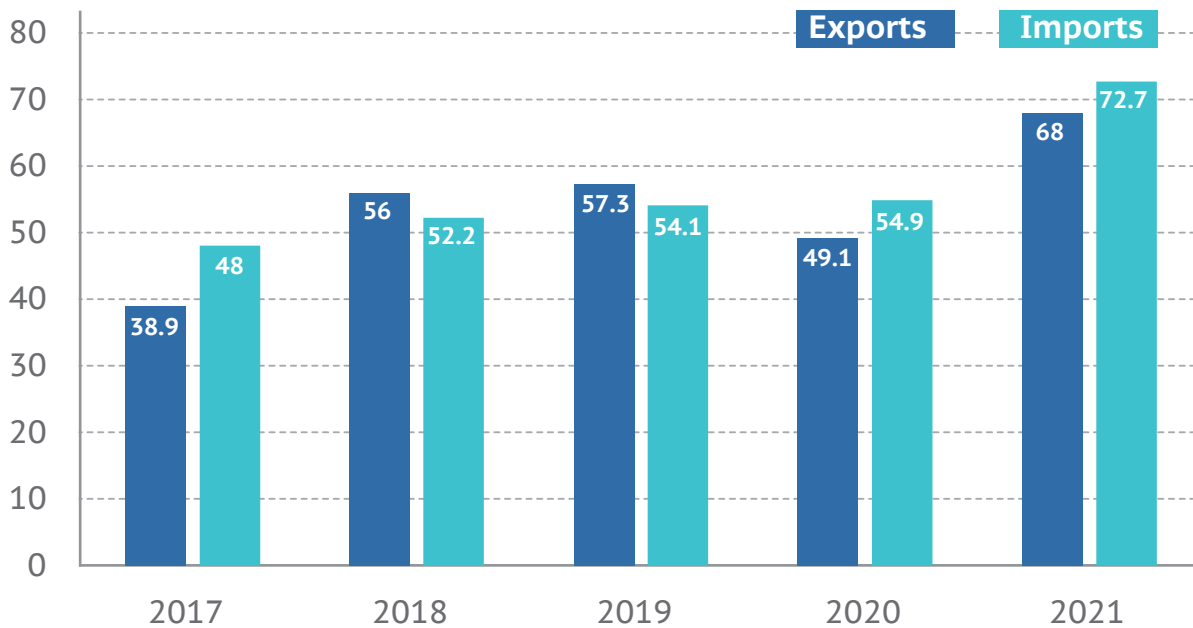
The most important consequence of the Russia-West conflict over Ukraine taking on a military-political dimension is the unprecedented economic pressure the United States and its allies have brought to bear on Moscow. In a matter of several weeks, the Western countries did whatever they could to push Russia out of the global economy. A considerable share of these attacks concerned trade and investment collaboration between third-country companies and their Russian partners. Because of its scale, China is number one among the third countries in question. China's involvement in global production and commercial chains makes Chinese companies vulnerable to Western pressure and compels it to invent new means of cooperation with Russia.

The West's economic war against Russia has affected a number of sectors of Russian-Chinese economic cooperation and made a number of major Chinese companies announce that they were phasing out their presence in Russia. At the same time, the general volume of bilateral trade continued to grow (Figure 1). The most dynamically developing areas of cooperation were trans-border trade, science and technology, industry, and infrastructure. In the first five months of 2022, bilateral trade reached \$65.8 billion, or \$28.9 billion more than during the same period in 2021. Both sides declare they hope their annual trade will reach the \$200-billion mark in 2024.²³

The Chinese Government is demonstrating real political will for retaining and developing cooperation with Russia in a new environment. In March 2022, the PRC Ambassador to Russia, Zhang Hanhui, called on Chinese business people to "fill the vacuum" left by Western companies after their

²³ Klimenko A.S. Развитие экономических отношений России и Китая посредством внешнего транспортного сообщения [Development of Economic Relations between Russia and China via an External Transport Link]/ A.S. Klimenko, D.A. Filenko // Modern Science. 2022. No. 5-1. Pp. 45–48; Посол КНР: Китай и Россия к 2024 году намерены достичь товарооборота в \$200 млрд [PRC Ambassador: China and Russia intend to reach \$200 billion in trade by 2024] // TASS. 14.08.2019. URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/6761153>

Figure 1. RUSSIA-CHINA TRADE, \$ BILLION



Source: Russian Federal Customs Service statistics.

withdrawal from the Russian Federation.²⁴ Addressing the St Petersburg International Economic Forum on June 16, he stressed that China was ready to “build up the mutually beneficial cooperation.”²⁵

Transport and infrastructure

A major achievement in transport cooperation was the completion of the Russian part of the Nizhneleninskoye-Tiangjin trans-border railway bridge across the Amur River to China in the Jewish Autonomous Area in late April 2022. A joint Russian-Chinese project, the bridge, to quote Deputy Prime Minister of Russia Yuri Trutnev, “will be a key element of the new export route, which will incentivise the creation of new production facilities and logistics hubs and improve the transport accessibility of several regions at once in the Russian Far East.”²⁶

²⁴ Посол КНР призвал китайских предпринимателей «заполнять пустоту» на российском рынке [PRC Ambassador called on Chinese entrepreneurs to “fill the vacuum” on the Russian market] // Expert.ru. 22.03.2022. URL: <https://expert.ru/2022/03/22/posol-kitaya/>

²⁵ Посол КНР заявил, что Китай и РФ уверенно движутся к целевому товарообороту в \$200 млрд [PRC Ambassador says that China and the RF are confidently moving towards the target trade figure of \$200 billion] // TASS. 16.06.2022: URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/14925145>

²⁶ Завершено строительство российской части трансграничного моста в Китай [Russia completes the construction of its part of the trans-border bridge to China] // RIA Novosti. 27.04.2022. URL: <https://ria.ru/20220427/most-1785653384.html>

A no less important event is the launch of freight traffic on the first trans-border motor bridge across the Amur in the Blagoveshchensk-Heihe area on June 10.²⁷ The construction project started in 2016 and will prospectively boost trade with the PRC by one million tonnes of freight per year.²⁸

Industrial cooperation

In early May 2022, the Technopolis Moscow special economic area and Jiangbei Xinqiu, a major special technological area in China, held talks on cooperation in microelectronics, information technology and biomedicine.²⁹ This project is of importance not only in the scientific and technological sense but also for Chinese and Russian business, since it facilitates expansion of potential alternative supply chains for component and raw materials and the search for export and technology transfer partners.³⁰

On May 26–28, Blagoveshchensk hosted AmurExpoForum 2022, an important opportunity for seeking out new markets, business partners, and supplier. There were representatives of Chinese energy, insurance and logistical companies and the matters discussed concerned further Russian-Chinese business cooperation. Amur Region Governor Vasily Orlov reported that the plans for next year's forum were to organise two venues, "an expert and investment venue for big business and a venue for small and medium-sized businesses, where they will have a chance to present their manufactures and services and find partners."³¹

On June 27, 2022, the authorities in the city of Suifenhe held a ground-breaking ceremony for a logistics base that will supply automobile parts to the Russian market. The project is of considerable importance for the city as it will expand trade cooperation with

²⁷ Между Россией и Китаем открыли первый автомобильный мост [The first motor bridge opened between Russia and China] // TASS. 10.06.2022. URL: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/14875585>

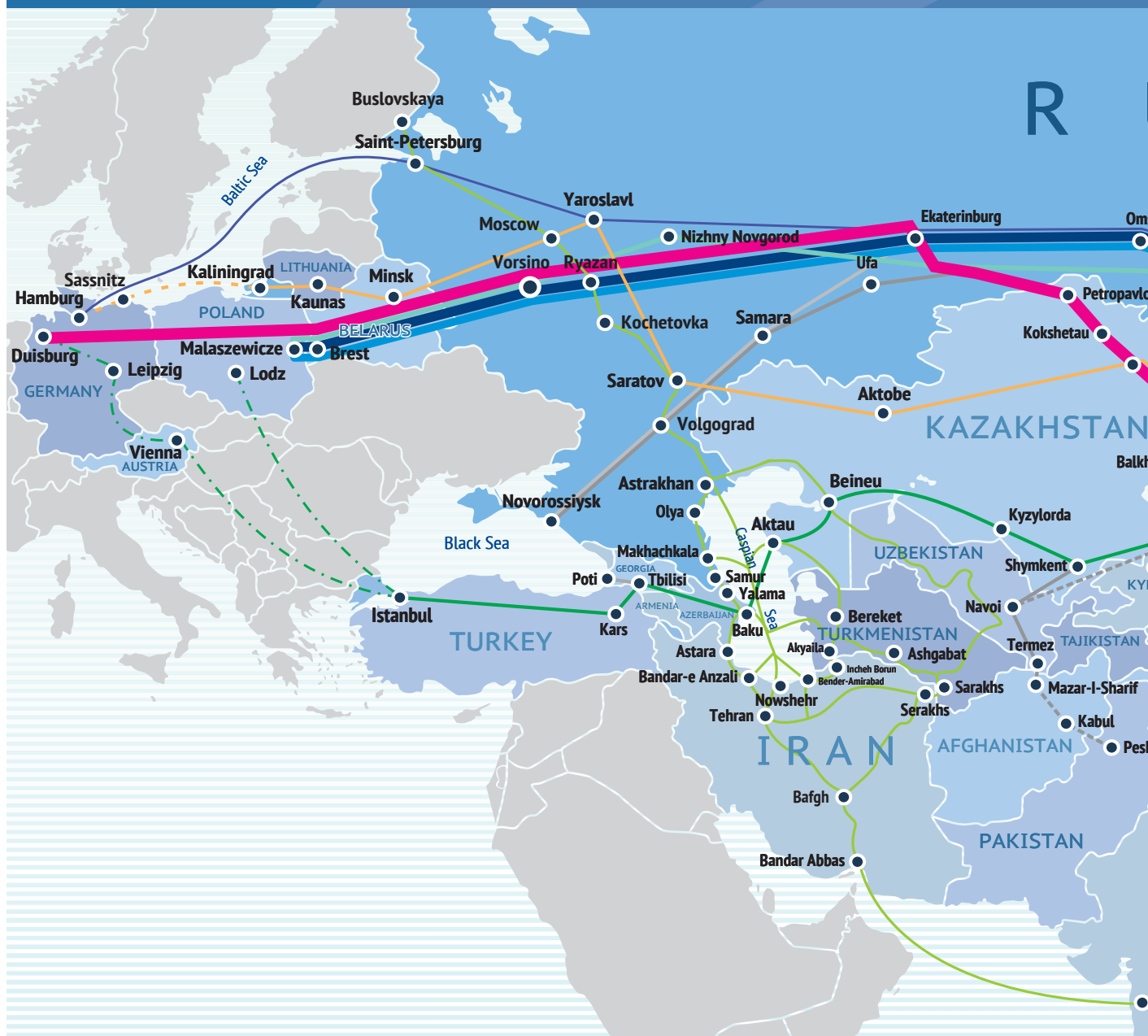
²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ ОЭЗ «Технополис Москва» расширяет сотрудничество с китайскими партнёрами [SEA Technopolis Moscow expands cooperation with Chinese partners] // Technopolis Moscow. 11.05.2022. URL: <https://technomoscow.ru/press/oez-tekhnpolis-moskva-rasshiryaet-sotrudnichestvo-s-kitayskimi-partnyerami/>

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ «АмурЭкспоФорум-2022» собрал более 500 человек в Благовещенске: участники из КНР подключились онлайн [AmurExpoForum 2022 in Blagoveshchensk attended by more than 500 guests: PRC participants joined online] // Amurskaya Pravda. 26.05.2022. URL: <https://ampravda.ru/2022/05/26/0112946.html>

MAP OF THE KEY RAILWAY CORRIDORS IN EURASIA



Route to Duisburg via Dostyk

(150 thousand TEU in 2022)*



Route to Poland via Zabaikalsk

(100 thousand TEU in 2022)*



Route to Poland via Naushki

(80 thousand TEU in 2022)*



Route to the Caspian region via Altyntkol and then to Turkey

(50–60 thousand TEU in 2022)*



Route to Poland via Primorsky Krai

(30 thousand TEU in 2022)*

Source: CCEIS NRU HSE, Infranews, Russian Railways, Kazakhstan Railways, Eurasian Development Bank
<https://eabr.org/analytics/special-reports/mezhdunarodnyy-transportnyy-koridor-sever>

The map illustrates the Silk Road routes across Eurasia. The northern route (blue) starts in Russia, passing through Krasnoyarsk, Novosibirsk, Irkutsk, Chita, Ulan-Ude, Zabaikalsk, Harbin, and ending in Vladivostok/Vostochny. The central route (pink) starts in Russia, passing through Nur-Sultan, Karaganda, Aktogay, Dostyk, Alashankou, Urumqi, and ending in Bishkek. The southern route (green) starts in Russia, passing through Chita, Ulan-Ude, Zabaikalsk, Harbin, and ending in Vladivostok/Vostochny. Other cities shown include Beijing, Shanghai, Ningbo, Wuzhou, Xuzhou, Zhengzhou, Taiyuan, Datong, Liaoning, Dalian, Sanyang, Kunming, Chongqing, Chengdu, Guanzhou, and Mumbai. The map also shows the borders of Mongolia, China, India, and Russia.

* Rounded data is indicated

Russia. A key industrial project on a city-wide scale, it will certainly serve to advance the car-making industry in the region.³² For Russia, this cooperation sector has special significance because the West-dependent Russian car-making industry has been hit by sanctions harder than other industries.

The Russian market is still attractive for Chinese industrial companies. China's Henan Xibao Metallurgical Group has declared that it will place its refractory applications plant in Lipetsk.³³ The company has registered as a resident of the local special economic area. The launch is scheduled for 2023. In March 2022, China's automotive concern Sokon (owned by Dongfeng Motor Corporation) unveiled plans to start the assembly of Evolute electric cars in Lipetsk before the end of this year.³⁴ Expanded cooperation with the Chinese automotive industry can help the Russian automobile industry alleviate the crisis caused by the closure of foreign car factories in Russia (some examples are Toyota, Nissan, and Hyundai). Greater cooperation in this field can help meet some of the demand for quality cars in Russia's domestic market.

Many Chinese companies, which continue their operations in Russia, are planning to increase the volume of production or supplies. For example, Weichai Power, developer and producer of diesel engines, has reported plans to boost output at its joint venture with KAMAZ.³⁵ In addition, China has increased supplies of its aluminum oxide (alumina) used in the production of aluminum. In May, China exported to Russia 153,362 tonnes of alumina on top of 134,480 tonnes supplied since the start of the year (to a total of 287,840 tonnes), or 417 times more than in the same period last year.³⁶

³² 中俄汽车配件出口基地项目在绥芬河开工 [The Chinese-Russian project to create a base for exporting auto spare parts to Russia has been launched in Suifenhe] // Heilongjiang Ribao. 28.06.2022. URL: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/tk9lhKJCUvdYtROLwWWC5A>

³³ Китайский металлургический гигант построит в липецкой экономзоне завод за 3,7 млрд рублей [The Chinese steel-making giant to build a 3.7 billion-ruble plant in the Lipetsk economic zone] // Abireg. 10.03.2022. URL: <https://abireg.ru/newsitem/92207/>

³⁴ Липецк заряжается из Поднебесной [Lipetsk being charged from the Middle Kingdom] // Kommersant. 23.03.2022. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5271004>

³⁵ Китайские компании приходят в Россию на замену западным [Chinese companies come to Russia to replace Western ones] // Realnoye Vremya. 18.03.2022. URL: <https://m.realnoevremya.ru/articles/244778-kitayskie-kompanii-prihodyat-v-rossiyu-na-zamenu-zapadnym>

³⁶ Ju Yiwen. China's alumina exports into Russia continue to soar in May; China becomes net exporter // Fastmarkets. 21.06.2022. URL: <https://www.fastmarkets.com/insights/chinas-alumina-exports-into-russia-continue-to-soar-in-may-china-becomes-net-exporter>

The obvious increase in the supply of Chinese components to Russia has made the United States anxious. It regards Chinese exports as a form of assistance to the Russian defence industry, both before and after the launch of the special military operation. As a result, in June the US Department of Commerce added five Chinese companies to the black list of exporters, including producers of electronic equipment (Connec Electronic Ltd., King Pai Technology Co. and Sinno Electronics Co.).³⁷

Of course, not all Chinese companies can stay in Russia in the current market environment. In fact, some of them have scaled down their exports, suspended deliveries or started winding down their operations on the Russian market altogether despite the numerous statements by Beijing condemning anti-Russia sanctions, calling on Chinese corporate leaders to stay firm in the face of Western pressure, and insisting that normal economic and trade relations with Russia be preserved.

IT and finance were the worst affected sectors, with auto manufacturing and the oil sector also suffering some collateral damage. In spring 2022, several Chinese technology giants like Huawei, Xiaomi, Honor, and Lenovo closed many of their brand stores and sharply reduced smartphone and laptop deliveries to Russia without even announcing their move in advance. Semiconductor Manufacturing International (SMI), a semiconductor manufacturer, soon joined this group, followed with Da-Jiang Innovations (DJI), a drone maker, which, unlike those before it, did issue an official statement before withdrawing from the market. In April, Huawei deleted from its AppGallery the applications of sanctioned Russian banks.³⁸

The possibility of losing the parts and components they buy from their Western suppliers, primarily in the United States, as well as access to an economy several dozen times bigger than the Russian market, was the main factor for Chinese companies. China depends on US technology, chips, and microcircuits, and this vulnerability is exposed whenever there is a flare up of tension between the two countries. This is what prevents

³⁷ U.S. Blacklists Five Chinese Firms for Allegedly Helping Russia's Military // WSJ. 29.06.2022. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/ukraine-russia-war-nato-summit-news/card/u-s-blacklists-five-chinese-firms-for-allegedly-helping-russia-s-military-lVaWM9p9qNQbaNSEqafw>

³⁸ Whalen J. China cut tech exports to Russia after U.S.-led sanctions hit // The Washington Post. 17.05.2022. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/17/china-russia-tech-exports/>

Chinese companies from maintaining their technological cooperation with Russia at the same level, let alone expanding it. Nothing will change as long as the United States has this leverage over China.

By the same token, major Chinese banks with transaction volumes running in the billions will not risk their standing or status for the sake of continuing to work with Russia. Back in February, two major Chinese lenders – Industrial & Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) and Bank of China – limited financing opportunities for buying Russian commodities and stopped issuing letters of credit for transactions with Russian commodity exporters. Part of a risk management strategy, this move was attributable to the threat of facing secondary sanctions and losing access to USD transactions. In March, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), with China as its majority stakeholder, decided to put activities in Russia on hold. The lender explained its decision by the need to safeguard the financial integrity of AIIB, against the backdrop of the evolving economic and financial situation.

The oil and gas sector has also raised serious concerns considering the risk of Chinese companies Bomeco Offshore Engineering, Cosco Shipping Heavy Industry, Penglai Jutal Offshore Engineering, Wison Offshore Engineering and Qingdao McDermott Wuchuan suspending their participation in building the Arctic LNG 2 project. There is also the looming threat of Sinopec, a Chinese oil and gas company, revising its strategy to develop the Amur Gas Chemical Complex, a \$10 billion project that was supposed to be completed in 2024.³⁹

The reduction in car imports from China has also come as an unpleasant surprise. In March, Russia imported \$190.7 million worth of Chinese cars, but in April the figure was down to \$84.6 million and continued falling in May, down to \$32 million. Imports of car parts and components from China also tanked from \$117.1 million in February to \$76.3 million in March. Even if these imports somewhat stabilised in late spring, increasing to \$81.3, they were still \$48.3 million below the winter supply volumes. The shortage of European car models on the market did nothing to drive up Chinese car exports to Russia. In fact, the increase

³⁹ «Сибур» пересмотрит проект на \$10 млрд на фоне антироссийских санкций [Sibur to revise \$10 bn project due to anti-Russia sanctions] // RBC. April 8, 2022. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/business/08/04/2022/624ef7959a7947d20588a9fc>

in market share commanded by Chinese auto brands did not exceed one percent on average,⁴⁰ which is usually explained by weak demand for new cars in Russia and logistical issues.

This quiet withdrawal from the Russian market and sharp decline in the provision of goods and services across various sectors have affected the way people view Russia-China relations, since these developments were clearly at odds with the statements coming from both sides on mutual support and refraining from downgrading ties. However, observers have been arguing that the withdrawal of major Chinese corporations from the Russian market is reversible. Some companies have shrunk their footprint in Russia while maintaining a presence here, for example, by keeping part of their R&D operations in the country. If the US keeps ramping up its sanctions pressure on China, including in the context of the Taiwan issue, the Chinese may no longer be as afraid of the secondary sanctions as they used to. For now, Russia will have to focus on working with second-tier Chinese companies, which until now have been mostly operating domestically and for that reason are less exposed to sanctions.

Infrastructure-related factors can also limit bilateral cooperation. Sanctions will force Russia to adjust its existing logistical routes. Delivering goods through Europe has become a challenge, and major maritime shipping companies working with Russia have been facing restrictions. European ports are refusing to accept cargoes with links to Russia. In this context, rerouting the logistics to Asia would make sense, primarily by relying on the North-South transport corridor which links Russia to Iran and India, as well as Russia's Far East ports for supplying China. However, Russia has yet to prepare its infrastructure in order to be able to make this transition, which will require time and effort. In particular, there are certain limitations on Russia-China cooperation in this sphere, and stepping up ties in this sector will require them to remove several bottlenecks.

The port-railway link is the most important of these bottlenecks. With the shift in the logistics flows, the shortfall in capacity for the Trans-Siberian

⁴⁰ Китай, в чём дело? Автомобили и запчасти из КНР не едут в Россию [China, what is going on? Supplies of Chinese cars and parts to Russia dry out] // ixbt.com. June 21, 2022. URL: <https://www.ixbt.com/news/2022/06/21/kitaj-v-chjom-delo-avtomobili-i-zapchasti-iz-kr-ne-edut-v-rossiju.html>

Railway and the Baikal-Amur Mainline currently exceeds 100 million tonnes.⁴¹ The tough measures China introduced to fight the coronavirus remain in place, greatly complicating cooperation. In late 2021, Grodekovo-Suifenhe and Zabaikalsk-Manzhouli crossing points stopped accepting non-container shipments.⁴² Today, China restricts imports of agricultural products through land crossings.

Ensuring the efficient operation of the Eastern supply routes in this new environment calls for serious work in several areas. Expanding capacity will require the biggest effort, since major investment and developing new competencies for learning to handle new kinds of cargoes are necessary. Recovering existing capacities at land crossing points with China will be equally important considering the need to comply with strict sanitary rules on the Russia-China border.

The two countries have seen a steady increase in their annual trade, and retain much potential for further expanding it, as reflected by the mutual commitment to increasing trade to \$200 billion in 2022. Against the backdrop of sanctions pressure exerted by the Western countries, promoting cooperation in science and technology, transport, infrastructure, and industrial cooperation will serve as a new driver for fostering economic growth on the back of Russia-China cooperation.

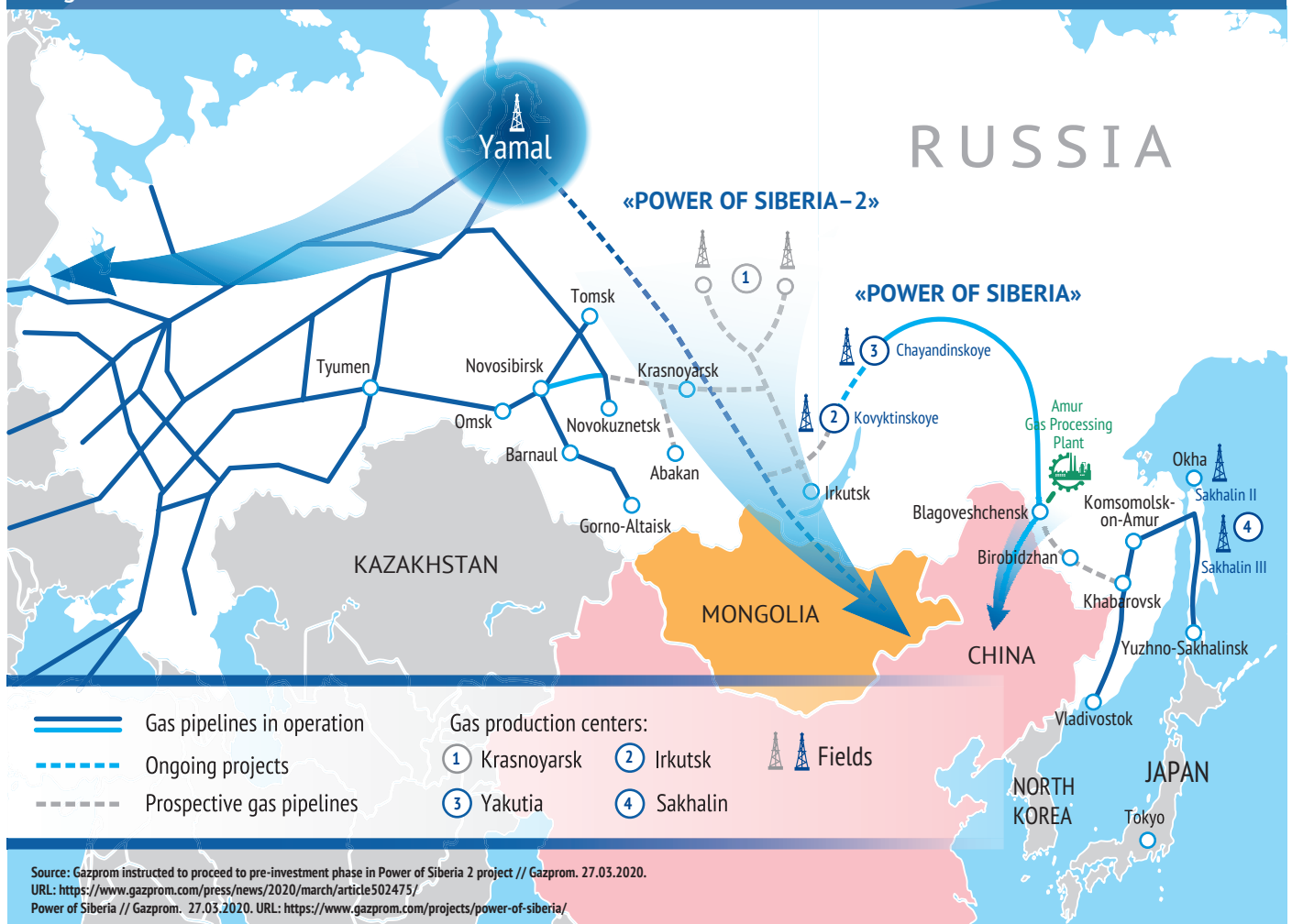
Siberia and the Far East

In this new reality, the accelerated development of Siberia and the Far East is turning from an attractive state programme into a vital necessity that will largely determine Russia's power and prosperity in coming decades. Reorienting the flows of Russia's main exports, primarily to China, is becoming critically important in order to maintain economic stability and budget sustainability amid the West's growing sanctions pressure, its embargo on Russian oil supplies and its plans to

⁴¹ Юрий Трутнев провёл заседание Государственной комиссии по вопросам развития Арктической зоны РФ [Yury Trutnev holds a meeting of the State Commission on Developing Russia's Arctic Zone] // Arctic Russia. June 24, 2022. URL: <https://arctic-russia.ru/news/yuriy-trutnev-provvel-zasedanie-gosudarstvennoy-komissii-po-voprosam-razvitiya-arkticheskoy-zony-rf/>

⁴² Potayeva K., Milkin V. Два погранперехода остановили пропуск неконтанейнерных грузов из России в Китай [Two border crossings close for non-container shipments from Russia to China] // Vedomosti. December 1, 2021. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2021/11/30/898356-dva-pogranperehoda>

Figure 2. RUSSIA-TO-CHINA GAS PIPELINES



completely phase out Russian energy. This reorientation is impossible without the large-scale infrastructure construction programme in Siberia and the Far East.

At this point, the main role belongs to the construction of the Soyuz Vostok gas pipeline (the continuation of the Power of Siberia-2) that will pass through East Siberian regions and connect the main production areas on Yamal with China via Mongolia. In this way, it will integrate the western and eastern parts of the Russian gas infrastructure into a single system (Figure 2).

In February 2022, already after the start of the SMO, Russia and Mongolia started designing the gas pipeline. The Mongolian government

and Gazprom established a joined working group and signed agreements on its activities as well as design and survey work.⁴³ Construction was supposed to start in 2024, but now it is necessary for obvious reasons to expedite the project and increase capacities for supplying gas to China. The capacity of the Power of Siberia-2 will be 1.3 times higher than of the Power of Siberia-1.

During Vladimir Putin's visit to China on February 4, 2022, Gazprom and CNPC signed a new contract on supplying 10 billion cubic metres of gas from the Sakhalin-3 project deposits. This primarily applies to the Kirinskoye deposit but its reserves are estimated at 5.5 billion cubic metres.⁴⁴ Therefore, to fulfil the contract, it will be necessary to develop the Yuzhno (South)-Kirinskoye deposit. In addition, to ensure supplies, Russia must continue the Sakhalin-Khabarovsk-Vladivostok pipeline (SKhV) towards China. The extension of the pipeline does not pose any difficulties but development of the technologically complex Yuzhno-Kirinskoye deposit may become a challenge due to Western sanctions and the departure of service companies from Russia. The question is whether Russia and China will be able to replace Western production technology in the new Sakhalin projects.

The buildup of throughput capacities in the east of Russia is also important for restoring imports after the departure of many Western companies and the introduction of restrictions on the supply of different goods to the Russian market. This will require an increase in imports from China. To ensure a steady flow of Chinese goods to the Russian market, we must expand the Trans-Siberian Railway, build more bridges across the Amur River and upgrade checkpoints on the Russian border. The latter task requires particular attention because improvements are taking too long, despite the fact that the business community has been talking about this problem for more than a decade. The Federal Customs Service and the regional and federal authorities must coordinate their work to boost the efficiency of all checkpoints along the entire Russia-China border.

⁴³ «Газпром» и Монголия перешли к стадии проектирования газопровода «Союз Восток» [Gazprom and Mongolia embark on designing the Soyuz Vostok gas pipeline] // Vedomosti. 28.02.2022. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/news/2022/02/28/911280-gazprom-mongoliya-soyuz-vostok>

⁴⁴ «Роснефть» подписала долгосрочный контракт с Китаем на \$80 млрд, «Газпром» поставит 10 млрд куб. м газа [Rosneft signs long-term contract with China worth \$80 bn, Gazprom to supply 10 bn cubic m of gas] // Vedomosti. 04.02.2022. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2022/02/04/907957-gazprom-rosneft-kontrakti-kitaem>

Cross-border territories of priority development can become a new mechanism for creating preferential regimes for economic operators. This will step up cross-border cooperation that has been in decline since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.⁴⁵

The speed of infrastructure construction and re-orientation of Russia's trade flows to China is extremely important now. It is necessary to attract Chinese investment and Chinese companies to participate in transport and logistics projects. It is essential to establish strict government oversight over accelerated coordination procedures and timely fulfilment of the work schedule. It is important to avoid what happened with the building of a deep-water port in Arkhangelsk. The competition between regional elites led to the project being blocked by federal authorities, and a Chinese investor lost interest.

Re-orientation will have a positive impact on the regions of Siberia and the Far East. Accelerating infrastructure construction will create additional jobs. It is necessary to provide jobs for Russian workers despite China's involvement. Cooperation with China will open up additional opportunities in the border areas, which may facilitate population inflow. This may occur not only in the most advanced parts of the macro region (Vladivostok, Khabarovsk and Sakhalin) but also in the regions of the Far Eastern Federal District, which did not make rapid progress in the last few years. Apart from migration, re-orientation will require developing local human capital in Siberia and the Far East. It is necessary to coordinate the activities of the scientific and educational community and intensify the training of specialists with a view to supporting Russia-China cooperation in the existing educational clusters of Novosibirsk (Akademgorodok), Yakutia (North Eastern Federal University) and Vladivostok (Far Eastern Federal University), to name a few.

Traditional areas of cooperation in Russian Siberia and the Far East – the mining and forest industries – may receive a boost during a period of profound re-orientation. However, to achieve this, it is necessary to liberalise economic activities and make it as simple as

⁴⁵ Полпред Трутнев анонсировал в ДФО появление трансграничных территорий опережающего развития [Presidential Envoy Trutnev announces the appearance of cross border territories of priority development in the Far Eastern Federal District] // Komsomolskaya Pravda. 08.07.2022. URL: <https://www.dv.kp.ru/online/news/4780060/>

possible to do business. It is worth considering cancellation of the restrictions introduced on round timber exports and reconsider existing quotas on coal exports. It is important to work with our Chinese partners on gradually overcoming the COVID restrictions that affect economic activities in the macro regions.

This new stage in the development of Siberia and the Far East in the context of Russia-China cooperation must not be detrimental to the fragile ecosystem of these macro regions. It is necessary to find such cooperation models that would meet environmental standards. There is a demand for this approach on both banks of the Amur River. This is manifest in the growing popularity of the green agenda in Russia in the past few years and in China's declared aspiration to build an "eco civilisation" in China. Indicatively, Chinese companies are considering working with Rosneft on green energy (wind generation) in the new oil province – the Vankor Field, where the Vostok Oil mega project is underway.⁴⁶

Conclusion

In their decision to openly confront Russia over Ukraine, the Western countries underestimated the scale and depth of the Russia-China strategic partnership in the new era. The events of the past few months defied assumptions about the fragility of Moscow-Beijing ties. They showed the common strategic vision of the two countries and their willingness to support each other to address complex foreign policy challenges.

By the middle of March 2022, Washington realised the futility of its attempts to persuade China to adopt a less pro-Russia position on Ukraine and launched a counteroffensive in another area that is vital for China. In the past half year, US-China bilateral relations have increasingly been reduced to the Taiwan problem. The US has repeatedly

⁴⁶ «Роснефть» в течение недели ждёт от партнёров из КНР предложения по ВЭС для «Восток Ойла» [Rosneft is waiting for a proposal on a wind farm for Vostok Oil from the Chinese partners] // Peretok. 22.02.2022. URL: <https://peretok.ru/news/engineering/24601/?ysclid=l5bbhk7hme629913322>

staged provocations to test China's resolve and ratcheted up rhetoric as regards China's Taiwan policy. The culmination was the visit by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan in early August 2022, in response to which the People's Liberation Army of China launched naval exercises in the South China Sea. As a result, Taiwan has practically ousted the Russia-Ukraine issue from US-China relations.

The only area in which the West managed to score some success was limiting Russia-China business ties. This is due to the strong dependence of large Chinese companies on Western markets and technological partnerships. They are afraid of the heavy blow that so-called secondary US sanctions would inflict. However, the general practical importance of this threat should not be exaggerated. Moreover, China and Russia are working hard to protect their economic relations from a probable Western attack. It is also important to understand that for Russia preserving full-scale economic relations even with such an important partner as China is not an existential issue.



The diplomatic efforts of Moscow and Beijing, as well as their actions at the global level, have shown that they are linked not just by allied relations. There is even more to it. Their ties are based on a similar understanding of the main international problems and the changes required in international politics and the world economy. In the past half year, there was not a single example of differences between Russia and China on what they consider truly essential issues.

Most observers respond to this by concluding that Russia-China relations have reached a high level, probably the highest in the entire history of their cooperation. It is worth emphasising that the main reason for their close cooperation is not the Russia-Ukraine conflict that merely spurred on some processes, but the natural state of their long-term strategic partnership. According to the official position of the two countries, the Russia-China tandem is one of the most important factors in ensuring stability in international affairs, and their interests align in many strategically vital economic industries.

The stabilising role of Russia-China relations is also important for such international associations as the SCO and BRICS. The preservation of mutual understanding between Moscow and Beijing is vital in both

cases. It allows other participating states to see that even under unprecedented economic and de facto military-political pressure, these institutions keep working as usual and uphold the varied interests of their member states. In this way, Russia and China are already laying the foundation of the future international order without a narrow hegemonic group of states.

The economic war unleashed by the West seems to be gaining momentum, making stronger relations between Russia and China even more important in this context. They have successfully navigated the first round of the struggle for a more just international order, a process that began with the historic meeting of their leaders on February 4, 2022.

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