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The limits of strategic partnerships: Implications for China's role in the Russia-Ukraine war

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ABSTRACT

Will Russia's invasion of Ukraine bring China and Russia closer together or drive them farther apart, or will it be business as usual? This article addresses this question by conceptualizing the main characteristics of the China–Russia strategic partnership. It argues that a strategic partnership, characterized as it is by informality, equality, and inclusivity, is essentially different from an alliance or alignment. These characteristics allow Beijing to distance itself from Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. This makes it unlikely that China will attempt any simultaneous aggression in East Asia or that it will be able to mediate in the conflict. This effectively rules out the rise of a China–Russia axis. As China strives to balance its close ties with Russia and its economic engagement with the West, Beijing is more likely to maintain, rather than strengthen or weaken, its strategic partnership with Moscow.

KEYWORDS Alliances; China; Russia; strategic partnership; the Russia-Ukraine war

Without doubt, the China–Russia strategic partnership has been overshadowed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Despite their leaders' pledge to put "no limits" on their cooperation (President of Russia, 2022), China has reacted cautiously to the invasion, abstaining from UN resolutions on the matter and condemning the aggression. Although Beijing has expressed its opposition to the West's economic sanctions against Moscow, China has largely complied with them. While the Chinese have blamed Washington and NATO for the conflict, they have called for a negotiated settlement that takes into account Moscow's "legitimate security demands" and Kyiv's "sovereignty and territorial integrity" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022a). It seems that the Russia-Ukraine war has presented Beijing with a dilemma regarding its strategic partnership with Moscow.

In particular, scholars and observers are debating whether the war is likely to bring Beijing and Moscow closer together or drive them apart and how

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their relationship will develop. Some analysts argue that Beijing would bail out Moscow because Russia is so important to China in its strategic competition with the United States; others contend that it is in Beijing's interest to remain neutral or even decouple from Moscow. Some believe that the war could increase Moscow's dependence on Beijing, strengthen China's bargaining position vis-à-vis the United States, and offer Beijing the chance of an important mediating role; others suggest that the crisis has created a dilemma for China, torn as it is between preserving its strategic partnership with Russia and maintaining economic engagement with the West (Blanchette & Lin, 2022; Carlson, 2022; Denisov, 2022; Medeiros, 2022; Nathan, 2022; Sacks, 2022; Westad, 2022). While these debates are crucial for understanding China's options regarding the Russia-Ukraine war—which include intervention, mediation, or neutrality—little attention has been paid to the nature of the China–Russia strategic partnership and its implications for Beijing's role in the conflict.

In this regard, this article explores the main characteristics of strategic partnerships and their implications for China's role in the Russia-Ukraine war. Strategic partnerships, defined as long-term collaborations between states on economic, political, and socio-cultural issues, constitute a subject of growing interest in international relations (Chidley, 2014; Ding & Sun, 2021; Leng & Chang Liao, 2016; Wilkins, 2012). While there is already a wealth of scholarly literature on the subject of alliances and alignment, strategic partnerships remain under-defined and under-theorized (with the exception of Tyushka & Czechowska, 2019). As Locoman and Papa (2022) argue, however, the China–Russia strategic partnership challenges "the value of alliance and alignment paradigms" (p. 278). Rather than viewing the China–Russia strategic partnership through the prism of alliance and alignment, therefore, this article argues that we should treat it as what it is—a collaboration characterized by informality, equality, and inclusivity. These features shape China's policy options regarding the Russia-Ukraine war by restraining Beijing from taking corresponding action in East Asia, restricting its ability to mediate between the adversaries, and preventing the rise of a China–Russia axis. As China strives to balance its close ties with Russia and its economic engagement with the West, Beijing is more likely to maintain, rather than strengthen or weaken, its strategic partnership with Moscow.

The future of the China–Russia strategic partnership remains, of course, uncertain, which requires caution on the side of analysts. Indeed, the war in Ukraine has already challenged many previously held assumptions (Dijkstra et al., 2022). In terms of the methodology, this article therefore considers plausible future scenarios based on an established analytical framework of what the China–Russia strategic partnership currently represents (for an account of scenario-based planning, see Weitz, 2001). The article takes

into account empirical evidence on developments in the China–Russia strategic partnership since the start of the war on February 24, 2022 and considers plausible paths forward for the strategic partnership. Using counterfactual analysis, it also excludes possible scenarios as currently either unrealistic or not in line with the evolving empirical evidence. This article proceeds as follows. The first section consists of a review of the scholarly debate on the China–Russia strategic partnership and argues that interest-based assumptions provide an incomplete view of the nature of strategic partnerships. In the second section, I conceptualize strategic partnerships by pointing to their three main characteristics: informality, equality, and inclusivity. The implications of these characteristics for China's role in the Russia-Ukraine war, as well as the future prospects of Beijing's strategic partnership with Moscow, are discussed in the third section. In the final section, I summarize my arguments and set out some further implications.

The China–Russia strategic partnership: The scholarly debate

Much scholarly attention has been devoted to why and how the China–Russia strategic partnership has continued to evolve (Baev, 2016; Bekkevold & Lo, 2019; Dittmer, 2001; Garnett, 2001; Kaczmarski, 2015; Ko, 2006; Li, 2007; Wilson, 2004; Yoder, 2022). Some scholars argue that the deepening cooperation between China and Russia amounts to a de facto alliance (Blank, 2020; Carlson, 2016; Flikke, 2016; Schoen & Kaylan, 2014). Common interests in arms and oil, shared ideations of autocracy and great power status, and increased tension with the liberal international order have driven them to develop their partnership into a Eurasian coalition that challenges the U.S.-led alliance system. Perhaps the most salient feature of the China–Russia relationship is their joint military exercises. As Beijing has stepped up its military activities in the East and South China Seas, it has begun conducting joint naval drills with Moscow in the area, thus posing a bigger threat to Washington and its allies. As Lukin (2021, p. 370) claims, "the Russia–China strategic partnership … may already be no less effective than some of the US-led treaty alliances."

Others argue that mutual suspicion makes an alliance between Beijing and Moscow unlikely, if not impossible (Bellacqua, 2010; Bolt & Cross, 2018; Deng, 2007; Krickovic, 2017; Lukin, 2018; Menon, 2009). Although historical mistrust between the two sides has abated in recent years, Russia perceives that China's growing economic power will soon allow it to challenge Moscow's geopolitical influence in Central Asia (Freeman, 2018; Kim & Blank, 2013; Swanström, 2014; Tang, 2000). On the other hand, the principle of non-alignment, with the exception of North Korea, remains paramount among Chinese leaders. For example, Chinese President Xi (2015) has stated, "We should forge a global partnership at both international and

regional levels, and embrace a new approach to state-to-state relations, one that features dialogue rather than confrontation, and seeks partnership rather than alliance." Recognizing the two parties' mutual mistrust and diverging strategic interests, Lo (2008, p. 54) depicts the China–Russia strategic partnership as an "axis of convenience" that "combines tactical expediency with strategic calculus and long views."

Still others regard the China–Russia strategic partnership as a new form of alignment that can be distinguished from a formal alliance (Ambrosio, 2017; Ferguson, 2012; Korolev, 2020, 2022; Wilkins, 2008). Alignments are "a confluence of interests among states," whereas an alliance is "a formal agreement among states to cooperate militarily" in the event of conflict. While realignments often occur as national interests change, alliances tend to "persist in the face of clashing interests" (Beckley, 2015, p. 14). Wilkins (2012, p. 58) identifies strategic partnerships as goal-driven alignments rather than threat-driven alliances and concludes that the emergence of strategic partnerships reflects the fact that "the very nature of 'alliance' itself is undergoing metamorphosis." The China–Russia strategic partnership is informal in nature and less institutionalized than an alliance. Both Beijing and Moscow want to enjoy the benefits of cooperation without incurring the risks and costs that come with a strong commitment to this collaboration.

While the scholarly debate focuses on the stark alternative of alliance or alignment, Yoder (2020) notes that "little progress has been made in reaching consensus regarding the character and causes of China–Russia cooperation" (p. 743). In particular, only limited attention has been paid to conceptualizing and theorizing the main characteristics of strategic partnerships per se.[1] Wilkins is one scholar who has provided a theoretical framework that defines the essence of strategic partnerships as consisting of common goals, mutual interests, and environmental uncertainty. His main argument is that a strategic partnership will persist "as long as the partner's preferences, in terms of interests and goals, remain reconcilable with the system principle and their individual behavior conforms to this" (Wilkins, 2008, p. 377). In a similar vein, Holslag (2011, p. 295) views strategic partnerships as long-term relationships between states that promote their shared interests in economic, political, and security areas. Strüver's (2017) empirical study of China's partnership relations finds that they are alignment behaviors based on common interests rather than shared values. These studies suggest that strategic partnerships need to be examined as fluid processes where the confluences of interests between partner states are in flux.

This interest-based assumption, however, is not sufficient to explain why some strategic partnerships derive from divergent policy objectives and motivations, while others persist even if the partner states' interests are in conflict. For example, Holslag (2011) finds that although the European Union-China strategic partnership lacks common interests and joint

actions, both sides have used their partnership as a new form of engagement (Michalski & Pan, 2017; Smith, 2016). Moreover, despite lingering mistrust and friction in their partnership, Beijing and Moscow still "acknowledge and manage their disagreements while continuing to expand areas of consensus" (Fu, 2016, p. 100). In this regard, an interest-based alignment cannot fully define the nature of or explain the persistence of the China–Russia strategic partnership despite the two parties' divergent interests. In an attempt to fill this gap, this article provides a new analytical framework to conceptualize the main characteristics of strategic partnerships.

The characteristics of strategic partnerships: Informality, equality, and inclusivity

This article explores the main characteristics of strategic partnerships in general and those of the China–Russia strategic partnership in particular. It is argued here that the three characteristics that define strategic partnerships are informality, equality, and inclusivity.

The first of these, informality, is the key to distinguishing a strategic partnership from an alliance—a written agreement between states that includes security commitments in the event of military conflict (Morrow, 2000). Alliances are usually recognized as formal interstate obligations, so they require deep political commitment, such as institutionalization and legislative ratification that make any violation more costly (Fearon, 1997; Leeds et al., 2002; Morrow, 2000). Strategic partnerships, on the other hand, are informal, and their commitments are nonbinding. They are usually embedded in joint declarations, executive agreements, and official exchanges of diplomatic notes that would not be considered legally enforceable. They are a foreign policy instrument designed to bypass the formal structures of alliance associations. Since the end of the Cold War, states have begun to reach out to one another through the forging of these strategic partnerships—a situation fundamentally different from the Cold War era when international relations were dominated by rigid alliances (Kay, 2000).

Take the China–Russia strategic partnership as an example. Despite their deepening cooperation in the political and military spheres, Beijing and Moscow have declined to form an alliance involving mutual security guarantees. Instead, they concluded a series of partnership agreements, as illustrated in Figure 1. Since the establishment of a "constructive partnership" in 1994, the China–Russia relationship has proceeded through a "strategic partnership" in 1996 to a "comprehensive strategic partnership" in 2001. Finally, in 2019 it was transformed into a "comprehensive strategic partnership for a new era." Both sides have vowed to establish a new form of cooperation that is different from a Cold War-style alliance (Charap et al., 2017; Locoman & Papa, 2022; Zhang, 2012). Even though China's political and

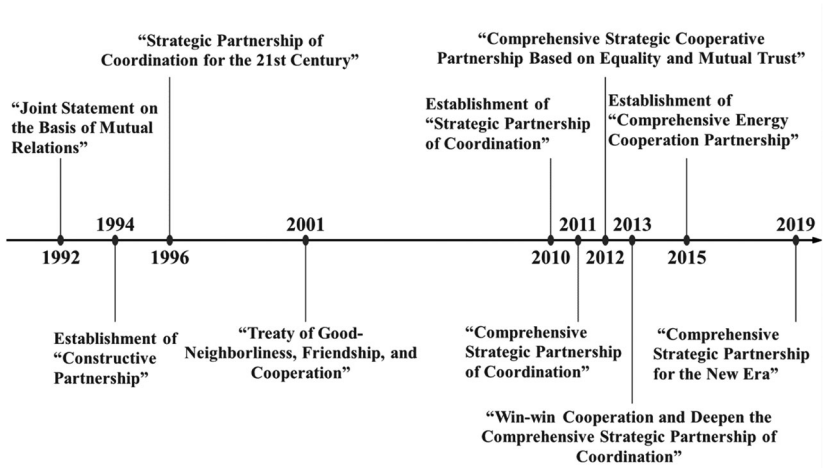

Figure 1. Development of the China-Russia Strategic Partnership, 1990-2020. Source: The websites of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China.

military cooperation with Russia has developed rapidly in the last decade, Beijing has insisted that the two countries "are close, but not allies" (Fu, 2016). For its part, Moscow also views its strategic partnership with Beijing "as a new form of cooperation and multivectorism … that eschews alliances." (Locoman & Papa, 2022, p. 280).

The informal nature of strategic partnerships is demonstrated in their agreements, which tend to be "substantively thin and vaguely defined" (Kinne, 2020, p. 736). Strategic partnership agreements contain no defense obligations, thus offering states more flexibility and autonomy. Even if other commitments are made under these agreements, they are often voluntarily assumed by the signatories, with the aim of creating momentum and mechanisms for further collaboration. Unlike alliance members that have to adhere to formal rules or institutional norms, partner states can amend their agreements relatively easily. If the consequences of pursuing a particular course of cooperation turn out to be less than beneficial, strategic partnerships can be renewed or modified on a case-by-case or temporal basis (Tow & Limaye, 2016). Because of the flexibility afforded by strategic partnership agreements, partner states can act in more informal or ad hoc ways commensurate with their interests without facing the entrapment/abandonment dilemma that comes with an alliance (Snyder, 1984).

The informality inherent in strategic partnerships does not mean that they are ineffective in promoting cooperation between states. Instead, they allow states to pursue multiple elements of collaboration such as trade, arms and technology transfers, and cultural exchanges (Envall & Hall, 2016; Nadkarni, 2010). By broadening issue linkages, states that disagree in some areas can

find common ground in others (Poast, 2012, 2013), thus creating reciprocal mechanisms that help resolve their differences in the long run. One example is the growing list of cooperation and intergovernmental connections in the China–Russia strategic partnership agreements—which includes broader linkages between areas of cooperation ranging from the economy, security, and energy to culture and technology, to name but a few. These issue linkages provide bases for regular exchanges between government departments and agencies, thus developing a structured framework for collaboration between the two states (Ambrosio, 2017; Lukin, 2018).[2]

The second characteristic of strategic partnerships is the sense of equality between the partners. The partner states are on an equal footing, despite their disparities in military or economic power (Blanco, 2016; Sautenet, 2007). For example, the European Union has used strategic partnerships as "equalizing arrangements of asymmetrical bilateral relations" with its partners (Ferreira-Pereira & Smith, 2021, p. 202). The equality of strategic partnerships stems in part from their first characteristic—informality of commitment, which promises a more balanced relationship between partner states. Power disparity in alliances leads to unequal distribution of security obligations and varying degrees of autonomy among allies (Morrow, 1991). In strategic partnerships, however, states do not depend on one another for their security and can keep their freedom of action. Strategic partnerships thus allow states to maintain "the fiction of equality generally absent in alliances," which makes them "easier to sell at home and help[ful] in protecting the country's image abroad" (Nadkarni, 2010, p. 201). While asymmetric alliances usually burden states with unequal contributions and obligations, strategic partnerships allow more equal and independent relationships.

Strategic partnerships can also serve to equalize the asymmetric relationships between alliance members. Strategic partnerships between states can generate mutual expectations of more symmetrical relationships in which weak states are on an equal footing with their strong counterparts (Michalski, 2019; Pan & Michalski, 2019). One example is the shift in the U.S.-led alliance system to focus on interoperability between allies and partners (Clinton, 2011; Green, 2019; Powell, 2004). By emphasizing "partner capabilities," Washington seeks to achieve "a more nuanced and equal set of security relationships with allies and partners" (Tow, 2015, p. 32). Meanwhile, U.S. allies and partners are also incentivized to assume greater responsibility for maintaining regional order, thus reducing the U.S. defense burden and concerns about allies' free riding (Hamilton, 2014; Parameswaran, 2014; Thalakada, 2012). This change means a less hierarchic, more flexible, and potentially more independent contribution to regional security between Washington and its allies and partners. One example is the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States

(AUKUS), established in 2021, which reflects the emergence of new regional multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific (Wirth & Jenne, 2022).

An alliance between China and Russia would not be as equal a relationship as a strategic partnership. After the end of World War II, China and the Soviet Union formed an alliance based on power disparity and security dependency. The alliance ultimately broke down in the 1960s due to ideological disputes and territorial conflict (Dittmer, 1992; Lüthi, 2008; Westad, 1998). Since the end of the Cold War, the relationship between the two states has gone into reverse as the Chinese economy has overtaken that of Russia. The growing asymmetry in material capabilities between the two sides has raised concerns in Moscow. Given both sides' awareness of their strategic autonomy, however, they have forged an equal partnership based on self-restraint and mutual accommodation (Cox, 2016; Flikke, 2016; Kaczmarski, 2016).

The third characteristic of strategic partnerships is their inclusivity. States forging strategic partnerships prefer not to limit their cooperation to one another. Alliances are "exclusive security institutions, designed principally to deal with threats from non-members" (Wallander & Keohane, 1999, p. 23), whereas partner states may "have multiple strategic partnerships simultaneously, even with rival states … " (Koga, 2022, p. 96). While alliances are formed to deter and defend against external threats, strategic partnerships are aimed at managing the risk that any state could either pose a threat or offer an opportunity. Perhaps more important, although alliances can exacerbate suspicions concerning non-allies, strategic partnerships may encompass friends and enemies alike, since they are not directed against third parties. For example, by forging strategic partnerships with China and with countries that share a common concern about China's rise, India has managed its partnership relations as a reassurance strategy aimed at convincing Beijing that India is not trying to balance against China (Rajagopalan, 2020).

The inclusivity of bilateral strategic partnerships has its merits in multilateral settings. On many issues in interstate cooperation, such as trade and investment, technology transfers, and environmental protection, paired partners share interests with third parties. They must go beyond their bilateral ties and focus on regional and global issues (Renard, 2012). For example, the European Union has forged strategic partnerships with emerging powers, such as Brazil, China, India, and Russia, with which it can pursue "effective multilateralism" for global governance (Grevi & de Vasconcelos, 2008; Renard, 2016). Groups of states can also strengthen their multilateral cooperation through layers of bilateral partnerships. Although strategic partnerships are more inclusive than alliances, they are less inclusive than multilateral institutions. Strategic partnerships may thus serve as a specific form of bilateral engagement in support of existing multilateral institutions (Michalski, 2019).

This is where the main difference between strategic partnerships and alignments is to be found—alignments being informal commitments based on the confluence of interests between states (Snyder, 1997, p. 6). Strategic partnerships are similar to alignments in that common interests carry the entire relationship, and the extent of the shared interests does not need to be clarified formally (Wilkins, 2008, 2012). As Wallander and Keohane point out, however, both alliances and alignments "are directed against specific threats and are exclusive in membership form" (Wallander & Keohane, 1999, p. 28). The key difference, then, is that strategic partnerships do not target third parties; they even deliver an expectation of engaging with enemies. Such an expectation is embodied in Japan's strategic partnerships with regional states such as Australia and India, which are aimed at promoting an open and inclusive regional order rather than containing China's rise (Satake & Sahashi, 2021).

In short, strategic partnerships are more institutionalized and broader based than alignments, but less formal and binding than alliances. With their three characteristics of informality, equality, and inclusivity as defined here, strategic partnerships represent a category of foreign policy instrument of their own in the taxonomy of interstate cooperation, being situated somewhere between alliances and alignments.

Implications for China's role in the Russia-Ukraine war

Together, these three characteristics—informality, equality, and inclusivity—delineate the fluid nature of strategic partnerships, distinguishing them from other types of interstate cooperation, such as alliances and alignments. They also have the effect of alleviating partner states' fear of entrapment and concerns about inequality and the risk of provocation. They are essential to the nature of the China–Russia strategic partnership, and they have implications for China's attitude toward Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

First, due to the informality of its strategic partnership with Russia, China has been able to avoid intervening in the Ukraine conflict. Consider, for instance, the counterfactual in which Chinese intervention would have taken the form of economic aid or military assistance to Russia. This would have significantly influenced the outcome of the conflict. It would not only have distracted and diverted the United States and its allies, but also ensured Russian support for any future Chinese action in the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea. Likely, however, the United States and its allies would have embarked on a campaign designed to impose a high economic cost on China for throwing in its lot with Moscow (Beckley & Brands, 2022).

Given the West's united diplomatic support for Ukraine, Beijing is indeed wary of the overwhelming power of U.S.-led economic sanctions (Lam,

2022). These concerns have prevented Beijing from ramping up its partnership with Moscow in a way that would remind observers of the Sino-Soviet alliance of the 1950s. A China–Russia axis, once formed, would pose a grave challenge to the U.S.-led international order for decades to come (Rozman, 2014).

For these reasons, any concerted action by China in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is unlikely, though it is conceivable.[3] Some observers have speculated that a conflict on two fronts could erupt if China were to take deliberately coordinated action in the Taiwan Strait (e.g., Erickson & Collins, 2022, pp. 118–119). Given the high degree of autonomy China and Russia enjoy in their partnership, however, Beijing can avoid springing unpleasant surprises or getting involved in a conflict that is not in its interest. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine seemed to catch China completely unaware, there was little chance of it launching a coordinated attack on Taiwan. Had Moscow informed Beijing of its war plan in advance, the Chinese would have withdrawn their diplomats and citizens from Ukraine more quickly. It is very likely that Beijing had been misinformed or even "played" by Moscow, and the Chinese could not rebuff or clarify something they did not know about (Sun, 2022a).[4]

Perhaps more importantly, Beijing has tried to avoid any parallels being drawn between Ukraine and Taiwan. From China's perspective, Ukraine is a sovereign country, and its territorial integrity deserves respect. Taiwan, in contrast, is in Chinese eyes a "breakaway province" of China and consequently the international community should comply with Beijing's "one China principle." As the Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying has remarked, "Taiwan for sure is not Ukraine," and to draw a comparison between the two is a sign of a "lack of knowledge of the history of the Taiwan question" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022a). This explains why China withheld support for the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia during Russia's war with Georgia in 2008, and why it refused to recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, even if coordinated action is implausible, the risk of China imminently using force against Taiwan cannot be ruled out, particularly given the current tension in the Taiwan Strait.[5] But this would be because China has been ratcheting up pressure on the island for years, not for any reasons related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Second, the equality characteristic of strategic partnerships means that there is limited likelihood of China playing the role of mediator between Russia and Ukraine, contrary to some expectations (Sun, 2022b; Wang, 2022; Wong, 2022). Given Russia's growing economic dependence on China, as well as the personal rapport between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, some have speculated that China could mediate between the two adversaries or even persuade Putin to withdraw. If this were to happen,

China would have proved itself to be a "responsible great power" (Chung, 2021). But given the emphasis on equality in their partnership, Beijing has been reluctant to exploit its upper hand with Moscow (Zhao, 2015). The two sides have managed to treat each other as equals and accommodate each other's interests. Although Russia would be less capable of asserting its strategic independence vis-à-vis China than vice versa, whether Beijing has enough leverage over Moscow remains to be seen.

China could also find itself in an uncomfortable position should it adopt a mediating role. Since it has been assumed that Beijing is close to Moscow, both Kyiv and the Western capitals would see Chinese mediation as undesirable, if not biased. If Beijing's mediation were to produce results unexpectedly favorable to Ukraine, China's relations with Russia could suffer, not to mention that Beijing would bear unwelcome responsibility for the outcomes and implementation of any settlement. More worrisome for the Chinese leaders is the potential damage to China's reputation if they failed to reach a settlement (Zhu, 2022). It is these considerations that have prompted Xi Jinping's call that "all parties should push for a proper settlement of the Ukraine crisis in a responsible manner"—a comparatively neutral posture which betrays no sign of wishing to assume a mediation role which would involve Beijing in demanding compromises and monitoring outcomes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022c).

Nevertheless, Beijing is attempting to reconcile the irreconcilable. Remaining neutral or impartial may be far more challenging than taking sides in the world's most dangerous conflict since the end of the Cold War. Instead of enjoying freedom of maneuver in its strategic partnership, Beijing might, through its neutrality, antagonize both Moscow and Washington, while alienating its European friends and partners. Beijing may also find itself on the receiving end of a share of the West's outrage, mainly caused by the prolonged conflict between Moscow and Kyiv, if it remains conveniently unconcerned about the stalemate. On balance, however, the potential risks for China would be offset by the benefits of maintaining its strategic partnership with Russia at a time when, given its deteriorating relationship with the United States, China is most in need of partners.

Finally, given the inclusivity of their partnership, it would be premature to predict the emergence of a full-blown China–Russia axis (Brands, 2022; Goldstein, 2022). In view of its economic and diplomatic isolation from the West, Russia will inevitably turn to China to reduce the impact of Western economic sanctions or rely on Beijing's economic and political support (García-Herrero, 2022). For Moscow, however, China is not the only available option, as the Russians would be reluctant to become overdependent on the Chinese economy (Wishnick, 2022). They could turn to other strategic partners, such as the other BRICS countries, that have avoided

criticizing Russia and have opted out of Western sanctions. For its part, Beijing has also tried to strike a balance between Moscow and Kyiv by adopting a fence-sitting attitude—it has not condemned Russia's aggression but has voiced at least rhetorical support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022b). If the prospects of a China–Russia alliance are often exaggerated, so too is a situation where the two sides count on one another. The Ukraine war is exposing the limits, as well as the essential characteristics, of the China–Russia strategic partnership.

It should be noted that if China strengthens its strategic partnership with Russia, it will not be to forge a de facto alliance but rather to achieve its own strategic interests. From Beijing's perspective, Moscow's failure in Ukraine would create uncertainty about the current leadership in the Kremlin as well as in Zhongnanhai (Wu, 2022). This might provide a motive for China's intervention in the war—that is, to prevent the collapse of the Putin regime and to ensure the continued dependency of a weaker partner locked in sequential conflicts with its Western neighbors. As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said to his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov in October 2022, China will "firmly support Russia in rallying and leading the Russian people under the leadership of President Putin to achieve strategic development goals against all the odds and disturbance, and to further establish Russia's status as a major country on the international stage" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022d).

However, a Chinese retreat from its partnership with Russia would not only facilitate the end of the conflict, but also turn the crisis into an opportunity for China to reestablish its credentials as a responsible great power (Hu, 2022). Although Beijing has refused to condemn Russia's actions or press Moscow to stop the war, it could downgrade their relations by stopping energy imports from Russia or joining the Western economic sanctions. In particular, if the Chinese leaders do not anticipate an all-out war and if they really empathize with the plight of the Ukrainians, they could justify distancing China from a conflict not of its own making. As the former Chinese ambassador in Washington, Qin Gang, has pointed out, "China and Russia's cooperation has no forbidden areas, but it has a bottom line," which is "the tenets and principles of the United Nations Charter, the recognized basic norms of international law and international relations" (Qin, 2022). Thanks to the informal nature of strategic partnerships, Beijing would bear little reputational cost if it did this, and it would also reduce the risk of China becoming a target of secondary economic sanctions imposed by the West.

Now that Beijing is in strategic competition with the United States, however, the Chinese would be unwilling to be seen as siding with Washington against Moscow. China still needs Russia to act as a counterforce to the

United States and its allies to prevent the Chinese from being prioritized or singled out by the West (Lukin, 2022; Zhou, 2022). Moreover, should China abandon its partnership with Russia, Moscow might be prompted to realign with Washington in the short term, much like China's rapprochement with the United States in the 1970s (Lüthi, 2012). In the long run, Russia could eventually be drawn into an anti-China coalition led by the United States —a nightmare scenario for the Chinese leaders.

Therefore, the characteristics of strategic partnership—informality, equality, and inclusivity—point to inertia and continuity as the default values in China's role in the Russia-Ukraine war. Beijing is likely to continue to tread carefully in matters pertaining to Russia's evolving conflict with Ukraine and the West. It will not punish Moscow for its aggression or seek common ground with other countries on the crisis, at least not as a mediator. It will be more likely to work together with other partners, such as India and South Africa among the BRICS countries, to resist the West's demand that it condemns Moscow's actions or imposes sanctions on Russia (Medeiros, 2022). China's support for Russia does not violate international law or the sanctions regime, as it can increase its purchases of Russian goods and services that are not yet included in the sanctions. From Beijing's perspective, as long as it refrains from providing any direct military support to Russia, it will avoid Western sanctions and maintain access to international markets and the U.S. dollar system, both of which are of critical importance to the Chinese economy.

In short, Beijing's dilemma is that drawing closer to Moscow would provoke a forceful response from Washington, while backing away from Russia may throw their relationship into reverse. Even those who had advocated a China–Russia alliance now recognize that China is caught in a strategic predicament (Yan, 2022). Under the banner of strategic partnerships, however, China can afford to be a bystander. Beijing can hold on to its traditional promise of non-alignment in order to win concessions from the West, while at the same time dangling the prospect of a closer partnership in front of Moscow. Given that Russia is likely to be facing a long period of isolation and sanctions, Beijing could increase its leverage vis-à-vis Moscow without compromising the kinds of cooperation it needs from the West, such as trade, investment, and technology. As a result, sustaining its strategic partnership with Russia is not only an optimal policy option for Beijing, but also a current reality.

Conclusion

At the time of writing this article, uncertainty about the outcome of the Russia-Ukraine war has sparked vehement debates over the role China might play in shaping that outcome. If China decided to assist Russia

militarily, Moscow's chances of prevailing would be significantly enhanced. If Beijing decided to snub Moscow, Russia would be more likely to succumb to the West's all-out diplomatic and economic sanctions. What is underexplored in this debate, however, is China's role in the war in the light of its strategic partnership with Russia as well as the nature of strategic partnerships in general.

This article thus highlights the need to distinguish the China–Russia strategic partnership from alliances and alignment by providing a conceptual framework for the essential characteristics of strategic partnerships in general. The China–Russia strategic partnership has been gradually deepening, particularly in recent years, as the two countries have engaged in alliance-like military coordination. Since Russia invaded Ukraine, however, Beijing has been striving to preserve a delicate balance between maintaining close ties with Moscow, respecting the UN Charter on state sovereignty, and ensuring that it does not obstruct, much less violate, the Western-imposed sanctions against Russia. Paradoxically, in many respects, China is acting in ways that are consistent with the very nature of strategic partnerships—which are characterized by informality, equality, and inclusivity. These features are serving China's interests by enabling Beijing, more or less plausibly, to distance itself from the war and play the role of a relatively disinterested bystander. Maintaining the status quo in its strategic partnership with Russia would thus work to China's advantage.

Given the essential nature of strategic partnerships, it would be imprudent to overstate or understate the collaboration between China and Russia. Beijing will neither risk its economy by confronting Washington in order to give unwavering support to Moscow, nor will it move away from Russia toward the West. China will try to maintain cooperation with Russia as best it can, while preventing an escalation of tension with the West. Although the biggest challenge for Washington and its allies would be a simultaneous conflict with both Beijing and Moscow, that scenario is rather unlikely.

However, that is not to say that the challenges brought about by the China–Russia strategic partnership can be ignored. With a growing energy-maritime security nexus, Erickson and Collins (2022, p. 120) argue that Chinese leader Xi Jinping may "view Russia as an essential partner in his ambitions to reshape the international system in China's favor." Although Russia's war in Ukraine has created a rare consensus among the Western countries against a major threat to the current world order, there are further frictions to be exploited: global inflation, the energy crisis, the food crisis, and Kyiv's need for aid. The world should remain alert to any sign that China and Russia are combining their economic weight and influence to drive a wedge between the members of the coalition against Russian aggression.

Notes

1. For the theorizing of strategic partnerships in the case of the European Union, see Blanco (2016), Ferreira-Pereira and Vieira (2016), Renard (2012).
2. Similarly, Sautenet (2007, p. 706) examines the European Union-China strategic partnership and finds that it allows "the two partners, without binding engagements, to exchange on specific subjects and to advance political dialogue step by step in a supple manner."
3. For example, NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg described the "two authoritarian powers" as "operating together." See Economist (2022, p. 56). Also see Kendall-Taylor and Shullman (2021).
4. The China-Russia strategic relationship has been full of surprises (Rozman, 2022). For example, China was not informed in advance of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and Moscow did not have prior knowledge of Beijing's agreement with Washington on sanctions against Pyongyang in 2016 (Lukin, 2018, pp. 133–134).
5. It should be noted that Russia did not join China's recent military exercises targeting Taiwan.

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