



Comrades? Xi, Putin, and the Challenge to the West

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RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

The relationship between Russia and the People's Republic of China has been the subject of much discussion amongst scholars, journalists and policy-makers ever since the two countries began mending their fences in the 1980s and 1990s. Developments over the last twenty years from the rise of Putin and Xi through to Russia's decision to launch a full scale invasion of Ukraine on the 24th February 2022 has made that debate all the more important, with on the one side a number of authors claiming the relationship was merely 'convenient' and would not last, and others insisting – correctly as it turned out – that it was precisely what the two leaders described it as being: 'rock solid'. But what continues to hold these two countries together, what impact has their partnership had on Russia's conduct of the war, and how is it helping reshape the world order?

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KEYWORDS:

Putin; Ukraine; Russia; China;
Xi Jinping

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Cox M. Comrades? Xi, Putin, and the Challenge to the West. *LSE Public Policy Review*. 2023; 13(1): 15, pp. 1–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.91>

When Russia launched its ‘full-scale invasion’ of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, two large questions loomed large in the discussion which followed: (i) why did Putin undertake what he called a ‘special military operation’ when most experts thought it would be folly to do so; and (ii) how would China respond to an action which it claims caught it unawares and which according to most pundits, has caused China no end of problems since?

The jury may still be out thinking about the first question relating to the deeper causes of the war and why Putin decided to initiate it. On the other hand, it has by now returned a verdict when it comes to China – which is that in spite of a war that has caused the PRC great embarrassment in Europe and led to massive problems for the world economy China depends upon, it is remarkable how loyal Beijing has been to the man who launched the invasion in the first place. Chinese officials may of course insist that China is not a party to the conflict; that it has not aided Russia militarily; that it recognises Ukraine’s territorial integrity; and that its only interest is in peace. Yet for many, such claims ring hollow. In fact, not only has China’s diplomatic and economic support proved crucial through the war, but Xi himself has turned out to be a model friend. From the beginning, he has made it obvious that in a conflict involving the US and NATO in opposition to Russia, it was perfectly clear on whose side China stood [1].

Nor has China been shy of investing the conflict with wider significance. Indeed, what might have begun as a minor military operation Putin said would be over in a matter of weeks has by now become a struggle for the future of the international system as a whole. This has not only raised the stakes in both Europe and Asia. It has also divided the world in ways that would have once been regarded as unthinkable. Furthermore, the outcome of the war according to Beijing will determine whether the world will be dominated by the US and its liberal allies, representing the past, or by new powers like Russia and China, representing what they claim will be a bright new future. As a Chinese official pointed out soon after another meeting between Putin and Xi, the ‘relationship’ between the two nations had by 2023, moved ‘far beyond the bilateral scope’ and over time had ‘acquired critical importance for the global landscape and the future of humanity’ as a whole [2].

Understanding both the war and its much wider implications requires us to then explain how two countries like Russia and China – both with very different cultures and systems of governance – have managed to forge such a close relationship. The answer, as we shall now go on to show, has to be sought out not in the present, where most commentators tend to begin, but rather in an exploration of the past. First, we will look at the last two decades of the 20th century, when the two countries started to mend fences after years of conflict. Over the next twenty years, the two nations then went on to build a new kind of ‘great power relationship’, which today poses a very real challenge to the West. No doubt Putin’s rise and Xi’s ascendancy to power in China were critical factors here. But so too was the first Ukraine crisis of 2014, a tipping point moment if ever there was one, which forced Russia to tilt more and more towards the ‘East’, while persuading Xi – if indeed he needed persuading – that China’s future belonged with Putin and Russia. This did not mean there were no longer any differences between the two, however. Even so, as time passed, the two countries and their two leaders discovered that much more united than divided them. Some in the West no doubt hope that economic interest and fear of further escalation in Ukraine will over time, lead to a winding down of the conflict with the West. But with trust between the US and China now at an all-time low, Russia as alienated from the West as it was during the Cold War, and the spillover effects of an unfinished war reaching all corners of the globe, there is every reason to be pessimistic and little cause to be optimistic about the future.

MENDING FENCES

The second half of the 20th century witnessed at least five major turning points in the history of the Sino-Russian relationship. The first came in 1950, when the two communist powers signed a treaty of friendship meant to last thirty years. The next came in the 1960s, when Mao declared that China’s old ally-in-arms was now led by revisionist traitors, who amongst many other ideological sins, had had the temerity to reject Stalin while working hand-in-glove with

the imperialists.¹ A few years later, China then met with the same imperialists in the shape of Richard Nixon, followed in 1979 with the establishment of full diplomatic relations and increased military cooperation between the two countries. Then, in the 1980s, the ‘seemingly changeless’ cold war between China and the USSR gradually began to come to an end [4]. Driven by Deng’s desire to drag China’s economy into the modern world, as well as the recognition on both sides of the pointlessness of exploiting a ‘revolutionary global movement’ that no longer existed, the two countries slowly but surely began to move closer together [5].

Significantly, however the most serious change in the relationship only occurred in the last years of the Cold War, when relations took a decisive turn for the better – relations that improved further when Gorbachev decided to visit Beijing in 1989, the first such visit by a Soviet leader in 30 years. Unfortunately for Gorbachev, and more worryingly still for the Chinese, not only did his trip coincide with the ongoing drama unfolding in Tiananmen Square (in part inspired by all his talk of reform), but Gorbachev himself was about to do something which deeply concerned China: decamp from Eastern Europe and East Germany, causing a major crisis in the wider communist camp, of which China still saw itself a part. Putin as we know, later became highly critical of his reforming predecessor. But as Arne Westad has shown, the Chinese were perhaps even more shocked because a leader of a great communist superpower not only let Eastern Europe go, but also went on to accept ‘the banning of the party and then the dissolution of the Soviet state’ itself, ‘almost without a shot being fired in anger’.²

That said, China was still faced with the task of working out how to manage their relationship with Russia going forward. The obvious answer, which was already in train anyway, was to improve ties in the hopes these would provide both countries – one rising economically and the other collapsing – with some degree of security in a challenging new environment defined by globalisation, and in which democracy, in one form or another, appeared to be the international norm. Thus followed a series of ‘joint statements’, a series of agreements on borders and military cooperation, a promise not to target each other with nuclear weapons, various discussions on improving economic relations, and quite a few summits (seven in all), all of which concluded in July 2001, with the two putting their names to what they regarded as a landmark treaty. Old time foes had now become ‘good neighbours’ and ‘friends’ [7].

UNIPOLARITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Though these early moves did not in of themselves mean that anything like a new ‘axis of authoritarianism’ had come into being, the significance of what had transpired should not be underestimated. Admittedly, none of what had happened added up to a formal alliance. The Treaty of 2001 was nowhere nearly as important as that signed by Stalin and Mao back in 1950. Nonetheless, it did point to a new configuration bringing together two countries who still felt like outsiders in a world shaped and dominated by the United States. Beijing may have also been hoping to secure a partner in what some, though not all strategists in China, were already starting to see as a part of the ongoing struggle against US hegemony. Anti-Americanism was hardly a new phenomenon in China. Indeed, following the crisis occasioned by Tiananmen, the CCP had put a great deal of time and effort into linking pride in the Chinese nation with hostility towards the United States. Hence, building a bridge to another outsider country – which by the turn of the century was beginning to move away from its earlier pro-Western phase – made a great deal of sense [8].

Moreover, even though the two countries claimed that nothing they were doing was directed against any ‘third party’, implicitly of course, it was. As both made clear in 1997 (with Putin making it clearer still ten years later in a famous speech delivered in Munich), they were determined to move the world away from a unipolar system, which did not suit their interests towards a ‘multipolar’ order which did. Even so, the two insisted they were not hostile to the US; Nonetheless as Russian leader Boris Yeltsin declared at one of his long meetings with the Chinese premier, Jiang Zemin, in the 1990s, there were some unnamed powers pushing for a world with one centre. This however, was simply unacceptable to either Russia or China, who

1 For a useful collection of Mao’s thoughts about Stalin spanning the period between 1938 to 1966, see [3].

2 For a discussion of how China officially reacted to the Soviet collapse, see [6].

from now on, would be working together to create a 'new world order ... with several focal points' and not just one [9].

In of itself, this may not have led to conflict with the United States and the West. Nothing was set in stone. However, as it soon became clear, unipolarity created conditions on the ground which allowed the US to act with a degree of impunity without much fear of the consequences. How else, according to policy-makers in both Russia and China, could one explain the many unilateral decisions taken by the United States from the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in May 1999, to NATO's continuing war against Russia's ally Serbia, and finally – most importantly according to Putin, writing on the eve of his war against Ukraine – to Bush's war against Iraq in 2003? These were not accidents of history in their view, but rather expressions of an underlying power imbalance in the wider international system. Some in the West may have insisted that unipolarity engendered stability. Others that unipolarity did not really matter. This however, was not the view in either Beijing or Moscow.

Russia and China may of course, have been hoping that they could still work with the US on key issues. After all, they did share Washington's views on the danger posed by international terrorism and nuclear proliferation. China and Russia also saw a future within pre-existing international institutions like the UN. And from a purely economic point-of-view, Russia and China clearly needed the markets and the investment only the West could provide. Yet the logic of economics would never be enough to overcome the logic of power politics. Slowly but surely, what began as an attempt by all sides to find a way of working together, came to nothing in the end.

History however, never moves at the same speed for all actors, and as it turned out, relations between Russia and the West deteriorated even more quickly than they did between China and the West. Putin's brutal war in Chechnya, his use of the fight against terror to clamp down on democracy, his own vast wealth (accumulated by controlling the apparatus of state), and the imprisonment of key opponents – including one of the richest men in Russia, Khodorkovsky – taken together certainly did nothing to reassure Europe or the United States that this was someone with whom one could easily do business (though many in the West still hoped it would be possible) [10]. Nor was the West much assured either, with Putin's oft-repeated assertions that his main goal now was to make his country 'great again' – especially as it was now firmly under the control of an ex-KGB man with an inner circle whose ruthlessness at home was only matched by a willingness to do anything to prevent change in either Russia or in its so-called 'near abroad' states (most especially Ukraine) as the work of foreign agents [11].

Nor did the relationship show any sign of improvement in the years thereafter. If anything, worse was yet to come, when at the Bucharest Summit in 2008, Bush called upon NATO to open its doors to both Ukraine and Georgia (a move which Putin claimed at the time 'complicated' his 'position').³ Relations cooled further when Russian forces invaded Georgian territory a few months later in what one writer called 'the first European war of the 21st century [13]. And they became cooler still when three years later, the Arab world was convulsed by a series of upheavals, which not only caused consternation in both Beijing and Moscow – people power was not something they wished to encourage – but also a great deal of anger when the West, in their view, turned what had initially been an R2P operation designed to save lives in Libya, into a policy of regime change. As they pointed out in a joint declaration signed in June 2011, they had been looking for a 'political solution' to the Libya crisis. The West on the other hand, was using military means and taking sides in ways that went far beyond that originally agreed at the UN [14].

But if the crisis in Libya provoked disagreement, then the war in Syria caused something close to a near breakdown in relations, especially when Russia decided to throw its military weight behind the brutal regime of the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad. Diplomatically, things became even more fraught when both Moscow and Beijing both exercised their veto power at the UN to prevent any sanctions being imposed on Assad's government [15]. Russia's decision may have been perfectly understandable given the long-standing relationship it had with the Baath regime ever since the Cold War. China's reasoning was probably different, but as one

³ Putin could not have been clearer. Opening the door for Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO put Russia in a 'very complicated position' [12].

observer noted, its decision was probably less driven by any interest it might have had in Syria, and more with demonstrating that it would from now on, be adopting a more assertive, more proactive foreign policy – and significantly doing so alongside Russia [16].

FROM XI TO THE FIRST UKRAINE CRISIS

Thus the wider crisis in the Middle East was already drawing the two nations closer together, even before Xi became China's 'paramount leader'. But having become leader, Xi lost no time in establishing a close relationship with Putin and Russia. Indeed, within a week of becoming president, Xi was already making his first overseas trip, and the first country he chose to visit was none other than Russia. He even told a small group of invited journalists that the fact he was visiting Russia shortly after assuming the presidency was itself a 'testimony' to the great importance that China placed on its relationship with its 'friendly neighbour' [17]. Moreover, by making Russia what Xi himself called 'a priority', he was also sending a message to the United States, who were by now taking what he felt was a dangerously intrusive interest in the affairs of the Asia-Pacific. The message could not have been clearer: China was no longer prepared to sit back and watch Washington dominate the field of international affairs [18].

Putin was clearly delighted by the visit and Xi's words, and responding in kind, even announced that not only did he look forward to increased economic cooperation (by 2013, trade between the two countries had risen eightfold over a ten-year period), but also to China and Russia working closely to produce what he termed 'a more just world order' [19]. In a joint declaration issued by Putin and Xi after their talks, they also made it clear who they believed was standing in the way of creating such an order. Indeed, without even mentioning the United States, the two governments concluded that together they would 'oppose' any country (or even a 'bloc of countries') that 'unilaterally and without limit', harmed 'strategic stability and international security' [17].

But perhaps the real test of the relationship came just a year later when Russia intervened to change the status quo in Ukraine by force. China may have been less than enthusiastic about this particular move, and even made it clear in its official statements that it continued to support the 'independence, sovereignty and integrity' of Ukraine. Yet in spite of its various declarations, there was little doubt in the end whom China would be backing. As critics at the time pointed out, what Russia was now doing in Ukraine – encouraging secession, using force to settle disputes and intervening in the internal affairs of another state (a state with which China had a significant relationship) – contradicted every single principle upon which Chinese statecraft had hitherto been based.

This however, made very little difference to policy-makers in China, nor to those in the official Chinese press who made clear which side Beijing was on. Indeed, in one fairly typical newspaper article published at the time, readers were informed that there were (unspecified) 'reasons' why the situation in Ukraine 'is what it is today'. Then, having hinted that the situation was more complex than many outside Russia were suggesting, the article went on to attack what it termed the 'West's biased mediation' in the crisis. This, it opined, only 'made things worse'. Putin meanwhile, was almost given a clean bill of health. After all, all he was doing, we were told, was protecting Russian interests and those of Russian-speakers living in Ukraine. The West, it concluded, should thus stop wagging its finger at the Russian leader and 'respect Russia's unique role in mapping out the future of Ukraine' [20].

BEST AND BOSOM FRIENDS

Putin in turn, lost little time reinforcing his position with those now prepared to turn a blind eye to Russian actions. At the sixth BRICS Summit held in Brazil in July, not only did he get the other four states there – including China – to say nothing about Russia's actions in Ukraine, but he also persuaded them to oppose any Western sanctions then being directed against Russia itself [21]. Meanwhile, even though China did not formally recognise Russia's incorporation of Crimea – impossible to do so, given its own views on secession and sovereignty – it nonetheless used the opportunity presented by the crisis to pressure Russia to sell China gas below market rates, while strengthening the economic ties it was already developing with Russia. As one Russian analyst at the time observed, the new 'rapprochement ... accelerated projects' that

had been under discussion for decades, resulting in agreements on a natural gas pipeline and cross-border infrastructure, among many other deals. As a result, China now began to import larger and larger quantities of Russian oil and gas, while Russia became one of the five largest recipients of Chinese outbound direct investment in relation to the Chinese government's Belt and Road Initiative [22].

Even so, a number of analysts were still unconvinced that a serious strategic partnership was in the making. We were even informed by at least one writer (there were many more) that the West should not be too concerned about what was happening because 'underlying tensions' between the two countries were bound to keep them apart [23]. Two Russian writers even asked whether this 'strengthening of relations' constituted a 'durable strategy' or was mere 'temporary rapprochement' between two countries with very different interests [24]. Beijing and Moscow soon provided an answer, and as if to prove their intent, signed another strategic agreement right in the midst of the crisis.⁴ By 2015, they were even talking of creating a 'Greater Eurasian Partnership' by bringing their two spheres of economic interests (the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Eurasian Economic Union) much closer together [25]. In 2016, Russia then moved to officially back China in its ongoing struggle with the Hague Court and the West's regional allies over the South China Seas dispute [26]. A couple of months later, following 'a string of high-level meetings' in both Beijing and Moscow, it also announced measures similar to those already in place in China to bring the internet under tighter control [27]. Significantly too, in the light of what happened later, Russia (and 36 other nations) wrote to the UN in 2019 supporting China's policies in the western region of Xinjiang [28].

Nor did the rapidly improving relationship conclude there. In 2015, for example, Russia finally agreed to sell China 24 Sukhoi-35 (Su-35) combat aircraft and four S-400 SAM systems [29]. Sino-Russian military ties also became much closer, especially in the area of joint military exercises, 'the most important' part of Russian-Chinese military cooperation according to Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu [30, 31]. Indeed, by early 2021, one senior Chinese official was even moved to declare that there now appeared to be 'no limit' to Chinese-Russian military cooperation.⁵ What followed only appeared to confirm this, when in October, Chinese and Russian warships conducted joint naval drills in the Western Pacific for the first time, followed only a month later with both militaries sending bomber flights into Japanese and South Korean air defence zones. The message could not have been clearer: this was a partnership that needed to be taken extremely seriously [33]. As one well-informed Western analyst pointed out at the time, it was by now clear that relationship was 'the strongest, closest and best' the two countries 'have had since at least the mid-1950s ... possibly ever' [33].

DEEP FREEZE

Meantime, as relations between Beijing and Moscow moved in one particular direction, those with the West moved in another. Earlier during his presidency, Obama had tried to 'reset' relations with Russia and 'tilt' the US more towards Asia in an effort he claimed to take advantage of the economic opportunities presented there. But as we now know, the reset soon collapsed, while America's so-called rebalancing act was read in Beijing as just a cover for a new and more effective means of containing its rise [34]. Moreover, when Obama was followed by Trump, who had already declared that the US was being economically 'raped' by China, it had become abundantly clear to policy-makers and foreign policy experts in China that they were now engaged in a long-term competition with Washington from which there would be no easy escape [35]. Trump alone was not the cause of this. But reflecting as he clearly did a decisive shift in US attitudes towards China as expressed most clearly in a raft of official reports detailing the threat China now posed to US national security, Beijing drew the logical conclusion that to offset the challenge posed by an increasingly hostile America, it needed all the friends it could get [36].

But what in the end may have driven the final nail in the proverbial coffin of China's relationship with the West was not what Beijing saw as the 'China threat' lobby in Washington, but Europe's

⁴ In May 2014, President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed the *China-Russia Joint Statement on a New Stage of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination*.

⁵ The quote on 'no limit' military cooperation between China and Russia can be found in [32].

increasing concerns about the direction China was now travelling. Hitherto, neither the EU, nor even NATO, had seen China in the same way as Russia. No doubt the lure of its huge market influenced this judgement. But there was also a feeling that even if China was no longer a simple ‘stakeholder’, it did have an ongoing interest in a stable global economy and indeed in globalisation itself. Soon however, the rhetoric coming out of Brussels started to change. The EU may have continued to see China as a country it could continue, and possibly needed, to do business with. Even so, by 2020 and 2021, it was already starting to view the PRC as a ‘systemic rival’, pursuing human rights policies as well as economic ones, inimicable to its core interests. When China then decided to adopt sanctions against members of the European Parliament, including the Chair of its Delegation for Relations with China, relations inevitably deteriorated even more rapidly [37].

NATO found itself in a not dissimilar position. As late as 2020, it too was still refusing to see China as a threat or as an enemy. However, by the time of the NATO summit in 2021, it was already arguing that China’s policies now presented a serious challenge to the ‘rules-based order’. NATO in fact, left little room for misunderstanding, and in a lengthy communique of its own, talked in increasingly tough-minded terms about Beijing rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal, China’s opacity around its own military modernisation and its significant ties working ever closer with Russia in the Euro-Atlantic region [38]. Even more worrying from China’s point-of-view was NATO’s growing inclination to see security in increasingly globalist terms with a discernible tilt of its own towards what it now called the ‘Indo Pacific’ region. Admittedly, it was only after the war in Ukraine had begun in early 2022 that NATO began to think seriously about ‘practical and political cooperation’ with a number of key allies such as Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea. But even before the invasion began, it was clear enough in which direction the alliance was moving [39].

The impact of all this back in Beijing was entirely predictable. Facing as it felt it did a ‘collective West’ and not just the Americans alone, Beijing concluded that it now had fewer, if any, reasons not to move ever closer to Russia. Meanwhile, as the two began to coalesce around issues such as Taiwan, China began to step up its attacks on the West more generally. Indeed, having been careful hitherto not to attack NATO openly, it started to do so – nowhere more unambiguously than in the communique on 4 February 2022, where it talked, probably for the first time (and very much like Russia) of the organisation being some relic of the Cold War whose continued existence not only threatened the security of its close friend Russia, but provided no long-term basis for European security overall. By the middle of 2022, it was even referring to NATO as a ‘systemic challenge’ to global security and stability, as well as a ‘tool for the United States to maintain its hegemony’ in order ‘to instigate a “new cold war”’ [40].

CONCLUSION

As we have tried to show in this historical survey of the Sino-Russian relationship leading up to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the partnership between the two began to take shape just as the Cold War was winding down, continuing through the 1990s and thereafter going from strength to strength – in part driven by the two nations’ overlapping interests, their own ideas about the kind of international system they wished to inhabit, and also by what they perceived to be the liberal, democratic West’s underlying refusal to accept their right to be either illiberal or undemocratic. Putin and Xi also played a key role here. The fact that they have met over 40 times, even before Russia invaded Ukraine, may well have been pure coincidence. Powerful leaders of significant states often talk to one another. But the obvious ease Xi and Putin felt in each other’s company certainly lent weight to the view that that the wider relationship between the two countries they represented was very special.

But something else was also uniting the two men: a shared view about the direction they thought the world was now moving towards. Both of course, were well aware of how much power the US and its allies could still muster. Even so, underlying their partnership was a belief that the West in general (and the US in particular) were in decline, and that history was at last moving in their direction. Long-term changes in the structure of the world economy followed in short order with the rise of populism, the West’s failure (as they saw it) to deal effectively with the Covid pandemic, and finally, NATO’s ignominious withdrawal from Afghanistan in late 2021.

This only proved to them what Putin and Xi had been saying for years: that the West was failing, and that the future belonged to the East [41].⁶

This in turn, leads us to reflect not just on how durable the Russia-China relationship is likely to be going forward – that question has already been answered by how Putin and Xi have responded to any suggestion that theirs is a ‘bad marriage’ likely to hit the rocks soon [42] – but also on what the relationship means for the world at large. There is no doubt that if the war had come to a speedy end (with Ukraine overcome as Putin had planned), we might have been in a very different place. However, the fact that it has continued for so long with no end in sight means that there is now much more at stake. Short conflicts can be deadly. But long wars often change everything, and what in effect began as a regional conflict on the edge of Europe, has in the eyes of many come to define the future of the whole international order. Many years ago, all the talk in the West was of how globalisation would turn all states into ‘responsible stakeholders’. Even today, many continue to believe that even if Russia is a ‘lost cause’, China still has an interest in finding a way to work with the West. One can but hope. Yet the signs are not good, and as long as China stands by Russia – and at the time of writing, there is little sign that it will not continue to do so – then what some are already calling a new Cold War is likely to get colder still. Dangerous times lie ahead [43].

Professor Michael Cox was appointed as a Chair at the LSE in 2002. He was a Founding Director of LSE IDEAS and is now Emeritus Professor in the Department of International Relations. He has served as a Senior Fellow at the Nobel Institute in Oslo and is currently a visiting Professor at the Catholic University in Milan. He is the author, editor and co-editor of several books, including works on E.H. Carr, J.M. Keynes, the Cold War and US foreign policy. His most recent volume, *Agonies of Empire: American Power from Clinton to Biden* appeared in 2022. This has now been translated into Italian and was published by Vita E. Pensiero Press of Milan under the title *Agonie dell'impero*. Professor Cox has also just completed a volume for LSE Press entitled *Afghanistan: Long War – Forgotten Peace*, and is now working on a study of the China- Russian relationship entitled *Comrades?* to be published by Polity Press in 2024.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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⁶ As early as 2012, Putin had been arguing that ‘domestic socio-economic problems that have become worse in industrialised countries as a result of the (economic) crisis are weakening the dominant role of the so-called historical West’ [41].

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Cox M. Comrades? Xi, Putin, and the Challenge to the West. *LSE Public Policy Review*. 2023; 2023; 13(1): 15, pp. 1–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.91>

Submitted: 05 June 2023

Accepted: 16 June 2023

Published: 08 September 2023

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