



Michael Cox

May 27th, 2025

'Friends of Steel': Russia and China in a New Era

"Right now there are changes – the likes of which we haven't seen for 100 years – and we are the ones driving these changes together." Xi to Putin. March 2023.

Bromance: Xi and Putin

If there's one leader in the world whose company Xi Jinping just can't seem to get enough of, then it has to be Vladimir Putin. What has been called Xi's 'bromance' with the Russian leader began many years ago when, in 2010, he visited Russia for the first time, followed three years later when he made the Russian capital his first port of call after having been elected as President of the People's Republic of China. Even by then it was getting serious, with Xi openly confessing that the two men had already become 'good friends'—so friendly in fact that they met later in the year on the fringes of the G20 meeting in September, followed the next month by yet another encounter in Indonesia. **As the official Chinese handout noted at the time**, 2013 had turned out to be a true "bumper year" for China-Russia relations.

Thereafter, the air miles just kept piling up as they hopped from one not-so-secret assignation to another: two in 2014 following Russia's annexation of Crimea; at least four in 2015, one of which saw Xi attending the 70th anniversary of Russian victory in the 'Great Patriotic War' in May; and around four every year until the pandemic put paid to such direct engagements—until 2022 when in early February Putin met with Xi in Beijing. Here the two issued **their famous 5,000-word communiqué**, which apart from attacking "closed bloc structures" like NATO in Europe and AUKUS in the Asia-Pacific, as well as "some actors" who continued to "interfere in the internal affairs of other states", went on to announce that the "friendship between the two States" had "no limits" and "no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation." Coincidentally or not, three weeks later Russia decided to invade Ukraine.

The lessons of history

Nor has the war, which China has resolutely refused to call an 'invasion', dampened the two men's desire to be with one another. Thus they met three times in person in 2023, three times again in 2024, and so far twice in 2025 (one virtually in January), concluding with Xi's four-day visit to Moscow in May to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the end of the war in Europe. The symbolism of the two sitting close together watching the troops (some from the PLA) march by was obvious. This was no ordinary event but a confirmation of the deep ties connecting the two nations in 'brotherhood' against the Axis in the past, and bullies and unilateralists who were seeking to contain and divide them today. Xi could not have been clearer. As he noted in an article published in the Russian press just before he arrived in Moscow, *Learning from History in Order to Build a Bright New Future*, the lessons of the war—when China and Russia stood side by side—should never be forgotten as the two countries strove together in the modern era to promote an equal and orderly multipolar world against all those still intent on practicing "hegemonism and power politics."

But it is not just the history of World War II and the important lessons learned from it that unites the two leaders. Both also look back on the Soviet experience through a similar, if not identical, lens. Putin of course is not entirely uncritical of Stalin. Stalin after all was a communist and Putin most definitely is not. But Stalin still remains "the symbol of victory in the war—and of a powerful state." Putin is also reported as saying that even if Stalin was a tyrant, the "country shouldn't be made to feel guilty about its past." If anything, Xi has been more positive towards the Soviet leader, once reportedly arguing that for real communists "Stalin weighs no less than Lenin. And in percentage of right decisions, he doesn't even have an equal in world history." Xi may be no Stalin, and modern China no Soviet Union. Nonetheless, Xi, like Putin, views the collapse of what Stalin constructed through the 1930s and 1940s as a tragedy, which for Xi at least is still "too painful to look back upon," giving him "almost physical pain... when forced to think about it!"

Contested histories

Of course, history alone is not enough to bind two large countries closely together. But it certainly helps. It also helps when one is able to rewrite the past. Here, Xi has been nothing less than thorough when it comes to the history of the relationship between Russia and China. The so-called 'dark spots' in that relationship can hardly be deleted completely. After all, as every Chinese school child knows, Russia took over large chunks of territory in the Far East in the late 19th century that were previously Chinese. Yet the official story told today is an altogether more positive one, with Russia no longer cast as the villain who robbed China of vast territories, but as the bearer of a new set of ideas in the shape of Marxism-Leninism which once planted in China sparked what Xi has termed "a great awakening among the Chinese people" out of which the Communist Party of China was born.

Yet in spite of all this, we still find analysts in the West who wonder whether or not the relationship is quite the serious one Xi and Putin insist it is. Hence, when the two countries signed a Treaty in 2001 which, amongst other things, declared that "when their security interests" were involved, the

two would “**immediately hold contacts and consultations in order to eliminate such threats**”, the White House apparently said it was “**unconcerned**”. A few years later, we were then told by an influential writer on the subject that the partnership (or what he termed an axis) was merely “**convenient**.” In 2019, we were then informed the “**alliance wouldn’t last**.” Another expert told us a year later that the partnership had its “**limits**.” And only a few months before Russia’s full scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the doubting Thomases could still be heard declaring that the relationship was a “**bad marriage**” **between two very different powers who might through a careful use of carrots and sticks be divided one from the other.**

Even some within the current Trump administration appear to believe that the ties uniting the two states are not as strong as often argued. Indeed, according to some reports the Trump administration has been “quite open about why exactly it wants to get into bed” with Moscow, believing that “**closer ties will prize Russia away from China**.” And even if this proves impossible, there’s still no reason to think the relationship—secure though it is at one level—is without its contradictions. **Many Russians for example seem to resent the idea of becoming a junior partner to China. And though Chinese attitudes towards Russia remain mixed,** there is nothing about modern Russia itself which they find especially attractive. Indeed, even in these difficult times it would seem that young Chinese in particular are far more interested in the US than they are in Russia. The fact that only 50,000 Chinese students have chosen to study in Russia, while close to 280,000 still study in the United States (and hundreds of thousands more in the EU, the UK, Australia and Canada) may not tell us everything about the relationship. **But it clearly tells us something about how the new middle class in China look at the world.**

Too close?

That said, thirty-five years after Gorbachev met Deng in Beijing in 1989 and twenty five years or so since Putin signed that Treaty with Jiang Zemin in 2001, the relationship between the two states looks as if it is in rude health. We don’t even need to count up the number of times the two leaders have met (44 at last count) or even their foreign ministers (seven in 2024 alone) to prove it. Rather we simply have to look at the burgeoning economic relationship (China has now become Russia’s most important economic partner) as well as the number of joint military exercises they have held together (111 in all by 2024). Sceptics of course would retort by insisting that this is not a real alliance; that these are two very different countries with very different interests; and that one day the two could easily bid adieu to each other when the time is right. **Recently we were even told that for all their apparent chumminess, Xi has been careful not to get “too close” to Putin,** a sign perhaps that he is keeping his options open. Possibly so. But if the past is any guide to the future, then there is every likelihood that the two leaders (now in office for life) will continue meeting each other in the years ahead as they seek to reshape the world order.

This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of China Foresight, LSE IDEAS, nor

The London School of Economics and Political Science.

The cover image *Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, 26th July 2018* by the *Kremlin / Office of the President of the Russian Federation* is licensed under the *Creative Commons Attribution 4.0* license via *Wikimedia Commons*. The permission letter from the Press Secretary for the President of the Russian Federation is available [here](#).

About the author



Michael Cox

Professor Michael Cox taught at The Queen's University of Belfast and the Department of International Politics in Aberystwyth, before being awarded a Chair in International Relations at the School in 2002. One of the founding directors of LSE IDEAS in 2008, he also holds a visiting professorship at the Catholic University of Milan. Between 2005 and 2017 he also taught on Summer School at Peking University. His most recent books include *The Post-Cold War World: Turbulence and Change Since the Fall* (2018); a centennial edition of John Maynard Keynes's, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (2019); a reissue of E.H. Carr's original 1945 volume, *Nationalism and After* (2021); *Agonies of Empire: American Power from Clinton to Biden* (2022) published in Italian as *Agonie dell'impero: il potere americano da Clinton a Biden* (2022); *Afghanistan: Long War – Forgotten Peace* (2022); and *Ukraine: Russia's War and the Future of the Global Order* (2023). He has just completed a co-edited study Chatham House: *The First One Hundred Years* for Oxford University Press.

Posted In: Diplomacy | Economics and Finance | Politics | Security



THE LONDON SCHOOL
OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

© LSE 2025