

CONVERSATIONS ON STRATEGY

PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT

Zenel Garcia and Kevin Modlin Revisiting “Sino-Russian Relations and the War in Ukraine”

Claims that China has taken “Russia’s side” in the Ukrainian War oversimplify Sino-Russian relations. We contend Sino-Russian relations are a narrow partnership centered on accelerating the emergence of a multipolar order to reduce American hegemony and illustrate this point by tracing the discursive and empirical foundations of the relationship using primary and secondary materials. Furthermore, we highlight how the war has created challenges and opportunities for China’s other strategic interests, some at the expense of the United States or Russia.

Read the article [here](#).

Listen to the original podcast [here](#).

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Episode Transcript

Stephanie Crider (Host)

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Joining me today are Doctors Zenel Garcia and Kevin Modlin, authors of “[Sino-Russian Relations and the War in Ukraine](#),” which was published in the autumn 2022 issue of *Parameters*.

Welcome back, Zenel and Kevin.

Zenel Garcia

Thank you.

Kevin Modlin

Thank you.

Host

I wanted to invite you back to revisit your article. It was published about six months after Russia invaded Ukraine. You pointed out in your piece that it’s not enough to say China’s taken Russia’s side in the Russian war against Ukraine. China’s response has created an opportunity to—and I am quoting you here—accelerate “the emergence of a multipolar order to reduce American hegemony,” end quote. You paint a picture of China and Russia not as allies

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but as two countries that see each other as key poles in a multipolar order. What I want to focus on today is the China-Russia relationship and how it has developed since last August.

With the recent Xi-Putin meeting, there was also discussion of what that relationship entails. Some see it as transactional. Others see it as an emerging alliance. What do you think?

Modlin

Thank you, Stephanie, for having us again.

When we think about what’s transpiring in light of the war in Ukraine, as well as just the evolving relationship with Russia and China, I think it’s important to pause and notice how many countries are moving away from Russia and how that actually contextualizes our conversation. So, because the number of countries are distancing from NATO countries in Central Asia and India and Japan, that makes it more obvious who Russia is near to. And perhaps it can emphasize or contribute to a perception that we think that they’re drawing closer to China under those types of circumstances. It’s more noticeable when you have one person standing with another person in that type of scenario. However, whether it be articulating the sense of a multipolar order or just in the general relationship, we actually see numerous examples where they’ve maintained something of a status quo in their interactions.

So, they continue to avoid committing to each other, which I think is the central argument. There is a robust debate among academics of what entails an alliance. And everything I think Zenel and I are going to emphasize and say the delineation point is to what degree do states commit to each other? And, of course, Russia is constrained in who they can partner with on trade and other transactions. So, of course, they’re going to interact more with China in those regards, but they’re also continuously seeking to avoid arrangements, and, even when they met, a number of people noticed (as Zenel will note) natural gas pipeline initiatives and other projects have been stalled. That’s worth revisiting.

Garcia

To build off from what Kevin was stating, the way in which China and Russia are interacting—especially even in recent months, with the two foreign ministers meeting, with the two heads of state meeting, and with the two ministers of defense meeting—all of this has occurred in the span of a couple months. If you look at it from the immediate term, it does look like there is a strengthening of the relationship between the two countries. But, as Kevin is mentioning, it’s happening at the same time in which Russia is increasingly isolated from the other major players in the international system. You’re not seeing heads of state in major European countries and Asia going to Moscow. In fact, they’re actually going to Beijing. Who is actually going to Moscow is the Chinese counterparts.

So, the reason why I still think that we stand by the position that the relationship is more transactional than an actual alliance is because in the grand scheme of things, China could be doing significantly more if it was really committed, if it was willing to bear the cost for what an ally would be in this contest. And yet, what it has preferred to do is, quite frankly, the bare minimum. And, to be fair, the bare minimum works for Russia because, if you think about this, the fact that you’ve had three major officials from China visit their counterparts in Russia does give the Russian leadership a measurement of legitimacy. And we certainly have seen it that way.

But from Beijing’s perspective, these visits are part and parcel of what their aims ultimately are, which is . . . well, for Russia to actually be a major player—in other words, another pole in this multipolar order—then it can’t be completely isolated. It wouldn’t work. There needs to be a semblance of . . . that the country is still receiving that recognition for status, and China certainly feels that it could confer that.

Another interesting thing that connects to what we wrote in that paper: We argued that China has found a lot of space to benefit at the expense of both Russia and, of course, the United States. And I think one of the clearest examples of this is that as China has continued to stick to its narratives that we discussed in the paper, it was trying to position the Ukraine war as a European-American problem, not as a problem of their doing. And, in fact, they’re the ones

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that are presenting themselves as impartial and providing a solution, as incredible as that might seem on our end. One of the interesting things that you notice, though, is that because China has committed to this particular position, it has given cover to a lot of countries in the Global South to stay by that position too. In other words, countries that we argued in the paper probably have no dog in the fight but are actually probably feeling the economic effects of . . . of war, don’t see it necessarily in their benefit to side entirely with the United States or side with Russia on this. They basically want to stay away from it.

And so, by China basically arguing that it is best to stay away from it and sticking to that position, it allows these countries to essentially follow suit. And, in fact, this reinforces the very same position that we were arguing, which is what China’s really trying to do is accelerate the multipolar order. Because if all of these other countries in the Global South, middle and small powers, are just sitting it out—and, in some cases, even criticizing the American and European position in this—then, in fact, what you have is a compounding problem for the United States to bring together a much broader coalition to sanction Russia. But also, more explicitly illustrates that there are other players in the international system that may not necessarily be aligning with one or the other; they’re just going about and doing their own thing.

Modlin

And again, by articulating multipolarity and studying how they understand it, it emphasizes autonomy and decision making. And so, all of these themes are really about that autonomy.

Host

Let’s circle back to . . . Zenel, you talked about different counterparts meeting. What are the implications for Sino-Russian relations and for Ukraine?

Garcia

There’s a lot of discussion going on right now, especially because the minister of defense is going to be there for four days, so that’s a pretty sizable amount of time, and at least what’s openly known about his schedule is, of course, that he was going to be meeting with his counterpart in Russia: [Sergei] Shoigu. There was no knowledge that he was going to meet with Putin, but he did. And apparently, he’s gonna also be visiting some professional military education institutions while he’s there. What’s interesting is that what has been publicly stated is that they are going to be bolstering and continuing cooperation on military exercises—particularly, in the Russian Far East—continue coordinating on security-related matters. In practice, a lot of the stuff is quite broad. This is not a positive trajectory from our perspective because, ideally, you would want to see a reduction in this kind of partnership and, instead, you’re seeing a continuation of kind of like business as usual. And, in fact, it seems like it has been business as usual. China, Russia, and South Africa just held naval exercises earlier in February. They’re currently planning for exercises in the Russian Far East. But if you start thinking, “What is it that Beijing wants from this?” Again, you have to remember that this is a country that shares a sizeable border with Russia, with which it has a history of pretty negative relations, quite frankly, which has actually been a source of insecurity for China for quite a long time. And so, this period of time in Sino-Russian relations is kind of an aberration in the long period of their bilateral relationship. And so, you can make a strong argument that a lot of the rationale for why China is willing to maintain this relationship is because this is, again, foundational to how the two countries actually reached their rapprochement.

They settled the border disputes, and how did they get there? They got there by first demilitarizing the border and through confidence-building mechanisms and establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. So, security cooperation continues to be the basis for that bilateral relationship, but what kind of security relationship? If you really begin to unpack it, the majority of the bilateral exercises that China and Russia conduct could be distilled down to counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. There are very few exercises between China and Russia that are actually arguably relatively large scale and geared towards, perhaps, defending against an invasion or conducting one. And so, the nature of that relationship remains relatively narrow along a very specific band of what their security concerns

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are, which is mostly domestic, quite frankly. Insurgency and terrorism: Those are the two things that they can agree cooperation on. And at the international level, this multipolar order that they both want to cooperate in.

So, for me, this visit by the defense minister does two things. One, it continues the trend—this year, especially—of throwing Russia a bone. “If nobody’s going to Moscow, we are going to Moscow.” And second, to continue to iterate the foundations of that relationship, which is sovereignty, which is having an open strategic choice, and, of course, cooperation on security. The last thing that China is interested in—and I think we also covered this in our paper as well—China doesn’t necessarily care if Russia wins in Ukraine, but it can’t afford to have Russia walk out completely defeated because the prospects of a completely defeated Russia is likely to create a lot of instability across China’s periphery. And that is the one thing that the [Chinese Communist Party or] CCP is completely uninterested in. Almost all of their high-priority policies are internally focused, and the majority of them are predicated on economic stability because of social stability.

Host

Implications for Ukraine?

Garcia

If we wrap up the three visits—not just the defense minister’s visit, but, you know, the foreign minister, Xi’s visits, and the defense minister’s visit to Russia—and their implications for Ukraine: Quite frankly, not great. They’re not bad in the sense of that it doesn’t seem that the Chinese government is really going to be providing the level of material assistance that the Russians would need to make any significant headway in the conflicts. In that regard, probably not having a sizable effect. Although we’ve seen reports indicating that there’s, at least, minimal material support coming from China. But in the overall picture for Ukraine, what they would ideally want is a China that is more visibly committed to pushing Russia into a type of settlement, and that doesn’t seem like it’s going to fly. That was very clear in the Xi, uh, visit where he reiterated what his peace plan was.

I’m sure the Russians weren’t particularly happy with him reiterating that peace plan. But also, that peace plan is so empty and devoid of actionable components that it also does nothing. In other words, there’s no real political cost in putting that out into the ether. But it’s not a positive development for Ukraine, simply because it doesn’t look like the Chinese are really going to put their thumb in the scale on their behalf. But it also doesn’t look like the Russians are getting, quite frankly, the stuff that they’re asking for, one of which is massive economic investment on the part of China to help the Russian economy. It’s just not forthcoming. It seems that Putin wanted greater economic commitments for his Power of Siberia-2 pipeline; he didn’t get that. It’s clear that they probably want weapons from China, but I think that’s a threshold too far for China. It’s not to say that they couldn’t do it, but the costs of doing that probably outweigh any of the net benefits, given that the bare minimum that they’re giving right now seems to be enough to show the Russians that they’re not being abandoned entirely.

Host

Let’s talk about upcoming trends. What are the trends in Sino-Russian relations moving forward, and what are its implications?

Garcia

There’s a very interesting development as a result of this conflict in Central Asia. One of the odd things that has happened as a result of this war is that the CSTO—the Comprehensive Security Treaty Organisation that Russia leads—has proven to be quite ineffective in dealing with a lot of the problems that it was intended to deal with. So, the Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict is one of them, but, also, the Tajik-Kyrgyzstan border clashes of last year also illustrated that CSTO is just not capable of doing these traditional security roles. And so, what you’ve seen is an opening for China to become more proactive in a security arena that traditionally was dominated by Russia in Central Asia.

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Now, that’s not to say that the Chinese are fully committed to taking up that role wholeheartedly, but, rather, it’s opened up a space because Russia’s own partners in the region are questioning the level of commitment or capability that Russia can bring to bear in mitigating some of these existing problems.

What’s interesting in that development is not just that China’s now becoming more willing to take up security roles in Central Asia, but, rather, what kind of security roles it’s willing to take up. And, interestingly enough, it’s not the [People’s Liberation Army or] PLA that’s leading the charge in Central Asia in forging these security relationships; it’s actually the People’s Armed Police and the Ministry of Public Security, which are establishing greater partnerships of countries like Tajikistan. In fact, they have set up barracks and outposts to train Tajik troops, mainly to secure the Tajik-Afghan border. They’re becoming more proactive in extending scholarships to Central Asian officers to come into Chinese [professional military education or] PMEs. Not a whole lot of takers yet, but the offer is there, and there’s a trickling effect of younger officers going into Chinese PME. Actually, interestingly enough, arm sales as well. These are still very small scale compared to what Russia provides the region, but it clearly shows that China is becoming more interested in taking out these roles as Russia’s role is being questioned by these very same Central Asian partners.

Modlin

That is quite a contrast from the pattern in Central Asia, where they tend to play Russia and China off of each other and design roles for each of them respectively to play in. And, of course, Russia plays more of that security role. So, even China playing some increased role is in some way an interesting change. Part conditions, like Zenel’s saying, but it is kind of a change as far as perceptions of roles.

Garcia

I think that also, looking ahead into what the future relationship entails—I mean, obviously impossible to predict the future, but this conflict has clearly isolated Russia. And Russia is currently actually selling a lot more energy than it used to, simply because others are able to purchase at significantly cheaper prices. India and China are actually making up a lot of that. But the fact remains that all the other supply chains that matter to a modern economy are just not there for Russia anymore. Their auto industry is basically off in the wind because they’re just not getting the parts necessary from contractors and supply chains in Europe and other countries. Obviously, their tech industries, which was already not significant—it’s feeling the pain of this. So, in many regards, China is probably one of the few countries that can help fill that gap. Problem is, of course—and even the Russians admit this—is that, that creates a very asymmetric relationship that they don’t feel very comfortable with. And, in fact, they say this about the growing bilateral trade using renminbi.

Kevin and I have been speaking about this. A lot of people have said that, you know, as Russia no longer really has significant access to dollars and euros, maybe the Chinese can extend the renminbi as a way to conduct bilateral trade. That’s technically true. The problem is that the renminbi is not a currency that is easily convertible. The CCP obviously maintains serious monetary controls on that currency. So the Russians don’t really have a capability to use the renminbi for anything other than purchasing Chinese goods. If Russians wanted to trade with India, India’s not taking Russia’s reserves in renminbi. They’re gonna have to convert that renminbi into something else to be able to conduct trade with India or with Saudi Arabia, whichever country that that’s going to be traded with.

So, the point I’m making here is that Russia seems to be becoming more and more dependent on China, although I would caution with the argument that by design, Russia’s gonna be the junior partner in this relationship. I think in general, people tend to measure that in a material capacity. And arguably, yes, if you’re measuring it materially, like “Who’s got the money” and “Who’s got the tech” and “Who’s got the incentives,” of course it looks very asymmetric. But let’s remember that the Russians decided to reinvade Ukraine on their own, and they’ve created a condition for the Chinese that they’ve had to adapt to.

And so, in other words, when it really comes to taking actions that upset the existing order, it is the Russians that are really kind of taking the lead with revanchist foreign policy. Whereas the Chinese, quite frankly, for all of the discussion

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about revisionist power, et cetera, seems to be trying to have its cake and eat it too. In other words, it wants to maintain these things that are working for its benefit because it's concerned about domestic economic development and social stability, while also trying to maintain this international goal of ensuring that Russia just doesn't fall apart. I think that that relationship is more complex than a pure junior-senior relationship but materially increasingly asymmetric.

Modlin

Another part of that is we see in trade agreements and relations among states . . . we assume that the senior partner will have the leverage over negotiating when junior partners can often have a better sense of where their leverage points are and negotiate better deals. Again, in this circumstance, probably Russia has fewer alternatives throughout the early stages of the war and things like that. It's probably not surprising they're more on the losing end of these deals, but I imagine, over time, that they will evolve in this practice and Russia will have more negotiating leverage.

Host

I wish we had more time.

Listeners, if you'd like to read the genesis article, visit press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters.

Zenel and Kevin, thanks for sharing your insight on this really important and timely topic. It was a real treat to talk with you both again.

Garcia

Thanks for having us. Really appreciate the invite.

Modlin

Thank you, Stephanie.

Host

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