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Strategic shifts: the transformation of China-Russia relations from cold war to present

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This article examines the evolution of Sino-Russian relations from ideological rivalry during the Cold War to strategic partnership in the modern era. Initially characterized by ideological differences and territorial disputes, relations between China and Russia underwent significant changes after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The geopolitical vacuum created by the fall of the USSR prompted both countries to settle border disputes and expand economic cooperation, culminating in strategic agreements and energy projects. The 2014 Ukrainian crisis further intensified this partnership when Russia turned to China in response to Western sanctions. Based on a detailed historical analysis, the article scrutinizes the pragmatic considerations and strategic imperatives that define Sino-Russian relations. This comprehensive study provides insight into the geopolitical dynamics and economic interdependencies shaping the modern alliance between China and Russia, as well as explores its implications for global geopolitics. Hence, Beijing is balancing its relationships with the conflicting parties, while taking advantage of the weakening of its historical regional competitor, Russia, and its growing dependence on China. Understanding that under current conditions, China is a vital partner for Moscow due to its power, influence and economic potential, Beijing is advancing its own economic, political, and geopolitical interests. Meanwhile, Russia, in its efforts to assert itself, regain its superpower status and challenge the global dominance of the United States, placed a lot at stake by unleashing a conflict with Ukraine and escalating tensions with the «collective» West. Whether it will achieve its objectives remains to be seen. So far, the Kremlin has confronted with coordinated strong political opposition and massive economic sanctions from Western nations and found itself in an extremely difficult situation. This has made Russia vulnerable, forcing it to turn towards the East and, putting traditional fears about its long-standing regional rival aside, to align more closely with China and seemingly gradually to accept the role of a junior partner.

Key words: Sino-Russian relations, geopolitics, strategic partnership, BRI, Ukraine Crisis.

Introduction. The transformation of Sino-Russian relations from the antagonism of the Cold War to their current state is a clear indication of the dynamic nature of international politics. Initially marked by disagreements in various fields, Sino-Soviet relations underwent profound changes after 1991. The new geopolitical reality, the vacuum of influence created as a result of the collapse of the USSR, required a revision of foreign policy, prompting both countries to resolve historical conflicts and search for new ways of interaction and cooperation. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, economic imperatives contributed to the initial rapprochement, and trade and energy partnerships laid the foundation for deeper ties. This evolution was further accelerated by the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, which led Russia to align more closely with China in reaction to Western sanctions, thereby strengthening their strategic coherence. The following years were marked by the intensification of bilateral relations, covering military cooperation, economic integration and geopolitical coordination. High-profile initiatives such as the One Belt, One Road (BRI) initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) have highlighted the strategic interdependence of the two powers, despite the fundamental asymmetry in their economic relations. The complexity of relations is increased by China's pragmatic approach to balancing its interests with both Russia and the West. With the ongoing changes in global power structures,

the Sino-Russian partnership remains an important element in striving for a multipolar world order.

Degree of study on the transformation of Sino-Russian relations by authors from different countries is meaningful, with notable contributions from Western, Russian, and Chinese scholars. Authors from Western countries, such as Weitz R., Fong C., Maizland L. examine China-Russia relationships, particularly focusing on geopolitical strategies, military cooperation and economic collaboration. Russian academics provide an insider's perspective on the strategic partnership of the two states, while the Chinese researchers like Yu Bin and Junhua Zhang assess the bilateral ties from China's standpoint.

The novelty and scientific value of this study lies in an attempt to present a holistic picture of the evolution and current state of Sino-Russian relations, based on a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted nature of cooperation between the two countries, including historical, economic, strategic and military-political aspects. The balanced perspective, reflected in the analysis of both strengths and problems inherent in bilateral partnership, enriches the study.

Aims and objectives. The aim of the study, conducted by the author, is to thoroughly analyze the evolution of relations between China and Russia over a period of several decades, marked by various historical and geopolitical shifts and to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these geopolitical dynamics and Sino-Russian economic

interdependencies resulted with the current alliance between the two states. The consistent solution of a number of tasks, such as the evaluation of the historical trajectory of bilateral interactions, the analysis of key economic aspects of cooperation and integration initiatives, a detailed examination of regional and global processes contributed significantly to the achievement of the study goals.

Methods of research. The author has employed a number of scientific methods to study the evolution of the China-Russia relations, including historical, content, strategic and statistical analyses. An interdisciplinary approach integrating political science, economics, and international relations ensured a holistic view on the research topic, while a case study method aided to detail specific events like the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and the Belt and Road Initiative. The combination of these multiple methods provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the strategic, economic, and geopolitical factors driving the Sino-Russian partnership.

Main part

Historical Background

In the early years of the Cold War, China and the Soviet Union formed a strong alliance based on a common communist ideology. The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance, signed in 1950, became the embodiment of this partnership aimed at countering Western influence and supporting mutual security. During the Korean War (1950-1953), the USSR provided substantial military and economic support to China, strengthening their alliance against the United States and its allies. This period was characterized by close cooperation in the military and technological spheres, when the Soviet Union helped China to build up its industrial and defense potential.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was a significant ideological split between Beijing and Moscow. Differences in the interpretation of Marxist-Leninist doctrine and leadership strategies, especially under Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev, led to increased tensions. Mao's criticism of Khrushchev's policies, which he called revisionist, was a vivid manifestation of the growing differences.

The ideological discord was exacerbated by territorial disputes along the long Sino-Soviet border. The peak of the diplomatic confrontation was the border conflict between the PRC and the USSR on Damansky Island in 1969, which led to armed clashes and increased tension. These clashes highlighted the strategic rivalry and deep mistrust between the two countries. The conflict was accompanied by a split in the international communist movement.

The Soviet-Chinese split significantly influenced the global dynamics of the Cold War, which led to the development of an American strategy of trilateral diplomacy. By the early 1970s, the United States,

under President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, sought to exploit the Sino-Soviet rift by engaging Beijing as a counterweight to Soviet influence. This culminated in Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972 and the subsequent normalization of U.S.-Chinese relations.

The rapprochement between China and the United States has significantly alarmed the Kremlin, prompting it to strengthen its military presence along the Sino-Soviet border and seek to improve relations with the West in order to counterbalance China's growing engagement with the United States. The cooperation between Moscow and Washington led to a development of the arms control mechanisms, which coupled with the latter's historic rapprochement with Beijing, and essentially turned the second half of the cold War into what John Gaddis defined as a "long peace" [1].

Post-Cold War Realignment

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a dramatic shift in global geopolitics, ending the Cold War and creating a vacuum of influence in Eurasia. For China, this period has become both a challenge and an opportunity to review its foreign policy and regional strategy. In response to the changing geopolitical landscape, the PRC and the newly formed Russian Federation have begun exploring opportunities for cooperation. In the early 1990s, bilateral mechanisms were established to resolve border disputes and strengthen economic ties, culminating in the signing of the Sino-Russian Border Agreement in 1991, which laid the foundation for peaceful border interactions.

In the last decade of the past century, there was a gradual expansion of Chinese-Russian economic cooperation focused on trade and investment. Both countries sought to stabilize their economies through mutual cooperation: Russia supplied raw materials and energy resources, while China supplied consumer goods and investments.

Strategic Partnership Formation

In 1996, China and Russia officially consolidated their growing cooperation, declaring their determination to develop a relationship of equal and trust-based partnership aimed at strategic cooperation in the 21st century. What made this partnership strategic, among other things, was its focus on balancing the global dominance of the United States and promoting a multipolar world order.

In the early 2000s, Sino-Russian ties were further strengthened through various bilateral agreements. The 2001 Treaty on Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation became an important milestone, committing both countries to long-term strategic collaboration and mutual support in international affairs.

Energy cooperation has become the cornerstone of Sino-Russian relations, and major projects such

as the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean Oil Pipeline (ESPO), launched in 2009, which allowed oil to be transported to the Far East and to the markets of the Asia-Pacific region, contributed to the expansion of energy trade. During this period, cooperation in the field of infrastructure development also intensified, contributing to the economic integration of both countries.

In the first decade of this century, China and Russia consistently built their foreign policy in opposition to Western hegemony, in particular the unilateral approach of the United States. This consistency was evident in their consonant positions on issues such as NATO expansion, the war in Iraq and the conflicts in Syria and Libya. Both countries actively participated in multilateral forums, in particular, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS, promoting a multipolar world order and strengthening their influence in international affairs through mutual support.

The following years were marked by an increase in geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West. The factors that played a key role in this were the Kremlin's dissatisfaction with NATO's expansion to the east, perceived by it as a direct threat to Russia's national security and violation of previous agreements, and the strengthening of the European Union's influence in Eastern Europe through initiatives such as the Eastern Partnership, which aimed to strengthen ties, in particular, with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. These efforts were seen by Russia as attempts to disengage these countries from its sphere of influence and integrate them into Western political and economic structures.

Impact of the Ukraine Crisis

Geopolitical tensions have reached a climax in the Ukrainian crisis. After mass protests known as Euromaidan and the establishment of a pro-Western government in Kiev, Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014 and supported separatist movements in eastern Ukraine, leading to an ongoing conflict. These events have significantly changed Russia's foreign policy orientation, turning it towards a tougher and more confrontational position towards the West. In turn, the Kremlin's actions against Ukraine led to the imposition of harsh economic sanctions by the United States and the EU, pushing Moscow to establish closer ties with non-Western countries, primarily China.

According to a number of Russian and Chinese analysts, it was the Ukrainian crisis that served as a certain turning point, since Moscow's break with the West in 2014 became a powerful catalyst for Russia's reorientation towards China and gave Sino-Russian relations a completely different strategic context [2, 3, 4].

Russia had to overcome its own deep distrust of China, reconsider the risks associated with

establishing closer liaisons with it, including the latter's use of Russian technologies obtained as a result of arms sales, the threat of China's military or demographic takeover of the Far East, as well as the risks of support and cooperation with China in Central Asia. Ultimately, this reassessment accelerated Russia's turn towards Asia. In fact, in the Kremlin, the perception of the growing threat from the West was accompanied by a decrease in the perception of the threat from the PRC.

As for China, Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine has raised a sore point. Beijing has always been sensitive to separatist movements in regions such as Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan, and did not want to maintain a precedent of externally imposed border changes. Nevertheless, during a series of meetings held by the group responsible for international relations within the Chinese Communist Party in April 2014, it was decided that the benefits of joining Russia outweighed the costs [5]. On the one hand, Russia's isolation from the West would open up new opportunities for Chinese enterprises, as the former sought to diversify beyond the West. In addition, from a geopolitical point of view, the Ukrainian crisis would divert US attention from Asia, giving China a respite to more decisively implement its plans in the region.

Regarding the Ukrainian crisis, China has chosen to adhere to the so-called cautious neutrality and refrain from condemning Russia's actions, advocating a diplomatic settlement. A month later, the two countries signed a joint statement calling their relationship a «comprehensive strategic partnership based on coordination» [6].

One of the areas of strengthening cooperation between Beijing and Moscow was collaboration in the field of defense. Regular joint military events have begun to be held, such as the annual Peace Mission exercises under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the strategic exercises Vostok and Center. These exercises have increased interoperability, strategic coordination and mutual trust between the armed forces of China and Russia.

In addition, arms trade and technology transfer between the two countries have intensified. Russia has become a major supplier of advanced military technologies to China, including fighter jets, missile defense systems and naval vessels. This cooperation has contributed to the modernization of the Chinese armed forces and the technological progress of the People's Liberation Army of China (PLA).

Strategic coordination between China and Russia has extended to regional security issues. Both countries have agreed on their policy towards North Korea, advocating dialogue and denuclearization, while opposing unilateral sanctions and military intervention.

The Central Asian region is a sensitive topic in China-Russia bilateral relations, which has manifested itself in geopolitical tensions. The Kremlin has traditionally had concerns about the growing dependence of Central Asian states on China, to the detriment of Moscow's influence. However, judging by the current situation, today a de facto dual power has formed in the region, where Russia plays a leading role in political and security issues, while China is focused on supporting trade and economic development. The powers avoid conflicts with each other and cooperate to maintain regional security within the framework of the SCO, joining forces to combat terrorism, separatism and extremism.

Economic cooperation between China and Russia has expanded significantly since 2014, due to mutual interests and complementary economic needs. The imposition of Western sanctions against Russia has prompted Moscow to seek alternative markets for its goods and services, as well as sources of investment, while China has sought to secure the energy supplies needed due to the country's rapid industrialization and urbanization and expand its economic influence in Eurasia.

Europe has traditionally been the largest market for Russian energy exports, especially natural gas. However, geopolitical tensions and sanctions forced Russia to diversify its energy export markets and were largely the reason for the turn towards Asia.

In 2013, Russia and China signed a \$270 billion agreement to double oil supplies to China over the next 25 years. And in May 2014, Russia's Gazprom and China's CNPC signed an agreement on the supply of natural gas to China via the Power of Siberia pipeline in the amount of \$ 400 billion. This deal marked a significant shift in Russia's energy export strategy to Asia. The pipeline, which was commissioned in December 2019, strengthened energy ties between the two countries and provided Russia with a stable and growing natural gas market.

«One Belt, One Road» initiative and its impact on bilateral relations

The Chinese «One Belt, One Road» (OBOR/ BRI) initiative has laid the foundation for expanding Sino-Russian cooperation in the field of infrastructure development. The initiative, unveiled by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 during a speech in Kazakhstan, provided for the creation of a single Eurasian economic space and a transcontinental transport corridor between China and Europe with a main route through Central Asia. Russia's initial reaction to this initiative was the expected distrust due to the risks of expanding Chinese influence, undermining Russia's prerogatives in the area of its traditional dominance. A few months later, Moscow introduced the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as its own integration mechanism in the post-Soviet area. Moreover, in an attempt to balance the status change,

the Russian authorities have put forward the idea of Russia's own macro-regional initiative, the Greater Eurasian Partnership (BEP).

However, the Kremlin's attitude towards the OBOR project soon changed, not least in connection with the Ukrainian crisis. By March 2015, Russia had overcome its suspicions, and the two heads of state signed a declaration on «cooperation and integration of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt.» At the same time, Moscow still chose not to join the Chinese Belt and Road initiative, opting for the format of its «pairing» with the Eurasian Economic Union. This format was supposed to confirm the equality of the Russian Federation and the PRC and the fact that one great power cannot become part of the national strategy of another great power.

For Russia, cooperation with BRI has provided an opportunity to attract Chinese investment in its infrastructure projects, especially in less developed regions such as the Far East and Siberia. It was a strategic step to support a multipolar world order and strengthen Sino-Russian ties in the face of common geopolitical challenges. In turn, China's interest in cooperating with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was driven by a number of strategic, economic and geopolitical factors – by expanding ties, diversifying trade routes, investing in infrastructure and strengthening diplomatic ties, the PRC seeks to ensure its long-term interests in the region and beyond.

To date, cooperation between Russia and China within the framework of the BRI has brought some tangible results in various areas, including infrastructure development, trade, investment and geopolitical influence. Thus, several joint infrastructure projects have been launched, such as the Moscow-Kazan high-speed railway, which is part of a broader plan to connect Moscow and Beijing. In 2019, the Power of Siberia gas pipeline connecting Russia and China was commissioned, which expanded energy cooperation, ensured stable energy supply to China and allowed Moscow to diversify the natural gas market, reducing dependence on European buyers. Joint ventures have been established for the exploration and development of oil and gas fields in Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East. Chinese investment in Russia has increased, especially in sectors such as energy, mining and agriculture. China has become the largest foreign partner of the Russian Federation in projects for the production of liquefied natural gas (LNG) in the Arctic. Under the conditions of Western sanctions against Moscow, Beijing has provided Russia with the money and technology necessary to launch resource projects in the Russian Arctic. Thus, a balance has developed in the interests of the two countries: China has received a new source of gas and the first large sales of its Arctic technologies, Russia obtained a share in the huge

LNG market of China and money, vital for the projects that otherwise would not have been launched [7].

Russia has become one of the most important suppliers of energy, raw materials and agricultural products to China. Bilateral trade between Russia and China has grown significantly. In 2022, the trade turnover exceeded 147 billion dollars, and in 2023 it reached a record 240 billion [8].

Challenges and Criticisms of integrational efforts

Cooperation within the framework of the BRI became a pillar of the larger-scale strategic partnership between China and Russia and a platform for the parties to coordinate policies on regional and global issues. Nevertheless, the integrational efforts face a number of challenges, resulting with doubts on its effectiveness and criticism.

Some infrastructure projects have faced delays and cost overruns, reflecting the complexity of large-scale cross-border initiatives. In particular, the planned high-speed railway line through Siberia to China, and its first section – Moscow-Kazan, were not implemented, as the Russian government identified them as «economically inexpedient» [9].

Russia is extremely interested in the implementation of a large-scale Power of Siberia-2 gas pipeline project, meant to transport 50 billion cubic meters of gas per year to China via Mongolia. This project is much needed to offset to some extent the reduction in natural gas exports to Europe. However, negotiations between Moscow and Beijing on prices and other route-related issues haven't yet brought tangible results. It is obvious that China wants to avoid over-dependency on pipeline supplies, which are vulnerable to blocking, and prefers to rely on LNG to provide for its energy security [10].

Moreover, China's plans to expand the use of renewable energy sources and implement various energy technologies diminish its interest in the proposed gas pipeline, disappointing their Russian partners. Due to the low economic efficiency, the implementation of the pipeline project is uncertain, unless Beijing decides to move forward for non-commercial reasons.

The BRI initiative is considered by China as a vital for its huge exports and access to EU markets transit route to Europe. In this sense, due to comprehensive sanctions, Russia can hardly be seen as a useful partner in the foreseeable future.

Differences in the nature of regional integration initiatives between Russia and China are also challenging. The EAEU in fact is a limited customs union, while the OBOR initiative pursues a more ambitious agenda. Moreover, the EAEU requires its members to harmonize many policies and regulations, while the BRI initiative is less demanding on formal aspects.

Despite the fact that trade between the two countries has increased over the past two decades

and reached a record level in 2023, economic relations between Moscow and Beijing are heavily imbalanced. Russia is significantly more dependent on China than vice versa, which causes serious concern in Moscow. For example, while China became Russia's top trading partner, as of 2023, Russia was only China's sixth largest trading partner. China is Russia's largest market for raw materials (32% of exports) and the main supplier of goods (41% of imports). At the same time, Russia's share in Chinese exports is only 3.3% of the 3.5 trillion dollars. For comparison, the combined share of the European Union and the United States in Chinese exports accounts for about 24% [11].

The asymmetry of bilateral trade to Russia's disadvantage is aggravated by its structure, since the vast majority of Russian exports are raw materials and energy resources. As a result, Russia has become more dependent on the Chinese market, which cannot be said about China, which exports consumer and high-tech industrial goods, filling the vacuum created after the departure of Western companies.

Russia cannot dictate energy prices to China, as it once did with Europe, since the Chinese economy does not depend on Russian oil and gas supplies so heavily. Moreover, objective reasons and Russia's complicated international situation no longer allow it to redirect export flows to any other country as quickly and as effectively as it was able to do with China after the anti-Russian sanctions of Western countries. On the other hand, Beijing, recognizing its strong negotiating position, imposes its terms and prices on the purchased gas of the junior partner [12].

Personal sympathy is what matters

With Xi Jinping coming to power in China in 2012 and Vladimir Putin's re-election as president of the Russian Federation, a new stage of rapprochement between the two countries began. Sharing certain common views and principles, the leaders of the two states have formed strong and mutually respectful personal relations over more than a decade of interaction, which undoubtedly contributed to cooperation. Heads of state often call each other friends. Heads of state often call each other friends [13].

The regular high-level meetings and state visits exchanged between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin underline their commitment to maintaining and deepening bilateral ties and are the cornerstone of their strategic partnership. Since Xi Jinping came to power, he and the Russian president have met forty-three times, which is significantly more than the number of meetings between the Chinese president and other world leaders [14].

The similarity or even convergence of views of the leaders of Russia and China on a number of issues and problems is a significant factor in their rapprochement. Both leaders seek to counterbalance the dominance of the United States and its allies in

world politics and economics. They share a vision of a multipolar world order, where power is more evenly distributed among large nations. This mutual interest in reducing the influence of the West has led to coordination of efforts in various international forums and regional organizations. Both leaders advocate strengthening multilateral institutions that reflect the interests of emerging and developing countries.

The two heads of state have a negative attitude towards the US efforts to establish new military blocs in Asia, sharing the view that these initiatives are part of a broader strategy by Western powers to encircle and isolate both Russia and China. The two powers have responded to the creation of new defense blocs in Asia, such as AUKUS (the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States) and Quad (the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between the United States, Japan, India and Australia), with a combination of strategic measures, diplomatic responses and military cooperation.

China has expressed serious concern about these new defense initiatives, viewing them as an attempt to contain its growing influence in the region. Moscow shares Beijing's concerns that the Quad is turning into an Asian version of NATO, thereby undermining regional and global stability [15].

Both China and Russia advocate restraint on the Korean peninsula, while jointly expressing disagreement with Washington's deployment of the air defense system (THAAD) in South Korea.

Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping reject Western criticism of their internal governance, characterized by strong centralized control, suppression of political dissent and the priority of state stability over human rights. They both have strict control over their political systems and the media.

The Kremlin demonstrates favorable attitude towards Beijing's requests and shares its initiatives and positions. This is reflected in the Russian president's unreserved support for the initiative of the OBOR, the «brainchild» of the Chinese leader. Vladimir Putin personally attended each Belt and Road forum in 2017, 2019 and 2023 and was hosted as an honorary guest. At the annual meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club in October 2023, Putin denied that Moscow and Beijing had divergent interests regarding Eurasian economic integration or that the EAEU and the OBOR were competing. On the contrary, the president insisted that the two initiatives «harmoniously» complement each other in many respects [16]. According to the Russian leader, «One Belt – One Road» is «a really important global idea aimed at the future, at creating a more just multipolar world ...» [17].

Russia fully shares China's position on the Taiwan issue and remains committed to the «one China» principle, in contrast to the ambiguous attitude

of the United States on this issue. Moscow consistently chooses to stay out of the regional disputes involving China and Southeast Asian countries.

Contemporary Dynamics

In recent years, the assertion that bilateral relations have reached an unprecedented level of comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction and deserve to be called a model of interstate cooperation in the 21st century recurs repeatedly [18, 19, 20].

The deepening of the Kremlin's diplomatic relations with China was announced just before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On February 4, 2022, at the beginning of the Winter Olympic Games in Beijing, the presidents of the two countries held a meeting and made a Joint Statement reflecting the nature of Sino-Russian relations. The programmatic document defines their bilateral relationship as a friendship with no limits or forbidden areas and unaffected by the changing international environment [21].

It is noteworthy that during this visit, Vladimir Putin signed a 30-year natural gas supply agreement with China [22]. This was the second such agreement between the two countries, with the first being signed after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

China's Strategic Ambivalence

The onset of Moscow's open military conflict with Ukraine did not harm Sino-Russian bilateral relations; rather, it even strengthened them. In general, China's position on Russia's war in Ukraine is characterized by ambivalence, as it balances a strategic partnership with the Kremlin and its broader international relations and economic interests.

Official Beijing declares its neutrality and calls for dialogue and a peaceful settlement without taking sides. This allows China to maneuver diplomatically in relation to the conflict without alienating either Russia or Western countries. For example, the Chinese authorities emphasize the importance of respecting national sovereignty and territorial integrity, which is consistent with the traditional principles of China's foreign policy and reflects its concerns about setting precedents that could affect China's own territorial problems, such as Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. China recognizes Ukraine as a sovereign state and does not agree with Russian statements that this country is a Nazi puppet of the West. Beijing also maintains direct contacts with Kiev, opposes Russian nuclear threats and does not publicly support the invasion. At the same time, PRC refuses to condemn Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and, as consequence, consistently abstains from voting on this issue in the UN Security Council and the General Assembly [23, 24, 25].

Within the framework of its new Global Security Initiative, China opposes the expansion of exclusive regional military-political blocs. Beijing

views the conflict in Ukraine in the context of this paradigm, identifying the actions of the United States and NATO as efforts to strengthen Western security at the expense of Russia and other countries [26]. Chinese officials have repeatedly articulated their support for the «legitimate security concerns» that Russia is experiencing due the NATO's expansion to the east, and therefore blaming the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization for «provoking» Moscow to start the war [27].

At the same time, the Chinese authorities are making diplomatic efforts to ease tensions and promote a peaceful settlement of the conflict. Positioning itself as a mediator, China in February 2023 unveiled a twelve-point peace plan for resolving the conflict, which was rejected as impractical. [28] In particular, U.S. Secretary of State A. Blinken questioned Beijing's peace proposal, saying that «The world should not be fooled by any tactical move by Russia, supported by China or any other country, to freeze the war on its own terms» [29].

China refused to participate in the «Peace Summit on Ukraine», held in June 2024 in Switzerland and attended by representatives of more than 90 countries and 8 organizations. The reason was that Russia was not invited to this international forum, which, according to the Chinese authorities, violated the most important condition for the effectiveness of peaceful negotiation efforts. «Objectively, an international peace conference cannot contribute to the establishment of peace without the participation of the warring party. It is more likely that it will turn into a congress of solidarity with Ukraine and condemnation of Russia,» they commented on their position [30].

On the eve of the peace conference, President of Ukraine V. Zelensky not only expressed concern about the absence of China, but actually accused it of trying to sabotage the international forum, noting that Beijing is actively pressuring other countries not to participate [31]. Although he did not specify which countries were targeted, in early May, China's designated representative for conflict resolution visited countries such as Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Brazil, Indonesia, South Africa and Kazakhstan [27].

It should be noted that Chinese officials, including Xi Jinping personally, constantly state that their country does not provide military assistance to any of the parties to the conflict [32].

Indeed, unlike North Korea, official Beijing refrains from providing Russia with «lethal assistance» in order to ensure presence of large Western companies in China and avoid Western sanctional retaliation. However, according to experts, the supply of dual-use equipment and industrial goods from China greatly contributed to the military efforts of the Russian Federation [33, 34]. Among other things, China provides invaluable support, replacing Russia's lost

economic ties with the West, and, consequently, helping to maintain Kremlin's economic capacities to conduct military operations in Ukraine.

Nevertheless, there are limits to how far pragmatic China is willing to go for its northern neighbor. Despite all declarations that the strategic partnership with Russia has no borders, the United States and the European Union remain China's key trading partners. Beijing depends on Western technology, capital and markets. Moscow's gas conflict with the European Union has reduced the purchasing power of Chinese goods by Western consumers. In general, due to the rapprochement with Russia, Beijing's conflict with the West has noticeably escalated. China acknowledges that its relations with the USA will gradually deteriorate in the long term due to growing global rivalry. Therefore, it is crucial for Beijing not to aggravate relations with the EU, which is an extremely difficult task, given the degree of involvement of the latter in the war in Ukraine and its sensitivity for the issue [35].

Conclusion. China and Russia underwent through a significant transformation in their relationship, being ideological rivals in the Cold War era and gradually turning into strategic partners as of the recent decades, pursuing a common goal of establishing a multipolar world order, where the influence of the West would be balanced by a number of major nations.

Two big-scale international events – the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 2014 Ukrainian crisis – made tangibly significant impact on the development of the bilateral relations of Beijing and Moscow, marking turning points – after 1991 the parties started to explore opportunities for interaction and set trajectory for cooperation in various areas, while the mentioned crisis had accelerated the economic and strategic integration of Russia and China in response to Western sanctions. Both States demonstrate solidarity on issues that are sensitive to each other, thus confirming that their cooperation is based on pragmatic considerations and is driven by strategic imperatives. Meanwhile, Beijing is forced to balance its economic interests with Europe and the United States and its commitment to strategic partnership with Moscow. Of the two partners China occupies a more advantageous position, while Russia is growing more dependent on Beijing.

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Стратегічні зрушення: трансформація китайсько-російських відносин від холодної війни до сучасності

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У цій статті розглядається еволюція китайсько-російських відносин від ідеологічного суперництва під час холодної війни до стратегічного партнерства в сучасну епоху. Відносини між Китаєм і Росією, які спочатку характеризувались ідеологічними розбіжностями та територіальними суперечками, зазнали значних змін після розпаду Радянського Союзу в 1991 році. Геополітичний вакуум, створений розпадом СРСР, спонукав обидві країни врегулювати прикордонні суперечки та розширити економічне співробітництво, кульмінацією якого стала у стратегічних угодах та енергетичних проєктах. Українська криза 2014 року ще більше посилила це партнерство, коли Росія звернулася до Китаю у відповідь на санкції Заходу. На основі детального історичного аналізу в статті детально розглядаються прагматичні міркування та стратегічні імперативи, які визначають китайсько-російські відносини. Це комплексне дослідження дає розуміння геополітичної динаміки та економічної взаємозалежності, що формує сучасний альянс між Китаєм і Росією, а також досліджує його наслідки для глобальної геополітики. Таким чином, Пекін балансує свої відносини з конфліктуючими сторонами, користуючись при цьому ослабленням свого історичного регіонального конкурента, Росії, і його зростаючою залежністю від Китаю. Розуміючи, що в нинішніх умовах Китай є життєво важливим партнером для Москви завдяки своїй потужності, впливу та економічному потенціалу, Пекін просуває власні економічні, політичні та геополітичні інтереси. Тим часом Росія, намагаючись самоствердитися, відновити статус наддержави та кинути виклик глобальному домінуванню Сполучених Штатів, поставила багато на карту, розв'язавши конфлікт з Україною та посиливши напруженість із «колективним» Заходом. Чи досягне він поставлених цілей, ще невідомо. Наразі Кремль зіткнувся зі скоординованою сильною політичною опозицією та масовими економічними санкціями з боку західних країн і опинився у надзвичайно складній ситуації. Це зробило Росію вразливою, змусивши її повернутися на схід і, відкинувши традиційні побоювання щодо свого давнього регіонального суперника, тісніше зблизитися з Китаєм і, здавалося б, поступово прийняти роль молодшого партнера.

Ключові слова: китайсько-російські відносини, геополітика, стратегічне партнерство, BRI, українська криза.