

# How the U.S. and Its Allies Can Weaken the Russian–Chinese Relationship

## THE ISSUE

After months of military buildup around Ukraine, Russia used military force to change the borders of a European country for the second time in eight years. During the early morning hours of February 24, 2022, Russia launched a missile attack against every major city in Ukraine except Lviv. These attacks were followed by a major Russian ground operation in the north, east, and south of Ukraine.

During the buildup to the crisis, one dangerous and recurring response from Western countries and American policymakers has been that the U.S. should sacrifice its security interest in Ukraine to align with Russia—so that Russia can either help, or at least not distract from, dealing with the threat from China. This is an approach that is doomed to fail and will do nothing to enhance the safety and security of the American people nor of their allies.

## BACKGROUND

For the past several months Russia conducted a sizeable military buildup along its border with Ukraine and in Belarus and occupied Crimea. At the time of the February invasion, there were approximately 180,000 Russian troops positioned on Ukraine’s borders—equating to roughly 80 percent of Russia’s ground forces.

A large number of these forces were shifted from Russia’s Eastern Military District to the border with Ukraine, leaving the number of troops near Russia’s border with China at a historically unprecedented low. This point alone demonstrates the high level of trust

that currently exists in Russia’s relationship with China.

Furthermore, in a [recent joint statement](#) by Moscow and Beijing, both sides stated that they “oppose further enlargement of NATO” and called on the defensive Alliance to “abandon its ideologized Cold War approaches.” Even though Ukraine was not mentioned by name, the timing of the statement in the context of Russia’s military buildup makes clear that Kyiv was the target.

## RUSSIA DEPENDS ON CHINA

There are four main reasons why Vladimir Putin’s Russia and the West could never team up to deal with China.

**1) Many of Russia’s and China’s strategic goals in Europe overlap.** Both want a weakened and divided Europe that both can exploit. Both want to eclipse the U.S. partnership with Europe so that the free world is divided and more vulnerable. Russia will not help the U.S. to work against this most basic Russian interest.

**2) Since coming to power in 1999, Putin has demonstrated that he cannot be a trusted partner of the West.** Putin has spent more than two decades trying to undermine the U.S. and its allies at every turn. U.S. policymakers must operate in the world they are in, not in the world they want to be in.

**3) For the foreseeable future, Russia will prioritize its resources and energy in Europe—not in Asia.** Even though Russia spans two continents, its policymakers and political elites see Russia as a European power first and foremost. This is why the Kremlin

---

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/fs231>

The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

meddles in countries like Belarus and Ukraine. It knows that without influence or outright control of Minsk or Kyiv, Russia is not a European power.

During the 2005 State of the Nation [address to the Russian parliament](#), Putin said: “We should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the major geopolitical disaster of the 20th century.” Regaining the lost influence, control, and territory in Central and Eastern Europe since the 1990s has formed the basis of Russian foreign and defense policy since Putin came to power. This will not change.

**4) Russian and Chinese economic relations are too important for Moscow.** Since Western sanctions have started in response to Russia’s first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Moscow has sought out Chinese help to lessen the blow to the Russian economy. Since 2014, Russian and Chinese economic engagement has soared.

Major Chinese investments in Russia’s oil and natural gas facilities have served as an important lifeline for Moscow. Major gas pipelines linking Russia to Chinese markets have been constructed. The details for the [Power of Siberia 2](#), a new natural gas pipeline connecting Russia’s Yamal Peninsula (where much of Europe’s gas comes from) to China’s Xinxiang region (where the native Uyghurs are a victim of the Chinese regime’s genocide) is expected to be finalized later this year.

Last year, trade turnover between Russia and China was almost \$147 billion, up 36 percent from the year before. By 2024, both sides aim to hit \$200 billion in trade turnover. Moscow will not pursue a policy with the U.S. against Beijing that would jeopardize this economic lifeline.

#### HOW TO DIVIDE BEIJING AND MOSCOW

Even though Russia is the junior partner in its bilateral relationship with China, its relations with Beijing are too cozy right now

to expect any fundamental shift. The one area where Russia and China compete for influence is in Central Asia. But in this region, the U.S. has all but disengaged and has no leverage, nor any strategic interests. Furthermore, after Russia’s recent intervention in Kazakhstan to prop up President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Moscow is a highly active player in the region, and Beijing knows this.

The way to lessen the threat of the partnership between Russia and China is to make them less valuable to each other.

Russia only has two assets that gives it real influence—military force and energy. NATO needs to strengthen its conventional and strategic deterrence: Every NATO nation must do its share, and the U.S. needs to ramp up its contribution to defending NATO’s eastern flank.

The West needs to get serious about energy security. It needs affordable, reliable, and abundant energy without leaning on gas and oil from Russia. Without military and energy leverage, Russia is checkmated, and a less valuable partner for Beijing.

The U.S. should push back against China by standing with U.S. allies from Lithuania to Australia, confronting Chinese transgressions in the South and East China Seas and in the Taiwan Strait, tightening Chinese access to U.S.-developed technology, continuing to sanction China for its egregious human rights violations, and keeping China-based slave labor out of supply chains.

Washington should also work with its close allies and partners in the region—Australia, India, and Japan—to improve defense cooperation, and Washington should invest more in the U.S. military.

Increasing the pressure on both Russia and China may initially push them together; in the long run, it will increase competition and tensions between them, driving them apart.