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Ukraine and the Limits of China-Russia Friendship

ED PULFORD

In early February 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping welcomed his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin to the Winter Olympics in Beijing. Following a script to which both men have grown accustomed over the past decade, and with few concessions to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Xi and Putin held unmasked discussions at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, attended the Games' opening at the "Bird's Nest" stadium, and posed for photographs with their national flags, smiling in the glow of international and interpersonal friendship. On February 4, the two sides released a joint communiqué, the latest in a series of ambitious statements of Sino-Russian alignment, which declared each party's commitment to a "Friendship" with "no limits."

Three weeks later, this limitlessness appeared to be put to an immediate test. Ahead of Russian forces' renewed invasion of Ukraine on February 24, the Chinese government had seemed more relaxed than its Western counterparts. As Washington and London warned that the estimated 190,000 Russian troops gathering on Ukraine's borders were poised to attack, Beijing advised "all sides" to exercise restraint and alluded to "complex factors" underlying the situation. Since then this broad—if sometimes awkward—alignment has continued. Both the Chinese Foreign Ministry and official media have downplayed apparent Russian atrocities, blaming Ukrainian civilian suffering on NATO expansion.

This tacit support for Putin's bloody military misadventure has been particularly striking given the Chinese government's decades-long emphasis on sovereignty and territorial integrity as core principles of the global order. Everything from world leaders' meetings with the Dalai Lama to the 2010 award of the Nobel Peace Prize to imprisoned dissident Liu Xiaobo has drawn accusations of "interference in China's internal affairs" from Beijing. One might therefore assume that one country's full-scale military invasion of another would also meet the standard of "interference."

But such assumptions would be naïve, both in today's cynical age of posturing strongmen and when considering the history of official capital-F Friendship between China and Russia or the Soviet Union. The dynamics of this relationship over time, including during crises comparable to the current Ukraine war, reveal that their Friendship is usually more expedient than claims to limitlessness would imply—whether in its constant over-the-shoulder focus on what a certain "third power" is doing, or in its troubled negotiations with its own history.

SOCIALIST ROOTS

As the 38th encounter between Xi and Putin since 2013, the Winter Olympics meeting—at which no other major world leaders were present—seemed the latest sign of an interstate bond going from strength to strength during the twenty-first century. Friendship has been the guiding motif throughout. In 2018, Putin was awarded the Order of Friendship of the People's Republic of China (PRC) medal at a ceremony where Xi described him as his "best friend and confidant." Beyond rarefied summitry and high politics, the Russian leader has also become something of a cult figure in China, spurring a boom in Putin-themed self-help books that celebrate him as an idealized embodiment of leadership and manhood.

This intensifying Friendship has coincided with cooling relations between both countries and "the West." As recently as 2008, the PRC government was willing to criticize adventurist Russian foreign policy, voicing "concern" at Putin's invasion of Georgia, which came just as the Summer Olympics—with the current and former US Presidents

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Bush in enthusiastic attendance—opened in Beijing that August. Yet by 2014, the year President Barack Obama skipped Russia's Winter Olympics in Sochi, Beijing's response to Putin's first invasion of Ukraine was closer to its stance today: while not formally recognizing Russia's annexation of Crimea, the PRC abstained from two United Nations votes condemning Moscow's actions, citing the "complexity" of the situation.

Today's interstate bond may thus seem tied to Xi-Putin bonhomie in an emerging multipolar world, but Friendship has roots deeper than the personalities of these two men. Russia and China's contemporary relationship is defined by a Treaty of Good Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation signed in 2001 by Putin (early in his first presidency) and Xi's predecessor-but-one Jiang Zemin. In its language and atmospherics, this declaration in turn drew on a formal Friendship that flourished in the 1950s between China and the Soviet Union. Under a treaty signed by Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin during the former's 1949–50 visit to Moscow, this Friendship was also defined as "eternal," and it stressed principles of reciprocity and sovereignty that resonated strongly in an era of global decolonization.

Interstate Friendship may best be cultivated at arm's length.

If Sino-Russian amity has recently peaked in what the PRC calls Xi Jinping's "New Era," and is described—per the 2022 communiqué—as "superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era," symbolic aspects of the relationship have crucial twentieth-century antecedents. These matter because, notwithstanding the emphasis on limitlessness and self-determination, earlier iterations of the relationship also saw each party having to respond to military interventions launched by the other into neighboring states.

SOCIALIST INVASIONS

In November 1956, Soviet forces entered Budapest to suppress an uprising that had deposed Hungary's Moscow-sponsored socialist government. With Friendship defining Sino-Soviet relations, the Chinese response was mixed. At first, a late-October editorial in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) mouthpiece *People's Daily* stressed the need to respect Hungarian sovereignty, but a few days later Beijing's position changed to one condemning the new "counterrevolutionary" leader Imre Nagy, who wished to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact. Amid the violence of the ensuing Soviet invasion around 2,500 Hungarians were killed. While Budapest-based Chinese students sheltered in the PRC Embassy, pro-China Hungarian intellectuals were denied similar protection.

Beijing's initial hesitancy to back Moscow in 1956 hinted at troubles to come. A few months previously, at a closed session of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in Moscow (a milestone the CCP will reach in October 2022), Nikita Khrushchev denounced his predecessor Stalin's "cult of personality." Khrushchev's "secret speech" was only part of a broader de-Stalinization program at home and a "thawing" of Soviet relations with capitalist rivals internationally. But it captured a growing divergence between Soviet politics and those in China, where Mao—who remained a Stalinist despite being treated with disdain by Stalin during his 1950 Moscow visit—was nurturing his own cult. By the early 1960s, Sino-Soviet ties had soured into outright enmity.

As ideological solidarity and official Chinese admiration for the Soviet "older brother" gave way to bitter mutual recriminations, the USSR's next mission to rein in a straying socialist satellite elicited less ambiguity from Beijing. The 1968 summer invasion of Czechoslovakia was Leonid Brezhnev's response to the Prague Spring, a set of liberalizing reforms under Alexander Dubček that threatened Soviet supremacy. Two years into the violently Maoist Cultural Revolution, *People's Daily* decried Moscow's hypocritical claims that the invasion upheld tenets of socialist internationalism: "[H]ow is this respecting 'territorial integrity'? Where is the 'noninterference in internal affairs'? Where is the 'friendship,' the 'unity'? This vile shamelessness has reached an extreme!" fumed an editorial on August 30, 1968. Such outrage reflected concerns that the intervention might portend a Soviet invasion of China. These fears snowballed into a small war several months later over a river islet on the Sino-Soviet border.

A tense decade later, the dynamics of invasion and condemnation were reversed. In February 1979, Chinese forces entered northern Vietnam in response to the Vietnamese Communists' opposition to the Maoist Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Ahead of the invasion, Moscow had sealed a Friendship Treaty with Hanoi in November

1978 and provided advisers and matériel to the Vietnamese military, much like today's Western support for Ukraine. Most disconcertingly for Beijing's new government, led by Deng Xiaoping, Soviet forces were also marshaled up to China's borders with eastern Russia and Mongolia, a looming threat that included airborne divisions from thousands of miles away in Soviet Ukraine and Belarus.

Unlike the Russian forces massed on Ukraine's borders in early 2022, however, these divisions did not end up crossing into China. Deng's forces withdrew from Vietnam a few weeks later, and a disastrous confrontation between socialist nuclear giants was averted. In fact, the years that followed saw improving relations between Beijing and Moscow. Formal contact was cautiously resumed throughout the 1980s. By 1989, Mikhail Gorbachev was visiting Beijing, and just over a decade later, Jiang and Putin signed their treaty. The Friendship we know today was back in ascendancy.

TRIANGULATION

This brief history of Friendship, enmity, and invasions suggests several continuities between past and present, despite today's claims that Sino-Russian Friendship is unprecedented. For one thing, Friendships then and now have shared the need to actively forget earlier iterations of the relationship. Any nostalgia for socialist brotherhood which might underlie contemporary Beijing-Moscow rapprochement demands that decades of outright hostility—which in turn negated earlier commitments to "eternal" amity—be overlooked. Even the Mao-Stalin Friendship involved discarding memories of the pre-socialist nineteenth century, when the Qing empire—under colonial duress from Britain, France, and Russia—ceded northern Asian territories to an expanding Tsarist realm.

Also consistent over the past century of Beijing-Moscow ties has been the looming presence of a third power. The 2022 communiqué stressed that today's Friendship has nothing to do with anyone else, being "neither aimed against third countries nor affected by the changing international environment." But the document's critique of "some actors" who behave unilaterally on the world stage and interfere in others' affairs had an obvious target. Shifting twentieth-century relations among the socialist giants were always triangulated against the capitalist United States, and Chinese solidarity with Russian criticisms of NATO shows that this remains central to their relations. Indeed, Putin's own Chinese cult rests partly on his robust willingness to confront Western adversaries, much as his friend Xi increasingly does.

Yet if US-focused triangulation and the elision of past frictions are sources of continuity, one novel aspect of today's relationship is worth considering in this unsettling era of territorial conquest and cross-border intervention. Unlike either Friendship or enmity during the Cold War, China and Russia's twenty-first-century bond has facilitated extensive contact among ordinary people across the two countries' shared border. Since the 1990s, trade in consumer goods and, more recently, medical and leisure tourism have flourished between northeast China and eastern Russia.

Over the same period, however, these two regions have been rapidly depopulating. Between 2010 and 2020, northeast China lost over 10 percent of its population, whereas since 1991 the Russian Far East's population has shrunk by over 23 percent. With cross-border contact severed completely by the COVID-19 pandemic—devastating for borderland businesses—one might wonder if Friendship's new peaks are made possible precisely by estrangement on the ground.

At a time when each side's energies are focused elsewhere—be it Europe or the Pacific—it has suited Beijing and Moscow to maintain a regime of peaceful emptiness in the region that once witnessed Sino-Soviet conflict. Certainly the resulting marginality of the borderlands has made Moscow comfortable redeploying troops from its eastern military districts, where it once intimidated and fought China, to the Ukraine war. As global balances shift, abstract geopolitical rapprochement and triangulation against a third power are easier to manage than the messier human sphere of direct cross-border proximity.

Interstate Friendship may best be cultivated at arm's length, and so China's backing for Russia in Ukraine—like its commitment to territorial integrity—will likely remain within the limits of expediency. With the Friendship in its current form, Beijing would expect to receive similar arms-length support from Moscow for any comparable military exploit of its own—provided, of course, that the target is not part of sacred Tsarist or Soviet historical territory. ■