

Christian Fuentes

*“And even Marx would not have been able to answer”:
The Trilateral Relationship between China, Russia, and the United States
(1989–2022)*

ABSTRACT: *Although the Cold War has been over for more than thirty years, enduring issues have kept the relationship between China, Russia, and the United States at the forefront of international politics. Using government documents, statements, and records from all three nations, as well as accounts from central figures, this essay traces the history of their interactions from the final moments of the Cold War to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The author argues that China and Russia have both tried to advance their positions on the world stage without jeopardizing their regional security interests in the face of U.S. power projection.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; China; Russia; United States (U.S.); Xi Jinping; Vladimir Putin; regional security; Taiwan; Ukraine; diplomatic history*

Introduction

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine has brought the trilateral relationship between China, Russia, and the United States to the forefront of international politics, reviving the question of whether China and Russia can be considered allies and what implications their cooperation has for U.S. global interests. The Chinese and Russian governments have labeled their cooperation a “strategic partnership,”¹ yet the Chinese Communist Party (C.C.P.) has also used this term to refer to its relations with states like Germany² and Australia³ in recent years, making a more detailed analysis necessary to highlight the unique aspects of Sino-Russian relations that have been developing since the end of the Cold War. Some observers suggest that a Sino-Russian alliance has been consolidated in everything but name and that it is an immediate threat to U.S. interests. However, while notable elements of Sino-Russian cooperation exist and have been developing since relations were restored under Deng Xiaoping and Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989, both nations have, at times, also hesitated to draw too diplomatically close to each other and have made their own cooperative moves with the United States. Therefore, I contend that China and Russia have not drifted into a binding alliance, and that their behavior from 1989 forward has not been part of a joint effort to challenge U.S. hegemony; rather, successive administrations in both nations have sought to improve their position in the global power system while promoting their regional security interests, which has resulted in their unstable, trilateral relationship with the United States.

The invasion of Ukraine is the latest international conflict in which Chinese, Russian, and U.S. interests have converged, one that extends back to Russia’s 2014

¹ “Putin Congratulates China on National Day,” *People’s Daily*, October 2, 2014, [online](#).

² “Spotlight: Innovation, Cooperation Highlight Upgraded Sino-German Partnership,” *People’s Daily*, October 11, 2014, [online](#).

³ “Chinese, Australian DMs Hold Talks,” *People’s Daily*, October 13, 2014, [online](#).

annexation of Crimea but can even be seen as a ripple effect of the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. In fact, many of the recent conflicts within the China-Russia-U.S. relationship can be traced back to the Cold War's sudden and unexpected conclusion: Russia's turn toward energy diplomacy, China's international investment and development projects, and the United States' conspicuous yet "unofficial"⁴ support of the Taiwanese government. While few scholars contest that certain tensions were still present in Sino-Soviet relations during the final years of the Cold War, the following three decades have presented a complicated picture of shifting policy interests within each country. To make sense of this turbulent dynamic, scholars have continuously examined the distance between each state in the relationship. Is Russia a true ally of China, or have the two merely pursued some mutually beneficial policies? Does the United States see itself as being closer to China due to their significant trade arrangements? The most crucial uncertainty, however, is whether all three will be able to cooperate in the future or if their interests will prove irreconcilable for decades to come.

I. Historiography

From the 1990s onward, two schools of thought have dominated discussions of the China-Russia-U.S. relationship: the Cold War school and the hegemony school. The basis of the assumptions for the former school came from an intersection of cultural studies and Cold War history. After 1991, some scholars chose to analyze the post-Soviet landscape of international politics by focusing on cultural differences, the legacy of the Cold War, and the ways in which all three countries were drifting away from the ideological battle between communism and capitalism. First published in his 1993 article, Samuel P. Huntington's thesis in "The Clash of Civilizations" has had an enduring impact on how the trilateral relationship is framed by political scientists, especially those within the field of international relations. Huntington theorized that cultural norms would collide on a global level and that they would determine where conflicts would occur for the foreseeable future. He believed that, having lost its Soviet mode, Russia was suffering a crisis of identity that would bring it either closer to the culturally unified Western nations or cause it to retreat into self-perceived Russian traditions, and that China could possibly become the dominant cultural identity of East Asia, influencing its neighbors accordingly.⁵ In a similar vein, Kristina Spohr used this idea of an East versus West divide in her examination of the Cold War's conclusion and aftermath. Although Spohr noted that Gorbachev was drifting toward shared values with the United States before the fall of the Soviet Union,⁶ she and Huntington both saw the overall context of the Cold War and the reassertion of

⁴ "U.S. Relations with Taiwan," *U.S. Department of State*, May 28, 2022, [online](#).

⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22-49, here 44-47.

⁶ Kristina Spohr, *Post Wall, Post Square: How Bush, Gorbachev, Kohl, and Deng Shaped the World After 1989* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 48-51, ProQuest Ebook Central.

national identities that followed it as key to characterizing the later tensions within the trilateral relationship.

Like the Cold War school, the hegemony school suggests that China has been a rising economic and military power for decades and that a geopolitical East-West divide exists. Yet, while these scholars occasionally mention cultural factors and the Cold War, the hegemony school tends to prioritize discussion of hard power concerns. In addition, the school makes two crucial assumptions: one, that states are the primary actors in global politics, which lessens the importance of individual people and administrations; and the other, that China, Russia, and the United States have been moving toward fixed political alignments. Specifically, the school suggests that China and Russia have been natural challengers to a unipolar world system—a liberal hegemony of Western nations wherein the United States is the most dominant. Andrew Kydd, for instance, noted that shared elements of authoritarianism have drawn China and Russia together in opposition to the democratic rhetoric and policy interests of the United States, whom they recognize as the major Western hegemon.⁷ John M. Owen tried to complicate this view by suggesting that we should not use the U.S. government as a standard to gauge how close China and Russia have become. Nevertheless, he continues to reference Western liberal hegemony and, therefore, the East and West divide, as if such a distinction is insurmountable.⁸

In my own research, however, I have found the East-West divide to be an inadequate and unnecessary tool for explaining why China-Russia-U.S. relations have progressed to their current status. Scholars from both established schools of thought have used this concept to explain the broad strokes of modern interstate relations, but such discourse begs an unavoidable question: What ultimately determines whether a nation is "Eastern" or "Western?" For Huntington, culture is an essential determinant; yet, when we look at the totality of a nation's foreign policy, domestic conditions, and the divisions that exist within its society, we may find its status too ambiguous to classify. Huntington himself acknowledged the deficiency of his thesis by describing certain countries as exceptions to the divide. He felt, for instance, that Russia's crisis of identity in the early 1990s had made it difficult to tell whether it was an Eastern or Western nation. Similarly, he claimed that Japan had become diplomatically aligned with the West while retaining its own unique cultural identity.⁹

Unlike Huntington, scholars from the hegemony school often seem entirely focused on hard-power dynamics, but the cultural connotations of the East-West divide remain implicit in their application of the concept, especially in their

⁷ Andrew Kydd, "Switching Sides: Changing Power, Alliance Choices and US-China-Russia Relations," *International Politics* 57, no. 5 (March 2020): 855-884, here 859.

⁸ John M. Owen IV, "Sino-Russian Cooperation Against Liberal Hegemony," *International Politics* 57, no. 5 (10, 2020): 809-833, here 821.

⁹ Huntington, "Clash of Civilizations," 27-28.

perceptions of authoritarian state behavior. Such connotations are significant enough that, in my view, scholars should not rely on the East-West divide unless they properly address all dimensions of the concept. Utilization of the divide may be helpful if one is summarizing interactions over a substantial period of time and between many nations, but to use it needlessly could over-generalize the details of a more focused topic.

This essay analyzes the development of the trilateral relationship from 1989 to the present day through the lens of geopolitics. It attempts to circumvent oversimplified perspectives of this topic that rely too heavily upon the concept of an East-West divide. Special attention is given to how the fall of the Soviet Union transformed the relationship, the issue of Taiwanese sovereignty, Russian rhetoric toward Ukraine, and official government documents, particularly treaties and discussions between leaders from all three nations. Naturally, this results in a highly top-down understanding of the international power system, but such an approach is necessary to maintain my focus on diplomacy and the impacts that come from administrative changes. With regard to Chinese and Russian relations, this essay addresses how the two states have supported each other in the realm of international politics while avoiding clear alliance behavior and then question the extent to which this dynamic has been based on their strategic opposition to U.S. global interests. I suggest that the Russian government of today has opted to put its regional security concerns ahead of its plans for economic integration, knowing well that it can lean into growing Chinese institutions without becoming an unconditional ally or puppet of China. As the Chinese economy has grown, adopted ambitious projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, and come under Xi Jinping's leadership, Russia has shared some interests with the nation in order to protect its control of energy resources and its trade connections. Meanwhile, the United States has continually supported foreign policies and stances on human rights violations that oppose Russia and China. I hope to convey all of these interpretations in a manner that focuses on individual leaders and administrations; this allows me to demonstrate where the idea of an East-West divide falls short.

II. Transitioning Out of the Cold War

Gorbachev's visit to Beijing during the 1989 Sino-Soviet summit was a clear attempt to restore relations between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. A Soviet premier had not come to China since 1959, which elevated the visit from a diplomatic gesture to a signal that Gorbachev and Deng were ready to forge a new sense of affability between their nations. Both leaders expressed a desire to move on from the disputes that had fueled the Sino-Soviet split and fractured the communist world. Despite all of the charged rhetoric that the Soviet Union and China had used to bicker about their ideological differences in the 1960s, Gorbachev now asserted that neither state had ever abandoned the tenets of socialism. Speaking in agreement, Deng implied that both nations had adapted

as best as they could to suit the evolving global political landscape, saying, "And even Marx would not have been able to answer all the questions, which came up after his death."¹⁰ Both men characterized the summit as setting a foundation for their future cooperation, with Deng asserting that relations had "officially" been "normalized."¹¹ From 1989 onward, communication between the two states became more frequent and sustained, which made security deals more tenable over time. Consequently, China and Russia would go on to make new agreements regarding their disputed borders, a topic that had been a source of antagonism since the Sino-Soviet split and had also been addressed by Deng during the 1989 summit.

Nevertheless, the summit also made it clear that underlying tensions existed between the two leaders. Deng began the meeting by reminding Gorbachev of the "three obstacles" to improved relations that he had enumerated three years prior:¹² the Soviet Union's presence in Afghanistan, its military forces at the Chinese border, and its support for Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. At this point, all three obstacles had been removed; thus, Deng's eagerness to address them could be seen as a provocation of sorts, a suggestion that the Soviet Union had either made concessions to China or that it had failed to project its hard power throughout the decade. Deng went on to characterize some of the Soviet Union's past actions as being part of an imperialist legacy that stretched back to the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century.¹³ Notably, he mentioned the Soviet Union's acquisition of islands near Khabarovsk, its hand in creating the Mongolian People's Republic using land that China had claimed, and its earlier misperception of "China's place in the world."¹⁴ Finally, Deng also brought up a recent speech that Gorbachev had given in Vladivostok. He believed that the friendly tone of the speech might be signaling a possible "turning point in relations between the USSR and the USA," allowing the two nations to lessen their hostilities for each other.¹⁵ Deng found this matter considerably important since, in his mind, "problems of Soviet-American relations" were "the central questions of international politics."¹⁶ Therefore, this visit was the first in a chain of diplomatic moves that suggested a future of cooperation between China and Russia, but it also hinted at the instability of their relationship. Deng was keeping the Soviet Union at arm's length and was simultaneously wary of its relations with the United States; meanwhile,

¹⁰ "Meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping" (excerpts), May 16, 1989, *Wilson Center Digital Archive*, [online](#).

¹¹ "Meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping" (excerpts), May 16, 1989.

¹² "Meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping" (excerpts), May 16, 1989.

¹³ "Excerpts from the Meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping," May 16, 1989, *Wilson Center Digital Archive*, [online](#).

¹⁴ "Meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping" (excerpts), May 16, 1989.

¹⁵ "Meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping" (excerpts), May 16, 1989.

¹⁶ "Meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping" (excerpts), May 16, 1989.

Gorbachev seemed to be treading lightly so that he could present a peaceable appearance to the public. Gorbachev's responses were generally measured and cautious, urging for discussion of what might lie ahead rather than of their past interactions. He also made no statements about the ongoing protests at Tiananmen Square, despite the fact that many protestors were trying to appeal to him directly. When students tried to arrange a meeting with Gorbachev by delivering a letter with "6,000 signatures" to the Soviet embassy, the embassy declared that he would eventually speak to the public but gave no details about what that might entail.¹⁷

The collapse of the Soviet Union only two years after the 1989 Sino-Soviet summit raised many questions about where a post-Soviet Russia would stand in global politics. Significantly, it also inspired a brief period of Russian-American cooperation that seemed to overshadow the relations that Deng and Gorbachev had initiated. Stripped of its communist identity, Russia would endure a major transitional period throughout the 1990s. Initially, this included a high degree of diplomatic openness with the United States. Prior to the Soviet collapse, Gorbachev had already overseen the adoption of the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) agreement with the United States, beginning a drastic reduction of their strategic nuclear arsenals, and had joined the United States in supporting United Nations resolutions that opposed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. When Gorbachev was forced out of his leadership position and the Soviet Union ceased to exist, Boris Yeltsin continued this cooperative stance in his presidency, particularly in 1992. Vladimir Lukin, who was Yeltsin's ambassador to the United States, would later characterize that year as one in which his administration had taken a "pro-Russian policy which [was] most effectively achieved through cooperation with the leading Western Power."¹⁸ Thus, at that time, the Yeltsin administration had participated in the initial talks for the START II agreement, which was intended to limit the capabilities of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) for the United States and Russia. It had also become a recipient of aid from the U.S. Freedom Support Act of 1992, which was one of the investments that helped prop up Russia's economy under Yeltsin.¹⁹

Yet, the ties that were forming between the United States and Russia would begin to dissipate in the latter half of the decade as Yeltsin faced domestic turmoil and China became open to hard power deals with Russia. The Russian Constitutional Crisis of 1993 showed Yeltsin the extent to which the public and parliament had lost faith in his economic reforms, reforms that had been partially buttressed by the foreign aid the country had received in 1992. As a result, Yeltsin realized that aligning himself with the United States was not enough to secure his policies and therefore reverted to more traditional concerns, such as regional

¹⁷ Spohr, *Post Wall, Post Square*, 48–51.

¹⁸ "Interview and Discussion with Vladimir Lukin," August 13, 2020, *Wilson Center Digital Archive*, [online](#).

¹⁹ Spohr, *Post Wall, Post Square*, 478.

security. In 1996, Yeltsin argued with Clinton regarding the continued development of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), though both leaders agreed to present a facade of mutual understanding to the press.²⁰ The lack of progress regarding the decrees of START II came to indicate the shift in Russia's attitude toward the United States. Despite successful deliberations and its acceptance by both parties, the START II treaty was never actually implemented and would be abandoned completely in the 2000s. START II came at the end of a series of hard power deals between the United States and Russia, but its failure to produce any tangible results showed that the Yeltsin administration had already begun to de-prioritize U.S. relations by the second half of the decade.

As previously discussed, the new Russian government had become split between countless concerns at the start of the 1990s as it struggled to regain stability. The C.C.P., however, had held onto power in spite of public unrest, and its policy interests therefore found much continuity with its third generation of leadership. The C.C.P. had therefore maintained a heavy focus on its regional security concerns, particularly with regard to Taiwan, making it no surprise when tensions began to flare up in the South China Sea. In 1996, Chinese missile tests provoked the mobilization of American ships, creating a tense standoff between the two governments now known as the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. Just one month after this standoff, the Chinese General Secretary, Jiang Zemin, traveled to Russia and signed a joint statement announcing the two nations' "partnership of strategic coordination...oriented toward the twenty-first century."²¹ In the aftermath of the crisis, it became clear that China and Russia shared a mutual frustration with U.S. power projection due to their respective regional security concerns. For the remainder of the decade, the two states kept engaging diplomatically to signal this, which was reflected by their criticism of "attempts to enlarge and strengthen military blocs" like NATO and their praise of "regional peace" and "multipolarization" in a 1997 joint declaration.²² Ultimately, it seems that the cooling of relations between Russia and the United States gave Jiang the perfect opportunity to increase relations with Russia in the late 1990s, thereby responding to increased U.S. military presence in the South China Sea.

III. *The Dawn of a New Century*

Changes in the Chinese and Russian administrations near the turn of the century ushered in another shift in relations that seemed to mirror the circumstances of the early 1990s. Vladimir Putin maintained amiable relations with China, but he was more focused on a reconciliation with the United States and Western Europe;

²⁰ "Summary Report on One-on-One Meeting Between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin, May 10, 1995, 10:10 A.M.-1:19 P.M., St. Catherine's Hall, The Kremlin," *Wilson Center Digital Archive*, [online](#).

²¹ "China and Russia: Partnership of Strategic Coordination," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, copyright 1998-2014, [online](#).

²² "Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order, Adopted in Moscow on 23 April 1997," *United Nations Digital Library*, [online](#).

therefore, Putin was taking a stance that was very similar to the one that Yeltsin had taken at the beginning of his tenure. The Russian government avoided making a significant petroleum deal with China and instead searched for opportunities to build energy infrastructure for the United States and nations within its sphere of influence.²³ Meanwhile, in 2001, Jiang used the eightieth anniversary of the C.C.P.'s founding to take a less aggressive view of the global political landscape. Though he emphasized the memory of the imperial oppression that China had fallen victim to in the nineteenth century, as Deng and Mao had done before him, he was careful not to specify which "Western nations" had been at fault, and unlike Deng, he steered clear of discussing twentieth-century foreign conflicts that pertained to the trilateral relationship.²⁴ He also made no mention of the United States in any capacity and only mentioned Russia during his brief reference to the Russian Revolution. His most important talking points were all limited to the domestic development of China. The C.C.P. was not necessarily withdrawing from global affairs, but now that the Taiwan issue had become stable again, China was not eager to threaten the status quo that had emerged in the trilateral relationship.

Just as had happened in the transition from the early to late 1990s, however, China and Russia were once again drawn together by issues of regional security. Any expectations that Putin had for the Russia-U.S. relationship were gradually abandoned as revolutions in Eastern Europe heightened his concerns about NATO; his administration even seemed to believe that the United States had used its dominant position in Europe to cause the turmoil.²⁵ Simultaneously, Taiwan had remained a critical concern for China even as it de-prioritized the improvement of Sino-Russian relations. As mentioned previously, Jiang had generally been careful to avoid discussing recent foreign conflicts at the 2001 C.C.P. anniversary, yet he abandoned all caution when speaking about Taiwan. Thus, only five years after its serious confrontation with the United States in the region, he characterized the idea of a reunification with Taiwan as a "trend that no one and no force can stop."²⁶ In addition, Russia and China signed another treaty of cooperation in 2001. Unlike their former declaration in 1997, it did not emphasize multipolarization and therefore took a comparatively less hostile attitude toward perceived U.S. hegemony. However, neither country had changed its stance on the regional security issues that had been highlighted in 1997. This 2001 treaty reiterated their antagonism toward military blocs and their focus on regional peace, but also gave Russia an opportunity to unequivocally denounce

²³ Artyom Lukin, "Soviet/Russian-China Relations: Coming Full Circle, in *Uneasy Partnerships: China's Engagement with Japan, the Koreas, and Russia in the Era of Reform*, ed. Thomas Fingar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 189–218, here 199, ProQuest Ebook Central.

²⁴ "Jiang Zemin's Speech at the Meeting Celebrating the 80th Anniversary of the Founding of the Communist Part of China," July 1, 2001, *china.org.cn*, [online](#).

²⁵ Lukin, "Soviet/Russian-China Relations," 199–200.

²⁶ "Jiang Zemin's Speech," July 1, 2001, *china.org.cn*.

the concept of Taiwanese sovereignty.²⁷ China and Russia continued to share a great interest in keeping neighboring regions within their respective spheres of influence. By 2005, Russia and China had begun to use their positions in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (S.C.O.) to denounce the United States' military reach in Central Asia.²⁸

Although both countries had shown clear unease with regard to their regional security situations, China had taken an arguably harder stance than Russia due to its over fifty-year focus on Taiwan. This changed in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea. Suddenly, Russia had become willing to use direct military intervention in order to maintain what little influence it had over Europe: its control of oil and gas resources. In an attempt to legitimize the annexation, Putin claimed that the action had been taken because of Crimea's "ethnic Russian majority,"²⁹ though his rhetoric eventually evolved to the point that he implied that Russians and Ukrainians are one people,³⁰ similar to how the C.C.P. has characterized the people of Taiwan as being part of China. Nevertheless, China had not actually attacked Taiwan since 1958, making true conflict in the region a distant memory. The Putin administration, on the other hand, had thrown caution to the wind. This single military operation was enough to threaten Russia's relationship with much of the international community and result in the rapid deployment of sanctions from countries like the United States. However, even if the new Xi Jinping administration did not wholly agree with the annexation, it still saw the conflict as an opportunity to "upgrade" its strategic partnership with Russia in hopes of securing future energy and regional security deals and also to reduce the amount of pressure that the United States could put on its tactically important neighbor.³¹

IV. *The Issue of Ukraine*

With the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, it has become clear that, within the trilateral relationship, the Russian government is currently the most willing to challenge perceived notions of regional stability in order to support its security interests. As a result, the United States has made its rhetoric against Russia increasingly hostile and has doubled down on the strategy that it used during the annexation of Crimea: the deployment of sanctions. The U.S. government has characterized these sanctions as being part of an "unprecedented action" that "will have a deep and

²⁷ "Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation," July 24, 2001, [online](#).

²⁸ Lukin, "Soviet/Russian-China Relations," 201.

²⁹ "Russian President of the State of Russia's Economy: Excerpts from a Press Conference Held by Russian President Vladimir Putin on December 18, 2014, on the State of Russia's Economy," in *Historic Documents of 2014*, ed. Heather Kerrigan (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2015), 627-636, here 634.

³⁰ "Address by President of the Russian Federation," *The Kremlin*, March 18, 2014, [online](#).

³¹ Pavel K. Baev, "Three Turns in the Evolution of China-Russia Presidential Pseudo-Alliance," *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 6, no. 1 (October 2018): 4-18, here 6-7.

long-lasting effect on the Russian economy and financial system."³² Yet, even though the Biden administration has fervently defended this response to Russian aggression, it cannot escape concerns regarding the third member of the trilateral relationship, China.

The Putin administration's unflinching commitment to its militant approach has created a strange diplomatic battle in which the United States and Russia have both pushed China to take a definitive stance on the conflict, but the C.C.P. has carefully avoided doing so. While the C.C.P. has neither supported nor denounced Russia, it "maintains that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries must be respected."³³ Political commentators have noted that China is supporting Ukrainian sovereignty so that it does not contradict its own stance on Taiwan. The C.C.P. wants to discourage other nations from challenging its claim of sovereignty over the island. Yet, only one month after the C.C.P.'s previous statement, the Chinese Vice Foreign Minister declared that the C.C.P. would pursue deeper cooperation with Russia despite any changes to the international landscape. In response, Russia's ambassador to China stated that increasing ties with the C.C.P. was the Putin administration's "diplomatic priority."³⁴ The two nations have therefore expressed a mutual desire to not halt the progress that their relationship has seen since its status was upgraded in 2014.

China's strained attempt to remain neutral in the conflict has been met with displeasure from U.S. President Joseph Biden. Though the Biden administration has boasted that "more than 30 allies and partners have levied the most impactful...restrictions in history" against Russia,³⁵ the effectiveness of this collective action will be threatened if China moves toward an explicitly pro-Russian stance. As a result, the U.S. government has repeatedly warned China against aiding Russia's invasion efforts. Biden has implied that any Chinese "material support" for the Kremlin's goals in Ukraine will provoke a retaliatory response from his administration, a point that he stressed in his April video call with Xi.³⁶ Yet such rhetoric does not seem to have intimidated Xi. The Chinese president responded by claiming that Ukraine and Russia are both in need of support during this difficult period.³⁷ His statement paints both nations as victims

³² "U.S. Treasury Announces Unprecedented & Expansive Sanctions Against Russia, Imposing Swift and Severe Economic Costs," *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, February 24, 2022, [online](#).

³³ "Yang Jiechi Expounds China's Position of the Ukraine Situation," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, March 15, 2022, [online](#).

³⁴ "Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng Meets with Russian Ambassador to China Andrey Ivanovich Denisov," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, April 19, 2022, [online](#).

³⁵ "Fact Sheet: United States, G7 and EU Impose Severe and Immediate Costs on Russia," *The White House*, April 6, 2022, [online](#).

³⁶ "Readout of President Joseph R. Biden Jr. Call with President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China," *The White House*, March 18, 2022, [online](#).

³⁷ "President Xi Jinping Has a Video Call with U.S. President Joe Biden," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, March 19, 2022, [online](#).

of the conflict, which is a rational conclusion when one considers that the Ukrainian and Russian forces have both suffered heavy casualties, but it certainly downplays the Kremlin's role in planning, mobilizing, and initiating the invasion of its neighbor and, by extension, ignores Biden's view of Russia as the clear aggressor. In the same meeting, Xi insisted that the United States had "sent a wrong signal to 'Taiwan independence' forces," and asserted that the issue could stifle bilateral relations.³⁸ His straightforward jab at the issue of Taiwan, an issue he recognizes as one of the most pressing feuds between the United States and China, comes at a moment of incredible tension for the overall trilateral relationship. It is unclear whether the C.C.P. views the invasion of Ukraine as a possible catalyst for another standoff over Taiwan. It is likely, however, that President Xi sees China as being in a similar position to the one it was in after the 2014 annexation of Crimea. For the second time, China finds itself not wholly agreeing with Russian aggression but fully aware of how such aggression could rebalance the trilateral relationship. Still, while Russia's role as a tactically important neighbor has not changed, the United States remains one of China's most lucrative trading partners. Under these circumstances, the C.C.P.'s neutral stance is essentially acting as a diplomatic failsafe to ensure that neither Russia nor the United States can derail China's quest for regional security.

Conclusion

Though the trilateral relationship has long been the subject of intense speculation, much of which has portrayed Sino-Russian cooperation as being founded on an opposition to U.S. hegemony, a broader perspective of these nations' diplomatic behavior reveals a more complicated picture. The alignments between China, Russia, and the United States have not remained stable throughout the past thirty-three years, nor have they been predetermined by an intrinsic East-West divide. China and Russia have both altered their rhetoric and their approaches to hard power in pursuit of favorable positions within the global political landscape. Russia in particular has switched back and forth between heightened cooperation with either the United States or China in the hopes of gaining leverage within the trilateral relationship. On the occasions where China and Russia have taken rigid stances against the United States, they have typically done so to promote their regional security interests. In other realms of cooperation, such as economic and military deals, there has continually been a great deal of ambiguity and opportunism. Thus, one should refrain from believing that the development of a full Sino-Russian alliance is inevitable. Additionally, we should not assume that some insurmountable boundary has kept Chinese or Russian interests from converging with U.S. interests in recent history.

³⁸ "President Xi Jinping Has a Video Call with U.S. President Joe Biden," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, March 19, 2022.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Christian Fuentes of West Covina, California, earned a B.A. in History with a minor in Creative Writing (2023) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF). The essay published here originated in a seminar on Contemporary China offered by CSUF's History Department.*