China–Russia Relations in the Indo-Pacific after the Ukraine War: Unanticipated Hedging Opportunities for Moscow

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After invading Ukraine in February 2022, Russia faced isolation from the West and refocused on the Indo-Pacific. In this context, observers have noted an increasing strategic closeness between Moscow and Beijing, with some arguing the relationship has become a de facto alliance aimed at balancing against the United States (US).

The logic of systemic anti-US balancing in China–Russia relations is compelling: threatened by the West, Russia cultivates reliable alignment with China, which, also locked in long-term confrontation with the US, reciprocates by viewing Russia as its only great power ally. The structural imperatives of systemic balancing incentivise China–Russia strategic alignment and explain why it has survived the Ukraine war and the Western backlash.

Indeed, Xi Jinping reassured Vladimir Putin that "…the Chinese side stands ready to work with the Russian side to push for steady and long-term development of practical bilateral cooperation," promoting "…a proper settlement of the Ukraine crisis in a responsible manner." China–Russia bilateral trade hit $190 billion in 2022 (29% increase from 2021) and $218.2 billion in 2023, achieving the goal both set for 2024. Russia's imports of Chinese technology and electronics also soared. Military cooperation also progressed: in 2024, Russian and Chinese bombers were intercepted near Alaska for the first time, and the two countries conducted their first joint Coast Guard patrol in the Arctic Ocean, indicating Russia's willingness to enhance military cooperation with China, with China not turning its back on Moscow.

However, balancing logic captures only part of China–Russia relations. A closer look reveals a more complex pattern: China–Russia balancing against the US-led order coexists with Russia's regional hedging aimed at diversifying its economic, political, and security bets by engaging with China's actual or potential adversaries. Unlike balancing, which entails unequivocal strategic alignments aimed at checking and blocking a clearly identified rival, hedging denotes state behaviour that diversifies stakes by combining cooperation and competition, engagement and resistance, helping avoid taking one side at the expense of another. Hedging helps maintain diplomatic flexibility, improve strategic positions, and mitigate risks while keeping options open.

As a regional hedger, Russia has fostered cooperation with India, Southeast Asian states, and North Korea, not only to circumvent Western sanctions but also to mitigate its overdependence on China.

India effectively thwarted the Western energy embargo against Russia: it increased imports of Russian oil immensely, implemented alternative payment mechanisms, maintained trade relations and strategic energy projects, and played a key role in processing Russian crude,

re-exporting it to other countries, including European buyers who, wary of buying oil directly from Russia, appeared willing to purchase it after refinement in India.

During the 22nd India–Russia Annual Summit in July 2024, the two countries announced a deepened partnership, focusing on energy trade, defence cooperation, investment, infrastructure, agricultural trade, and technological cooperation. That year, Prime Minister Modi visited Russia twice (in July and October), reaffirming his commitment to the relationship. In April 2025, during the 8th Russia–India Working Group session in New Delhi, both sides agreed on six new strategic projects to boost bilateral cooperation, including energy collaboration, technological innovation, infrastructure development, trade and commerce, agricultural cooperation, and cultural and educational exchanges.

Like India, some Southeast Asian states approach Russia with strategic pragmatism. Shortly before the war (on 30 November 2021), Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan Phuc visited Moscow and pledged to deepen defence and security cooperation. On 20 June 2024, in the third year of Russia's war in Ukraine, Vietnamese President To Lam welcomed Putin in Hanoi and stated that his Russian counterpart had "…contributed to peace, stability, and development in the Asia-Pacific region and the world." The two leaders vowed to strengthen defence ties, signed multiple agreements, and discussed creating "…a reliable security architecture in the Asia-Pacific."

Moscow also sought to strengthen military ties with Indonesia by negotiating an air base in Papua province as part of its broader defence expansion in the Indo-Pacific. While Indonesia denied any formal agreement to host a Russian base, the two countries deepened military cooperation by conducting their first-ever bilateral exercise in the Java Sea near Surabaya in November 2024 and discussing defence technology and arms sales.

In parallel, relations between Russia and North Korea have expanded dramatically. On 18 June 2024, the two countries signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, including a mutual assistance clause if either party is attacked (Article 4). Moscow supplied North Korea with advanced military equipment, including air defence systems and missile technology, enhancing its defence capabilities. Russia also facilitated the unprecedented participation of North Korea's Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui in a BRICS event in Saint Petersburg in September 2024, helping break Pyongyang's isolation. North Korea allegedly became a crucial munitions supplier to Russia, and its troops were reportedly deployed to assist Russian forces in Ukraine.

The current geopolitical situation in the Indo-Pacific appears conducive to Russia's maintaining this two-level behaviour pattern of systemic balancing and regional hedging. While China is concerned about Russia's behaviour, it needs Moscow for its impending confrontation with the US. It quietly accepts these developments, worrying that if Russia withdraws from its partnerships with countries like India and Vietnam, the US will fill the void, which is worse for Beijing.

Simultaneously, Beijing's growing assertiveness in the region incentivises India, Vietnam, and other Southeast Asian states to seek closer ties with Moscow, recognising that unequivocal alignment with the US will antagonise China, which is not in their long-term

interests. For example, while India's concerns about China suggest alignment with the US, New Delhi is not interested in antagonising China beyond the point of no return, which stymies such alignment. In contrast, a closer partnership with Russia creates channels for engaging China and helps mitigate the risks of a China–India escalation. These multilayered geopolitical pressures create hedging opportunities for Russia, enhancing its autonomy vis-a-vis China. A similar logic applies to Vietnam. Donald Trump's foreign policy has increased geopolitical uncertainty, forcing Indo-Pacific states to diversify external relations, which gives Russia more room for hedging.

The implications of this two-level pattern for the Indo-Pacific are ambivalent. Its balancing component (i.e., deepening China–Russia alignment) will likely exacerbate great power rivalry. It will accelerate the disappearance of regional uncertainty about incipient power blocks, thus reducing regional power diffusion and making the regional environment more divisive. Hedging will likely have the opposite effect: fostering structural uncertainty, thereby delaying the transition from great power rivalry to open block-like hostility. Because it is easier to hedge between friendly states, Russia is not interested in an all-out confrontation between China and India or China and Vietnam, and it is likely to mitigate potential tensions between them.

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