

CAROL SAIVETZ: Welcome to the Starr Forum. I'm Carol Saivetz, senior advisor in the MIT Security Studies Program. And I'll be moderating today's session.

We couldn't have picked a more timely topic. When we picked the date and we picked the topic, we didn't know that Xi Jinping and President Biden would have met yesterday and that Xi Jinping would even be in the United States. Our focus today is on the US-- sorry-- on the Russia-Chinese relationship.

And the title of the panel is "A Permanent Partnership-- how Xi and Putin are shaping a Turbulent World." And our two speakers are Elizabeth Wishnick and Natasha Kuhrt. Liz will be speaking first. She is a senior research scientist for China studies at the Center for Naval Analyses. She's an expert on Sino-Russian relations, Chinese foreign policy, and Arctic strategy.

At CNA, Wishnick contributes her dual regional expertise on China and Russia, including professional proficiency in both languages, to research and analysis of Xi Jinping's risk-taking, Sino-Russian military cooperation, and China's Arctic Policy. She is also a senior research scholar at Columbia's Weatherhead East Asian Institute and professor at Montclair State University where she teaches political science. And her CV goes on so I don't think I need to read all of it but I'm delighted that Liz is here.

Our second speaker is Dr. Natasha Kuhrt, who's a senior lecturer in international peace and security in the Department of War Studies at King's College London. She holds a BA in Russian and German language and literature, an MA in Soviet studies, and a PhD in Russian policy towards China and Japan from UCL.

She has written a number of articles, and reports, and book chapters on global security and international law as well on Russia's relations with China and Asia. She is currently working on two co-authored books, one for Polity Press on Russian foreign policy and another for Edinburgh University on Russia-Chinese relations.

I really would like to welcome all of you to the session. And Liz and Natasha, we Thank you for speaking with us. Liz, you are first.

ELIZABETH WISHNICK: Thank you to the MIT Starr Forum for organizing this timely event. It's a pleasure to talk about this important topic with you. So I'm going to be focusing more on the China side of the equation. And I'm going to address two questions that we typically hear about China-Russia relations when we look from the Chinese perspective.

So regarding the war on Ukraine, since China appears to be supporting Russia tacitly at least, are they forming an alliance? And the second question we often hear is, given Russia's ongoing debacle in Ukraine, its inability to achieve its desired aims, does China still need Russia as a strategic partner? So these are the two extreme questions that we hear raised when we discuss the China-Russia partnership.

So in my comments, I'm going to try to address these questions and, in doing that, to make some broader points about the staying power of the China-Russia partnership. And typically, when we examine the China-Russia relationship, we focus on geopolitics, that both of them are drawn to each other despite their differences because of the pressure they both feel from the United States and the West.

And so geopolitical factors often are given pride of place in explaining why these two very different states are forming a strategic partnership. But I argue that this emphasis on geopolitics obscures other factors, the domestic sources of their partnership both being very concerned about regime security for their authoritarian governments. Both see the collapse of the Soviet Union as the biggest calamity of the 20th century. And they want to avoid a similar development, albeit for a different reasons, in their respective countries.

And there's also the power of ideas, normative factors. They have a vision of how they want to engage in global governance. And they want to participate in rule making, not just be accepting the rules as laid down by Western states.

And so for these reasons, Xi Jinping's Russia policy is unlikely to change regardless of what happens on the battlefield in Ukraine. I would argue that China wants to avoid, on the one hand, an alliance with Russia-- China has a long-stated opposition to forming alliances-- but also wants to support Russia and avoid its defeat in Ukraine.

The China-Russia partnership from my perspective has been deepening. It's not a transactional partnership. It has real staying power. And China has accepted some real costs to its own foreign policy goals to maintain this partnership. And I'm going to talk about those costs in a few minutes.

So how does China perceive Russia? The Chinese ambassador to the US Qin Gang, also former foreign minister now disappeared, called Russia in an interview with the US media an asset for China. And this was in response to questions early on in the war in Ukraine about how China viewed Russia given that it was stuck on the battlefield and under sanction.

And so I think this is an important point that China has stuck with Russia because it sees benefits to doing so. It sees some real opportunities in that partnership. Why? Well, if you look at the map, you see a very long border between China and Russia, 2,600 miles. They both had militarized this border during the Soviet era. China had to relocate its industries to the interior because of the threat it felt from the Soviet Union. And so they don't want to repeat that experience of conflict and militarization.

And for China to achieve its goals of being a naval power, it has to be able to reorient its military forces away from this border because if there's a conflict with Russia, then China has to be more of a continental power than a naval power. So it has real implications for China's global strategic position. China also seeks to diversify the resources that it imports. It has a preference for land-based supply routes to a certain extent, although the disruptions of such routes of late have caused some reconsideration.

But nonetheless, China gets an increasing amount of energy resources and also some food and some water resources or their equivalent in the sense of timber resources from Russia. And so these resources are an important aspect of their trade. And they also have some shared goals, not identical. They agree to disagree on a number of areas, especially in the Indo-Pacific, but they do have a shared vision of how they want to participate in global rule making. And I think that brings them together.

However, in terms of Ukraine, China has stated it has a bottom line. That bottom line appears to be nuclear use. So China has not spoken out about any human rights abuses, about targeting of civilians or any such developments, but they have said that the use of nuclear weapons or the targeting of nuclear power plants would be unacceptable.

And while the West would have wanted greater cooperation from China on Ukraine, this is still considered an important bottom line and has prevented the conflict from escalating further although Russia has brought tactical nuclear weapons into Belarus and there have been some battles around nuclear power plants in Ukraine. So there was this bottom line.

In China, the issue of China-Russia relations and the war in Ukraine has been censored, but there still is a certain amount of discussion that is tolerated. And you have certain former officials in China who have been able to make some critical remarks not about Chinese policy toward Russia but about Russian policies in Ukraine and talking about how the war in Ukraine damages Chinese economic interests, China's support for Russia in this instance isolates China internationally, and some more specific criticisms about Russian behavior, disregarding the rights of neighbors and violating UN resolutions.

So you have certain highly placed individuals in China who have been able to make some critical comments. But the official viewpoint is that it's the fault of the West that there is this war, the West fuels the fire by supplying weapons to Ukraine, and that this conflict, while undesirable, not what China would like to see as Chinese officials like to state, however it does have the effect of relieving some pressure from China temporarily, although Russia, China's strategic partner, ends up feeling isolated and facing a difficult economic environment.

There have been some criticisms of the Russian performance on the battlefield but with the understanding that it's a difficult battlefield but overall confidence that Russia eventually will at least maintain its position, if not prevail.

So what does this tell us about the Sino-Russian partnership? So right before the Russians invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Putin visited Beijing for the Olympics and the two countries signed a statement that is typically referred to in the media as the no limits partnership because they stated that there should be no limits to their relationship. But this did not mean there would be no parameters to it.

This came from a discussion in Chinese circles about those very parameters. And Chinese officials were trying to avoid pinning down whether or not-- they wanted an alliance. There were some academics who advocated for this but the Chinese officials felt that this was unnecessary because there was a limitless perspective for the relationship, not that there would be never any bottom lines to it, just that it had a bright future.

The academics in China thought that this was not a good term, that they should really focus on the drivers of the partnership. And so because of all the negative commentary outside of China about this term, if you look at the joint statement that Putin and Xi signed in March of 2023, they don't use this language anymore.

They talk about a superior relationship. And so this is an effort to try to explain where the China-Russia partnership fits into the hierarchy of China's foreign relations. And Russia-China relations is at the very top. And so that's why they chose this term superior.

But what about the question I posed in the beginning? Is it an alliance? So my colleagues at CNA and I wrote a study where we outlined the criteria for alliance. And we determined that the relationship falls short in many ways. In terms of the jointness of military planning and military cooperation, it falls short.

There's no clause where each party is bound to help the other one and so on. But I would argue that this really does not matter because both Russian and Chinese officials periodically float the idea of an alliance.

And just the ambiguity about the partnership has a deterrent value of its own where it's not clear what the parameters of the partnership are so this increases its deterrent power, much like the way the US is not clear about whether or not it's going to intervene militarily on behalf of Taiwan in case China attacks. So there is this strategic ambiguity about the partnership that increases its deterrent value even without a full scale alliance.

And so for China, I would say that Russia is a consequential partner though a problematic one because China is very much integrated in the global economy. If we see Xi Jinping coming to talk to Biden despite many problems in the relationship, this is because the Chinese economy has been suffering of late because of all of the various disruptions, including the trade tensions with the United States.

So as a state that's very much integrated in the global economy, China needs more stability. And Russia has been acting in ways that have harmed that. But nonetheless, because of all the reasons I outlined earlier, China has a commitment to this partnership.

Because of Ukraine, the two countries have boosted their economic partnership with Russia under sanctions. Russia has reoriented a certain amount of its energy exports to Asia and China has benefited but perhaps not as much as India. India has increased its oil purchases much more than China has.

But nonetheless, China now buys almost 19% of its oil from Russia, about 25% of its coal and pipeline gas. And I would say coal is a very important indicator because about half of China's energy consumption comes from coal. And so 25% is quite a large amount in this context.

Other areas of technological cooperation have been proceeding nuclear energy, biotech, telecoms, and so on. But if you look in the context of China's other economic relationships, Russia still ranks relatively low, number 10 after Malaysia, which is a much smaller country, though trade may reach \$200 billion by the end of this year.

Even though Russia is being constrained by sanctions and is facing a lot of economic difficulties, I would still not argue that China has made Russia its vassal. I think there's more interdependence there than meets the eye that China needs these resources it gets from Russia but just doesn't like to talk about that dependence.

And I think it's the concern about dependence that is leading China to shy away from the power of Siberia to a gas pipeline that Putin has been advocating and to look more towards Gulf states to balance the energy ties that have grown much closer to Russia.

Finally, I'd just like to make two more points, one about the consequences for China and then the other about the military side of things. So even though China basically sees Russia as an asset, the partnership in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has had many negative consequences for Chinese foreign policy.

We see this especially in Europe where China is now seen as a supporter of Russia's disregard for accepted boundaries of states. This has had big impact on China's economic ties in Europe and also on its aspirations in the Arctic, which are now mostly constrained to its involvement in the Russian Arctic.

The conflict in Ukraine has also had a big impact on China. China and Ukraine had had a good relationship prior to the war. China had invested in ports that Russia went on to destroy. China received agricultural resources from Ukraine. And China has suffered from the end of the Black Sea grain deal. Russia's targeted a grain storage site in Odessa where Chinese grain was contained. China was the single largest recipient of grain from that deal so China has had direct negative consequences from the conflict.

And then the Global South. So the Global South has experienced higher food and energy prices as a result of the conflict. And I think we need to see China's position on Gaza in terms of that, trying to recoup some of that lost influence in the Global South by taking the positions that it has on Gaza.

And so what are the security implications then of this partnership? Can China be a mediator as it claims to be-- put out a peace plan for Ukraine that really was a non-starter because it didn't call for Russian forces to leave Ukraine-- or is it an enabler of this conflict much as the way it accuses the West of fueling the fire? So a lot of attention has been placed on whether or not China is providing direct lethal aid to Russia.

But I think also this is beside the point because China can provide a lot of dual use support and has provided I would say about 70% of that without incurring the direct reputational costs of direct military aid. And so if you look at some of the items that Russia purchases from China, semiconductors, nearly 80% come from China. And they might not be the most advanced. They might not be the best semiconductors but they fill a big gap for Russia.

Drones. China has claimed that certain companies have stopped sending drones to Russia but you do still find them in the battlefield in Ukraine. And that's because there are many ties to third countries. And Iran is playing an interesting role there.

We see the burgeoning China, Iran, Russia cooperation that we also see in the Middle East. And also Hong Kong has a role as an intermediary. And then there are Russian drone volunteers who go on shopping trips to China and buy these drones. And so there are a lot of different routes where dual use technologies, not just electronics but things like heavy trucks, can get to Russia and play a real significant role in the battlefield.

So I'll just conclude here by saying that the partnership with Russia is a big priority for China, despite the fallout for certain foreign policy goals from the war in Ukraine. And that's because there's a certain amount of interdependence between China and Russia, and some shared goals despite differences in many areas. So the limits to the partnership have always been apparent. But I think sometimes we underestimate its staying power. So I'll stop there. Thank you.

**NATASHA
KUHRT:**

So I think what Liz was saying about the fact that this is not purely a transactional relationship is very important. And so I'd like to briefly take us back to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening up of the Russian Far East, which is something that I very much focused on in my PhD. And I think the security, if you like, around that very long border was a very, very important factor in the two countries essentially deciding to effect this kind of rapprochement.

Of course, the rapprochement had already been begun by Gorbachev in 1989 so, again, I think we need to get away from this idea that this is a partnership that has in a way only just begun or that it only began in 2014. This has been a gradually evolving relationship, evolving in many dimensions since 1991.

But initially, Russia was quite ambivalent about relations with China and actually kind of viewed China-- of course, China being a very different type of country economically and so on in 1991-- but the elites in Russia tend to view China as a sort of economic dwarf if you like and tended to think about rapprochement with Japan rather than with China.

But for various reasons, not least to do with the need to secure hard currency and China needed Russian weapons, that initially gave a boost to relations and I think very much helped to revive the Russian military industrial complex as well. In fact, I think Chinese companies almost singlehandedly in effect revived the Russian Defense industry. So there were many ways in which they needed each other though as well. The Chinese traders in the Russian Far East, the need for consumer products which China provided and so on.

So in those first days after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were many ways in which they supported each other if you like, even sometimes more at an informal level. There was also a sense in which I think Russia, of course, was very much turned in on itself for the first few years in terms of foreign policy and so on. And I think it didn't really have a strong sense of what it really wanted and this, I think, being overshadowed by the Chechen War and so on, the two Chechen wars.

So then, obviously, when Putin comes to power and, of course, also tames the oligarchs if you like and brings them to heel, and then we get this kind of fusion if you like of state and commercial interests. And I think that's of course, the whole relationship has, as well as revolving around weapons, has also revolved very much around energy. And of course, that has also, to a large extent, meant the enrichment of elites in Russia, mainly those in Putin's circle.

And of course, you know Russia-China trade in raw materials, its exports of raw materials and so on, has greatly increased in the direction of China. So Liz's point about China, of course wanting to avoid too much dependence on Russia is correct. So Russia is just one of many suppliers of raw materials but in Russia, going back to the mid 1990s, for example there's always been this kind of narrative of the fear of Russia becoming a kind of raw materials appendage of China.

That was then, essentially-- that kind of narrative was really silenced along with any narratives that really depicted China as any kind of threat. I would say from the late 1990s it became more or less taboo to, at least in mainstream media, to talk about the threat from China.

So whereas in the 1990s that was quite a prevalent kind of image of China as a threat, particularly in the Russian Far East, but not only as you come into the 2000s, that kind of narrative disappears.

And so it is with some irony that we now see, of course, despite Russia obviously being very much concerned to present itself as this kind of hyperpower, if you like, at the same time, it has become very much dependent on China in terms, certainly in terms of energy, despite the fact that, as Liz pointed out, China also fears overdependence on Russia.

I mean I think it is an inescapable fact that Russia is really becoming dangerously dependent on China. Of course, since the invasion of Ukraine, since the reinvasion of Ukraine let's say in 2022, it's not only China that's buying cheap crude oil. India has also been buying cheap crude oil.

We have the issue as well of these gas pipelines. So Russia thought it could kind of play off Europe against Asia I think at one point. But obviously, now it's completely cut off from European gas markets more or less completely. And it's really just now quite dangerously dependent on one buyer, one buyer which can I think probably dictate the terms of the contract.

Power of Siberia 1, which transports gas through Siberia almost exclusively to China, this was in negotiation for a very long time and China was able to drive down the price. They've talked about Power of Siberia 2, which would link up through Mongolia to China. But again, I think there's the problem that China can drive down the price. But equally, as Liz said, there's the issue that China is somewhat ambivalent about wanting to be locked into another kind of relationship if you like with Russia.

And Russia, in a sense, is really just competing now with others, with other countries, to sell gas to China, so Turkmenistan but also you have, obviously, the US, Qatar, Australia, and so on.

I think one area that is interesting to look at is Central Asia. In Central Asia, I think this is where we really see the sense in which these shared kind of antipathies if you like to liberal democracy and externally sponsored regime change, the so-called colored revolutions, come into play.

And so in Central Asia via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which is built on resistance to the so-called three evils of separatism, fundamentalism, and terrorism, this is really where Russia and China come together with four out of the five central Asian states to form the SCO. India and Pakistan joined a few years ago and Iran is joining, too.

While we shouldn't overestimate the influence of this organization, it's a forum in which China has kind of, if you like, as some people have suggested, practiced foreign policy over the decades. It was formed in 2001. And China now is very much using the organization to promote its ideas about global civilizational dialogue and so on and so forth. And so it kind of acts also as a way for China to kind of, if you like, transmit its ideas about foreign policy thinking in an area which obviously has traditionally, if you like, been an area of Russian influence.

Of course, these countries have their own agency. And they have been, to some extent, trying to diversify relations away from Russia and to some extent from China. But I think if we talk about the Belt and Road Initiative, it isn't just about economics because it's also obviously part of China's bid to project itself as a global responsible power. And it kind of links up together with the Global Security Initiative which explicitly rejects the Western rules-based order and then the Global Civilization Initiative and the Global Development Initiative.

And this is a very sort of ambitious, quite well thought through I think project, obviously still in the early days. But Russia cannot compete with China in this kind of narrative that China is able and story that China can tell, if you like. That's a very quite a coherent kind of narrative and, obviously, is very much aligned to its economic ambitions around the world.

And China's thinking has gained traction among many countries of the Global South, of course providing that developmental path without lectures on human rights. And I think Russia at some level perhaps envies this ability that China has. What Russia can do is to-- it cannot offer the same kinds of benefits of course. But at the UN, I think you can see the way in which Russia tries to bring in these narratives about Western colonialism and so on. But it's a much more kind of in a way negative sort of narrative that Russia puts forward.

And so I think-- and we're seeing a much more concerted-- we've seen a much more concerted kind of campaign, a much more assertive Russia within the UN Security Council even when we're just talking about UN peacekeeping operations which, in the past, were not really areas that Russia, for example, pushed back on. But of course, what Russia's been doing in Africa makes these kinds of peacekeeping operations a lot more significant than they previously were.

And if we talk about Africa, I think that's an interesting area in the sense that given China's big presence there and Russia's insertion of itself as a sort of niche security provider in a number of these countries, we saw, for example, in the Central African Republic that I think it was seven or eight Chinese workers at a gold mine were killed.

And it was unclear who was to blame. But it seemed to emerge that the Wagner Group was probably culpable. So these kinds of potential conflicts of interest if you want to call them that and dangerous clashes could become perhaps more prevalent over time.

So I think to come back to so what does Russia get from China, I mean, clearly, Moscow was able to launch the invasion of Ukraine safe in the knowledge that its strategic rear in the Russian Far East was secure. And that isn't nothing. And of course, we've seen also the way in which Moscow deployed a large number of troops-- excuse me-- from the Russian Far East to the Ukrainian battlefield. And that would hardly have been possible 20 odd years ago. So just that fact itself is of great significance I think.

In terms of possible areas of friction, I mean I've outlined a possible area in Africa, for example. There are other areas. So for example, the Arctic. And Liz might want to say something more about that where essentially China has wanted for some time to develop a much stronger economic and political presence and Russia has needed the financial support for its developmental projects there.

And so China has extended credit and loans. And they've sought to jointly develop Arctic fossil fuels. And Russia obviously has, of course, also been militarizing that region with new installations, increasing air and sea activity in Arctic waters.

So, to some extent, they need each other to further their Arctic goals. And China has, of course, presented itself as a near Arctic state which I think Russia found quite irritating and disturbing for some time but it seems that Russia has, if you like, consented to or accepted in essence that it kind of needs China in the Arctic despite its concerns around sovereignty in that area and despite I think Russian concerns about what China's longer term motives might be.

And of course, we can talk about Central Asia where there's always been that sense in which China is the kind of banker and Russia is the sheriff, as some people have put it, that kind of division of labor if you like. I think that may change. I don't know when it might change. Obviously, with the Belt and Road Initiative, security is going to be key. I don't at the moment think that China is going to be stepping up to fill any kind of security vacuum.

And actually, I think that despite some predictions that Russia was going to just give up on Central Asia and that, essentially, Russia was too preoccupied with the war in Ukraine and so on to do anything much in Central Asia, it seems that, actually to the contrary, Russia has refocused on Central Asia, I mean not only because of the focus on Central Asia that's been coming from the US and Europe. We've seen Macron visiting and so on as well.

It's obviously not just to do with that. But for example, in Kyrgyzstan, Putin has recently visited Kyrgyzstan and they've agreed to further develop Russian military facilities there. And Russia will assist Kyrgyzstan in strengthening the armed forces as well. So I think those kind of ideas that Russia could somehow be written off in Central Asia have not really not really materialized. And it's quite clear that China isn't ready or willing to take up any kind of security role.

So I think, ultimately, this certainly is not just a transactional relationship. It's a relationship that has been evolving for quite some time. Clearly, China is concerned about what's happening in Ukraine but happy to project this kind of neutral stance, certainly on the international level. Obviously, at home, it projects a different view.

They do come together, Russia and China, in their view of the war essentially as being a proxy war and being a war against Western hegemonism. So while China does profess to be neutral, I think it seems to be clear that they have a very similar view of the kind of underlying causes of this war despite Chinese concerns about sovereignty and so on.

And so yes, I don't think it's an alliance. Otherwise China might have come to Russia's assistance. And I don't think it will ever be an alliance. The military level of cooperation is not at such a level that we can really call it an alliance relationship.

But I think, as Liz said, the ambiguity inherent in this relationship, which has been, I think Putin called it a flexible strategic partnership at one point, the idea of keeping the door open to an alliance or looking as if they are keeping the door open to an alliance is obviously quite useful or has been useful in the past. I'm not sure whether it will continue to be as useful but that's something that maybe we can discuss. Thank you.

**CAROL
SAIVETZ:**

We have any number of questions but I'd like to usurp the chair for the prerogatives of the chair for the moment to ask both of you, because you both refer to this partnership. There are mutual benefits.

There's some potential competition, et cetera. What do you think are the outer limits of this relationship? Is there one line that if either of them crossed or, for Liz and for Natasha, Liz for China and Natasha for Russia, is there a line that, aside from the use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine, is there a line that if Russia crossed it or if China crossed it they would sort of throw up their hands and say we better rethink exactly what we're doing?

And second I guess to that is Xi Jinping has just met with President Biden. He's in the United States. Liz, do you think that that's a signal to Russia that there are really limits as opposed to it being limitless, that there are limits to this relationship between Russia and China and that Russia shouldn't get too comfortable with this? So I don't know who wants to go first but you can both unmute.

**NATASHA
KUHRT:**

Liz, would you like to?

**ELIZABETH
WISHNICK:**

Yes. Thank you, Carol. Great questions. I think the nuclear issue is the main red line in terms of Ukraine. So that was what I was focusing on. Of course, China's territorial integrity would be the real issue. If Russia were to engage with pro-independence forces in Taiwan or take a different stand on Xinjiang or Tibet, I mean these are quite farfetched ideas but I think some area where China really considers a core interest at stake.

There have been times when Russia has not quite responded in the way that was fully desired. So Russia has quite close security and economic ties with Vietnam, which is a competitor of China's. And so there have been some disagreements over where Russian-Vietnamese energy exploration can occur in the South China Sea.

Russia has not fully accepted China's position on South China Sea territorial delimitation and so on. But these have not been welcomed in China, these kinds of actions, but they're not yet at a point where the two countries would really be in conflict over it. But if Russia took these core interests a step further and to counter Chinese interests directly, that would be a real issue.

In terms of the US, I don't think that this visit was meant to signal anything to Russia. I think it was, for Xi Jinping, it was an opportunity to help rebuild economic ties not just with the US but globally at a time when the Chinese economy is struggling. One out of every five young people is out of work. Their foreign investors are leaving. And so it was a way to backstop that trend and to show that China is a global player, basically. I don't think it had anything to do with the Russia relationship.

CAROL

OK. Natasha?

SAIVETZ:

NATASHA

OK. Yes. I was going to say Vietnam. And for China, that obviously has been potential area of friction. I mean I think the Arctic has also been an area where there's potential friction.

KUHRT:

I think that would be a red line for Russia in that, obviously, unlike Central Asia, which, of course, Russia could be sensitive about that too, but the Arctic is actually obviously a part of Russia and a very important part of Russia historically to the extent that I think that were China also, for example, to with its research stations and so on in the Arctic, I think there have been suggestions that there might be some kind of espionage afoot. And so those kinds of issues I think would be a red line.

I mean there have been-- I don't know enough about the Arctic but I know that there's been quite a downturn in their joint scientific cooperation in the last year or so. And I'm not sure whether it's to do with insufficient levels of trust and concerns around espionage but there have been suggestions that it could be. So although Russia is happy to cooperate with China in the Arctic, I think if China were to go too far with its research, that could be an issue.

The Russian Far East as well I think, although they obviously have demarcated their border, China has-- I mean there's been quite a big furor around perhaps overhyping of this issue of China publishing these maps which I think it's actually been publishing quite some time, certainly domestically, which show areas which now belong to Russia to be Chinese. And of course, they are areas that Russia took.

I don't actually think that would in itself be enough to damage relations. But I think were China to-- there have been big tensions around the Russian Far East in the 1990s before the demarcation.

And so you can't rule out that happening again. I mean I think they would be very careful not to let that happen. But I think that's one area where I've always noticed talking to, when one could do that, talking to people in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for example in Moscow.

That's always been a sensitive area, this idea that the Chinese are taking over the Russian Far East. I mean not taking it over in terms of actual people coming in, moving in to the Russian Far East, because I don't think it's a particularly attractive place to live, but in terms of essentially taking resources out of the Russian Far East, Chinese farmers moving in, leasing the land, and farming there and also China essentially kind of just stripping it of resources. And I think that those sorts of issues could be magnified, I suppose, potentially.

And do you want me to talk about the US visit? I mean there were a few comments on that.

CAROL Sure. Absolutely.

SAIVETZ:

NATASHA Yeah. I mean, obviously, it's quite early days. I don't know if they'll comment on it further. I mean I think they're
KUHRT: kind of trying to play it down. That was my impression was they were trying to play it down and just focusing really on the fact that Biden called Xi Jinping a dictator. That seems to be one of the main, unsurprisingly, points for them to want to highlight in Russia.

But I think the other thing was somebody-- I think it was Fyodor Lukianoff-- suggested that this was similar to the kind of Brezhnev-Nixon visit, so the idea that, obviously, Biden is Nixon and Xi Jinping is Brezhnev. So I guess there's a kind of feeling that this is maybe becoming a G2 world even if they're not really actually articulating it in that way.

CAROL Great. That's great. That's really interesting. Thank you. We've had a couple of questions about both the Chinese
SAIVETZ: and the Russian relationship with India and where India factors into the bilateral relationship between Russia and China, one about Russian arms transfers, and one about just sort of the contentious nature of China-India versus Russia-India going forward. So I don't know who wants to take the question first but jump in please. Liz, you want to start?

NATASHA You want to?

KUHRT:

ELIZABETH Sure. I think one concern that India has is a deepening partnership between China and Russia could make Russia
WISHNICK: less impartial on the China-India border dispute. Russia has tried to stay out of this dispute and to keep good relations with both, but there is this concern that this may not be tenable in the future. So that's certainly a concern.

I saw one question about US leverage because the US and India have been developing security ties through the quad. I think that it's not really that the US has leverage. I think that India has alternatives, but the quad is really for the global China threat that India feels while the border is not an area where the US has leverage. That's an area where Russia is important.

And so if India is trying also to square the circle and keep ties with Russia stable while engaging with the US and the quad, I think it's because of the differences between India's regional and global security needs.

NATASHA Yeah. I mean, on India, I think that India has probably less of a role to play now in that kind of triangle if you want
KUHRT: to call it that than it did before. It has less value to Russia. I think now with the strengthening of the Russia-China relationship, I think that India is just a bit less important to Russia.

I think also, although it's right what you're saying, Liz, about the kind of global value to India, if you like, of the quad, I mean I think India has found it very difficult to balance its role within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its relations with Russia against its relationship with the US. And that has, obviously, also complicated things in terms of for Russia. Russia dislikes India's role there in the quad. It has very much railed against the Indo-Pacific formulation if you like, echoing Chinese rhetoric around that.

And it has very much come out as saying, well, the Indo-Pacific formulation, the Indo-Pacific strategy and all these minilaterals and so on are, essentially, it's all an artificial construct and it's a destructive concept and so on. I'm not saying that that in and of itself would harm relations. But I think Russia is just seeing everything now through the prism of the West.

And I think India has also found it very difficult. I think India is going through a difficult time really trying to balance those commitments with the US and so on. And so I don't know. I mean I think Russia before would have tried to maybe mediate between China and India. I'm not so sure now about that.

CAROL

SAIVETZ:

Great. Thank you both. So we've had a couple of questions about North Korea and where North Korea fits into this picture. One question asked, what about this seemingly close relationship now between North Korea and Russia, the provision of the munitions, et cetera, and how does China feel about that? And then somebody asked a more general question about where does North Korea fit into the Sino-Russian relationship competition, what have you, and is it changing?

ELIZABETH

WISHNICK:

I think this is an area that, where China is concerned, Kim Jong Un paid a visit to Putin in September, given the red carpet and everything. And China would have to worry that this is going to embolden Kim in some way where he would become more troublesome with his testing or other activities, although perhaps it takes some pressure off China if it's Kim that's supplying ammunition to Russia and China's no longer being pressured to do so.

I think China is uncomfortable when it's not included in discussions with the North Koreans just in the same way that when Trump engaged with Kim that China was not happy about it. And so they want to be included and they want to have a say in what happens in North Korea because it's an important neighbor for them in terms of the negative consequences of activities in the neighborhood. So it would have to be concerning.

I think also North Korea is a cautionary example for those who believe that Russia's growing economic dependence on China will give China the ability to settle the conflict in Ukraine, for example, because North Korea is the country in the world that is most dependent economically on China. And China cannot enforce its will in North Korea. So I think we should keep that in mind when we think of the limits of China's influence despite the growing economic relationship between China and Russia.

CAROL

SAIVETZ:

Natasha.

NATASHA

KUHRT:

Yeah. I mean, obviously, Russia has a border with North Korea and it was always very concerned in the past about any kind of crisis on the Peninsula because it would actually potentially directly affect Russia, refugee flows and so on. But it doesn't seem to be thinking about that lately.

There's all sorts of ways in which Russia has used and might still use North Korea, not just getting ammunition from North Korea but also it has in the past in the Russian Far East used-- well, the North Korean government has made money from the timber industry by essentially deploying North Koreans in the timber industry in the Russian Far East and making money out of that, although because of UN sanctions I think they all had to leave.

I was reading something which hadn't really had completely confirmed but recently which suggested that some of these workers were returning to the Russian Far East in some kind of clandestine arrangement between Russia and Pyongyang but I'm not 100% sure about that. I don't know if Liz knows.

But this was an arrangement whereby these workers are essentially paid-- they're almost like slaves actually, being paid very, very little and living in almost like a kind of prison labor camp. And so apart from the kind of obviously regional security issues, there are these other issues around, if you like, human security.

**CAROL
SAIVETZ:**

Right. Thank you. So one of our viewers asks a question that sort of relates to my initial question. What would happen do you think if China were to invade Taiwan and what would that do to the relationship? How would Russia react? Obviously, China would have reacted. So Liz, I'm not sure this is a question for you.

But Natasha, how do you think Russia would react and does it show the limits of partnership? Would Russia want to get dragged into that conflict the same way? I mean China has sort of been behind the scenes in Ukraine but not obviously actively involved.

**NATASHA
KUHRT:**

I mean, just on a kind of practical level, I don't know what Russia could contribute. I suppose it could contribute something but it's not really a Pacific power. I mean it can help with joint bomber patrols and so on. But I don't think it's a strong enough power in the Pacific to-- I mean it might help enable China, but I'm not sure what it could actually do because the modernization of the Pacific fleet has been very partial and very slow.

And I just don't think that Russia would be capable of doing anything much apart from giving China the green light and not standing in its way. I don't know if Liz would differ.

**ELIZABETH
WISHNICK:**

I would say that Russia could create some kind of distracting conflict situation elsewhere near Japan, in the Arctic, in some other part of the world where-- the Middle East, contributes to some activity going on there where Western forces would be divided.

But I think how this question is answered depends on what happens in Ukraine because if Russia, for example, is defeated and is considerably weakened, I'm not sure Russia would want to see China recover Taiwan because that would leave the Russian Far East as the last remaining territories belonging to the Chinese empire that China had not recovered-- or supposedly belonging to the Chinese let me say.

So I think there would be some real concern there in that kind of a situation. So this conflict in Ukraine I think matters not just for Europe but I think it matters globally in terms of how different states will respond in that kind of scenario.

**CAROL
SAIVETZ:**

So can I push you a little bit on that? So if Ukraine were to go even more badly than it's already going for Russia, if it looked like there was some kind of loss of Crimea, some kind of imminent defeat for Russia, how do you think the Chinese would react?

Would they back away from it and say, well, it's your problem, it's not ours? Would they try to bolster Putin's stature even as the defeat was going forward? I mean it's not clear to me how much of a stake they actually have in what happens in Ukraine.

ELIZABETH WISHNICK: Well, China has never recognized the breakaway in the territories that Russia claims to have annexed. It never recognized Crimea, or Donetsk, Luhansk, or any of the newer ones. So they can claim to support Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. And they signed an agreement with the previous Ukrainian government in 2013 where they pledged that. And they also pledged to protect Ukraine from any nuclear threat in that agreement.

So I think it puts China in a very difficult position if they're going to take any step beyond what they've already taken. I agree with what Natasha said earlier that we're not going to see Chinese boots on the ground in Donetsk anytime soon.

I mean the limits of what China might be able to do is to create some kind of incident elsewhere where that could give Russia some breathing space but I don't even know that they would-- I don't think China instrumentalizes its core interests in that manner to protect Russia. I think it would be a very unfavorable development for Chinese foreign policy but I'm not sure how they would respond to it. That's a very difficult question.

CAROL SAIVETZ: Thanks. Yeah. So somebody else asked about the alternative payment system that Russia and China seem to be putting together to use the yuan instead of the dollar, et cetera. Could both of you comment on that and how you see that progressing down the road? I would think it would help solidify the relationship between the two powers but does it pull them away from the global trading system? Somebody. One of you want to start?

NATASHA KUHRT: I'd have to say that's not something that I've been following that much. I mean I'm kind of skeptical about it. I mean, I know that they have been increasing their use of the yuan and so on. But as far as I know, I mean I don't think that it's necessarily in China's interests going forward. I don't know what you think, Liz.

ELIZABETH WISHNICK: I think China wants to reduce the weight of the dollar internationally and to encourage alternative currencies. But its own currency is not convertible and so it has a difficult time moving this kind of an agenda forward under those circumstances. And for Russia also, it wasn't that beneficial apart from relieving the hard currency crunch in the short term because China's currency is not convertible.

So that means that if Russia gets yuan, it has to buy goods from China. And so that's fine now when it can't really buy goods from many countries, but it might not be fine in the future. And also a lot of trade is not priced in rubles and yuan. It's priced in dollars and euros. And so I think we're a long way from where these dual currency settling arrangements become some kind of alternative currency.

CAROL SAIVETZ: Great. So we have time for one more question depending on how long your answers are. Somebody asked about how China's support for Russia and the war in Ukraine has damaged its reputation in the Global South. And I wanted to take it a step further and say have all these issues between Russia and China damaged either of them?

Does it help them expand their position in the Global South? Are they looking as if they're standing up for the little guy? I mean, there's been a lot of talk even in the last couple of weeks about how each of them has responded to the war in Gaza has helped their standing in the Global South. So how do you see that going forward? And is that the next area maybe of competition between the two of them? I don't know who wants to go first. Natasha.

**NATASHA
KUERT:**

I can say something about, yeah, I mean I mentioned about Africa and the potential for clashes there between Russia and China. I mean, I think, obviously, the whole term the Global South is kind of tricky but I just-- you know, I mean, China clearly has, as I said before, quite a coherent story to tell when it's speaking to the countries of the Global South because China is also a country of the Global South in essence. I mean, China has that dual identity.

It's a member of the P5 but it actually it also kind of identifies itself or self-identifies as a country of the Global South and as a developing country, which gives it I think that kind of added value at the UN along with, obviously, its developmental clout, which Russia doesn't really have.

But Russia is obviously able to appeal to certain leaders I think on the basis of-- I mean, to be honest, just in a very basic way the West has not really provided security. The UN is not able to provide security. In some cases, for example, they've actually exacerbated security problems. And so Russia's just coming in and saying, well, we can help you with security. So it's quite a basic kind of provision really of a service that some countries in Africa need.

I will just quote from the Ghanaian president who said when Ethiopia and Tigray are fighting, we don't ask you who you support. OK. That's the Ghanaian president, but I think there's a sense certainly in a number of countries of the Global South that they're having a huge amount of pressure put on them by some Western countries to essentially declare what side they're on. And they feel that kind of pressure is unfair.

And so while it doesn't mean that they necessarily feel great warmth towards Russia or perhaps even China, I think some of their speeches, and so on, and perhaps reluctance to condemn Russian aggression comes more from, obviously, in some cases, a sense of antipathy towards the West because of RTP, these kind of what they see as sort of excessive importance given to human rights and so on, but also being told that they have to kind of declare for one side or the other. They're saying, well, maybe it's a conflict that's actually quite far away for us as well.

So I think it's difficult to really summarize or to speak on behalf of all of the countries of the Global South because they can be quite different. For example, Kenya I think voted differently and so on. But I think there is-- I think we have been maybe a little bit too look smug perhaps at times and also a little bit unaware of how some of our messaging comes across.

**CAROL
SAIVETZ:**

Great. Liz, you get the last word.

**ELIZABETH
WISHNICK:**

I would--

**CAROL
SAIVETZ:**

Uh oh. Liz froze.

ELIZABETH WISHNICK: The issues resonate differently. So just to take climate for an example, that's not an issue where Russia has a lot to say because Putin himself is not sure that there's climate change happening. China has a complex role, on the one hand a big supplier of renewable technology but also a big contributor to the problem and a big importer of resources that contribute to climate effects in many places, also seen as a big state as opposed to a small state in terms of climate talks.

And so I think some of these initiatives that China has been putting forward that Natasha described-- the development initiative, the global security initiatives, are intended to show that China has a vision for the Global South that is different from that of the West. But the devil is in the details. And I think we need to pay more attention to these relationships.

It's now the 10th anniversary of the Belt and Road. And while this has led to some infrastructure development, it also means that China is now the big holder of non-performing loans. And many of these countries are going to have difficulties paying these loans back, their resources for infrastructure deals. Some have benefited. Some have not. So it's complicated. And China's support for Russia and Ukraine has worsened some things in terms of the inflationary pressures on food and energy.

The Middle East conflict I think has given China an entry point to engage with certain parts of the Global South but I think that's very issue specific again. So it's hard to draw a big general conclusion about their role in the Global South. But it's something that we need a lot more research to follow.

CAROL SAIVETZ:

Great.

NATASHA KUHRT: I think in terms of if we're actually talking about and I think the question in the Q&A was about the stance on the Ukraine war if I'm not mistaken but I could be wrong.

CAROL SAIVETZ:

I generalized it more.

NATASHA KUHRT:

Oh, you generalized it.

CAROL SAIVETZ: Yeah. I took the liberty. All right. So we're at the end of our hour and 15 minutes. I'd like to thank our speakers Natasha Kuhrt and Elizabeth Wishnick for doing just a super job for us. And stay tuned because there's one coming up that's now on your screen. And we will have two more in the spring that deal with Russia, Ukraine, et cetera, going forward. So thank you all. And have a wonderful Thanksgiving.

[MUSIC PLAYING]