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CHINA- RUSSIA RELATIONS

## EMPIRE STRIKES BACK AT MOSCOW AND BEIJING

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For [Moscow](#) and Beijing, the changing of the guard in the White House in January 2021 meant no reset of ties with Washington. Instead, the newly inaugurated Biden administration turned the screws on both China and Russia by reinvigorating alliances, firming up sanctions, and prioritizing force deployment, particularly to the Indo-Pacific region. In contrast to Biden's multifaceted diplomatic offensive, China and Russia seemed passive, if not inactive, both in terms of their bilateral ties and their respective relations with the US. Top Russian and Chinese diplomats met in person just once in the first four months of 2021 in the middle of sharply escalated tensions across the Taiwan Strait and in East Ukraine. Meanwhile, Beijing and Moscow waited to see if the transition from Trumpism would lead to a brave new world ("[new concert of powers](#)"), a grave new world of [Kissingerian](#) "[great games](#)" in the era of WMD plus AI, or something in between.

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## The Eye of the Storm?

A month into his administration, President Biden declared to the Munich Security Conference that “[America is back](#).” Meanwhile, interactions between Russia and the PRC—the main US “strategic competitors,” remained routine, if not minimal. In his speech, Biden repeated his “America is back” catchphrase three times lest anyone miss it, but he wasn’t limited to just words. Indeed, in the first few weeks of the new administration, the US rejoined the Paris Climate Agreement and World Health Organization, reversed the troop withdrawal from Germany, ordered airstrikes on Iran-back militias in Syria, discussed re-entering the Iran nuclear deal, applied sanctions against the Myanmar military coup, among other steps. Yet, far from working together to counter Biden’s initiatives, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin did not even have a telephone conversation in the first four months of 2021 (compared to [five times](#) in 2020, including one in April).

In fact, much of the diplomatic interaction between Beijing and Moscow during this time occurred at the functionary level. On Jan. 15, Deputy Chinese Foreign Minister Le Yucheng and Russian Ambassador to China Andrey Denisov met in Beijing to [discuss bilateral issues and those of “common concern.”](#) The two met again on Jan. 28 for issues of “[strategic coordination](#).” In late February, Denisov [met in Beijing with](#) Cheng Guoping, special envoy for external security affairs of the Chinese Foreign Ministry. They discussed antiterrorism and other bilateral issues.

In the first 50 days of the Biden administration, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov talked on the phone [only once](#) (Feb. 4). In contrast, Wang and Lavrov talked [four times](#) in the first four months of 2020. This time, they “stressed the importance of upholding [non-interference](#) in other countries’ internal affairs” (such as [Alexei Navalny](#) and [Xinjiang](#)). For both China and Russia, the return of liberal interventionism in Washington was a familiar, though unwelcome, harbinger of challenges ahead.

COVID-19 continued to minimize normal diplomatic interactions between the two large powers. Yet at least two other factors might explain the current lull in Russia-China

interactions. One was the absence of any major problems between the two, hence the mutual confidence in bilateral ties. On Jan. 2, [Wang Yi](#) described relations with Russia as the “best in history in all areas.” [Alexander Gabuev](#), senior fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center, observed that bilateral relations had remained stable in 2020 and even improved in some “important aspects.” With the waning of the pandemic, Putin is scheduled to visit China in summer 2021 and the two sides are likely to ink “a hefty package of new deals,” said Gabuev.

The other possible reason: Moscow and Beijing also seemed to wait for the dust in Washington to settle in the wake of a chaotic power transition from Trump to Biden. Neither Russia nor China placed unrealistic hopes in the new US administration. However, [Beijing](#) and Moscow expected something different from the new team, as relations with the US under Trump had hit a low point. “An already bad relationship cannot be further destroyed,” [Putin was quoted](#) as saying. And there was a positive initial step: Biden’s quick move to extend the New START was “a step in the right direction,” according to [Putin](#).

## From “Strategic Patience” to “March Madness”

For all its declared “de-Trumpification efforts,” the Biden administration started with a similarly China-heavy-and-Russia-lite tilt, evidently meant to weaken the Beijing-Moscow partnership. This was soon replaced—deliberately or not—by a dual strategy of taking on both China and Russia, leading to strong pushbacks to the extent that [a US observer](#) warned in April that Biden now “faces a nightmare scenario” as a result of “deepening ties between China and Russia.”

In the beginning, however, the Biden administration seemed to follow a carefully scripted [policy paper](#) (from the Center for a New American Security, authored by two former senior intelligence officials) to limit, if not break, the depth of Russia-China partnership. To this end, Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov [was invited to join Biden’s inauguration](#). Also among the guests was Taiwan’s de facto ambassador in Washington, [Hsiao Bi-khim](#). Six days after his inauguration, [Biden called](#) Putin. The two [agreed to extend the New START Treaty](#) for five years without

China's participation, as had been insisted upon by the Trump administration. Biden and Xi did not talk over the phone [until two weeks later](#) (Feb. 10). For this, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki referred to a policy of "[strategic patience](#)" with China while prioritizing relations with allies. Meanwhile, the stage was set for a more robust China-focused strategy when an anonymous author on Jan. 30 released "the [Longer Telegram](#)," named after George Kennan's famous "Long Telegram" from Moscow in February 1946, a precursor to the Cold War.

The Biden–Xi two-hour telephone conversation on Feb. 10 took place after Biden called China the US's "[most serious competitor](#)" in his first foreign policy speech on Feb. 4 and just a few hours after his [first visit to the Pentagon](#), where he announced the formation of a [DOD China Task Force](#) for intra-departmental China policy coordination, as well as liaising with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the intel community.

Biden's China-focused strategy unfolded rapidly in March as the China Task Force became operational on March 1. Two days later, the White House unveiled its "[Interim National Security Strategic Guidance](#)," defining China as "the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system." Russia, on the other hand, merely plays a "destructive role."

As part of efforts to confront China, Biden held the first virtual summit with other Quad leaders (Japan, India, and Australia) on March 12. Although the joint statement did not mention China, everything the leaders talked about was about China, a [Chinese source noted](#). Meanwhile, senior US foreign and defense officials (Secretaries Antony Blinken and Lloyd Austin) traveled to East Asia for "2+2" talks with their Japanese and South Korean counterparts on [March 16](#) and [18](#) before meeting two senior Chinese diplomats (Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi) in Anchorage, Alaska on their way back on March 18–19.

Chinese media offered [various reasons, real or imagined](#), for the location of the first US–China senior dialogue: a mid-point between continental America and Asia, a sense of equality for both sides, its [low COVID infection](#)

[rate](#), its distance from the US political center, etc. Alaska is, nonetheless, the coldest place in the US. The two-day dialogue, however, started with heated exchanges in front of reporters. Top Chinese officials were evidently taken aback by Blinken's opening statement containing what the Chinese side considered [anti-China allegations](#) and interference in Chinese domestic politics. A series of [sanctions](#) (against Chinese telecom companies and Hong Kong officials) imposed shortly before the meeting added to [China's discomfort](#). The ensuing two sessions of closed-door discussions ended without releasing a joint statement.

While prioritizing China, Russia was never out of Biden's sight, and soon tensions were rising again. On Feb. 25, the US bombed pro-Iranian forces in Syria. Russian Foreign Minister [Sergey Lavrov complained that](#) Russia was given only four or five minutes' warning before the strikes. Sergei Tsekov, a member of the foreign affairs committee of the Federation Council, described the bombing as "[extremely outrageous](#)." A week later, the Biden administration [imposed its first round of sanctions](#) against Russia for the alleged poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

Biden's other "Russia shoe" (calling Putin "a killer") dropped on March 17 [in his interview with ABC News](#). No matter how off-handed the comment was, it officially ended Moscow's "strategic patience" with the new administration. So ended lingering hope to "[normalize relations](#)" with the US, expressed by Putin in his Jan. 26 phone call with Biden. [Putin responded](#) by wishing Biden "good health" and then invited Biden to [a public discussion](#) to be broadcast live in Russia and the US. Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov [called](#) Biden's remarks "very bad," and "unprecedented," saying they showed that Biden "definitely is not planning to improve ties with Russia." Russia [immediately summoned](#) Ambassador Antonov back to Moscow for "urgent consultations," and "advised" US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan to go back to Washington "for consultations." The last time Russia recalled its ambassador from the US was in [1998](#), to protest US airstrikes against Iraq.

Outraged as Russian sources were, Chinese [analysts](#) were not particularly surprised by Biden's "killer" remarks, given Biden's past rhetoric about Putin. Russia's response (recalling ambassador), according to [Wu Dahui](#),

a prominent Russologist in Beijing, was a “you-go-low-I-go-lower” tit-for-tat strategy in the “darkest time of Russia-US relations.” Just two days after the Biden-Putin exchange, [Russia](#) deployed all six of its Black Sea Fleet submarines as NATO kicked off its *Sea Shield 21* (March 19-29).

### Taiwan and Donbass: End of Ambiguity?

March got “madder,” at least from Chinese and Russian perspectives, with the sensitive buttons of Ukraine and Taiwan being pushed. Until recently, both Taiwan and Donbass were carefully capped from significant escalation by the three large powers with different degrees of ambiguity. For Beijing and Washington, four decades of stability across the Taiwan Strait was kept by the “one-country-two-system” formula with the US maintaining [strategic ambiguity](#) regarding its direct intervention in times of hostility across the Taiwan Strait. Russia monitored the situation carefully, speculating on US motives for confronting the PRC on its Taiwan claims. By contrast, in the Ukraine case China is officially neutral, having ties with Kiev as well as Moscow, and the US and Russia successfully kept the proxy skirmishes in East Ukraine from escalating.

In the last week of the Trump administration, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [lifted](#) longstanding restrictions for US and Taiwanese diplomatic engagement, which Beijing regarded as a serious violation of the “one-China” arrangement (see more in the [China-Taiwan chapter](#)). A crisis was narrowly averted by the last-minute cancelation, [presumably by Biden’s transition team](#), of a trip to Taiwan by [Kelly Craft](#), then-US ambassador to the UN, scheduled for the closing days of the Trump administration. Since then, both the Chinese and US militaries stepped up their posturing in the East and South China Seas. The US *Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group* was deployed to the region [twice in three months](#) (Jan. 23 and April 6). On Feb. 9, the USS *Nimitz* [joined](#) the *Roosevelt Group* in the South China Sea to “improve our readiness levels in the region.” Meanwhile, Chinese military aircraft routinized their intrusion into [Taiwan’s air defense identification zone](#) (ADIZ) on an almost daily basis ([98 days](#) in the first four months of 2021).



Figure 1 The aircraft carriers USS Nimitz and USS Theodore Roosevelt, along with ships and aircraft from their strike groups, stream through the South China Sea on Feb. 9, 2021.

Russia watched the tense US-China standoff over Taiwan with deep concern. “Pompeo has wilfully crossed China’s [red line](#) on Taiwan,” declared an RT commentator when Pompeo lifted the Taiwan restrictions in January. [RT](#) also noted that Blinken’s March 10 remarks on Taiwan as a “country” broke with the longstanding US policy. A month later (April 10), the State Department issued new guidelines making it easier for US diplomats to meet with officials from Taiwan. “The move is certain to further increase tensions with Beijing,” RT predicted. As China’s strategic partner, Russia has been a firm supporter of China’s Taiwan policy. Although it has no obligation to directly assist China in a Taiwan crisis, Russia could do a host of things to alleviate China’s pressure. In March, Russia indicated that it would retaliate if the US brings [intermediate-range missiles](#) to Asia-Pacific, presumably to Japan and South Korea. For both China and Russia, a “back-to-back” posture (背靠背) is the most optimal position short of an alliance, argued an editorial of [Global Times](#) in Beijing.

While the US was moving from “strategic ambiguity” to “[strategic clarity](#)” regarding Taiwan, China found its own ambiguity tested by the rapidly unfolding conflict between Ukraine and Russia in the Donbass region. In the 2013-14 crisis, Beijing took a delicate position of neutrality between Moscow and Kiev. Since then, Ukraine has become a major hub for China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Europe. Despite the Russia-Ukraine conflict, China has [greatly expanded its economic ties](#) with Ukraine in the past few years and even displaced Russia in 2019 as Ukraine’s largest trading partner. Under Washington’s pressure, Ukraine moved in early February to nationalize aircraft engine company Motor Sich (Мотор Січ) and

sanctioned its Chinese share-holder, Skyrizon, which held more than 50% of Sich's shares. [China urged](#) Ukraine not to politicize a commercial deal. On Biden's watch, the sudden death of the Sich deal and the rekindling of the Donbass conflict threatened to jeopardize China's economic interest in the region.

On March 1, the US [announced](#) \$125 million in military aid for Ukraine, the first of its kind under the Biden administration. Throughout March, a steady Ukrainian buildup (an additional seven brigades, according to Russian sources—see map) to the Donbass area was met by Russia's highly publicized deployment of [28,000 troops](#) in the last two weeks of March.



Figure 2 Map of Donbass deployment (blue flags indicate locations of seven recently deployed Ukrainian brigades). Sources: MK.ru, April 13, 2021.

During the tense standoff in Donbass, the Russian Navy conducted a “comprehensive Arctic expedition drill” from March 20–26. Code-named “[Umka-2021](#)” (Polar Bear-2021). The weeklong, 43-event exercises featured three nuclear-powered missile submarines breaking thick ice and surfacing with a radius of 300 meters simultaneously for the first time in the history of the Russian Navy.



Figure 3 Three Russian nuclear submarines emerge through thick ice during an Arctic drill for the first time in the history of the Russian Navy. Photo: Russian Defense Ministry via Xinhua

Russia's show of force apparently had little impact on Kiev. On March 25, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed the “[Military Security Strategy of Ukraine](#)” (MSSU). On March 27, the Ukraine Parliament approved a [statement](#) declaring an “escalation” along the front while redefining the conflict with local pro-Russian forces as [one of Ukraine vs. Russia](#). In the next few days as fighting [escalating in East Ukraine](#), top US officials (Secretary of State [Blinken](#), JCS Gen. [Mark Milley](#), and Defense Secretary [Austin](#)) talked to their Ukrainian counterparts, culminating in [Biden's](#) first phone call to Zelensky on April 2.

China's analysts observed the rapidly escalating conflict in the Donbass area with various shades of assessments. [Wu Dahui](#) of Peking University pointed out that each side blamed the other for provoking conflict, and the low-level conflict never stopped since the 2015 Minsk Agreement. Although neither side intended to start a war, accidents may quickly escalate, said Wu. Compared with Wu's rather even-handed treatment of the unfolding Donbass conflict, Liu Junming of the Eurasian System Science Research Association in Beijing [argued](#) that Donbass was a useful pressure point for Washington for the purposes of keeping the US in, Russia down, China out, Europe divided—over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline which would carry natural gas from Russia to Germany but which many in Washington oppose—and NATO relevant, as long as it is kept controllable.

However, Wan Qingsong of East China Normal University in Shanghai [believed](#) that Ukraine President Zelensky was in the driver's seat. After the signing of the 2021 MSSU, Zelensky repeatedly urged NATO to intervene, requested

NATO membership, and solicited assistance from the US and Turkey. Zelensky's anti-Russian "brinkmanship game," similar to that of his predecessor Petro Poroshenko in 2018, would enhance Ukraine's national identity and hence, more legitimacy for himself as his domestic rating slid.

[Zhao Huasheng](#) of Fudan University in Shanghai saw rising tension in East Ukraine as part of a geopolitical fixation for Russia. In his analysis for the Valdai Club in March, Zhao argued that "[T]he near abroad is not only a strategic resource for Moscow, but under unfavorable circumstances, it is also a burden," remarked Zhao. The Ukraine conflict should be seen within this broad framework. Despite the diverse assessments at the expert level, the absence of official Chinese comments on the Donbass conflict was a sign of China's cautious neutrality between Russia and Ukraine. Even with Ukraine's unilateral ending of the Motor Sich deal, China continued to treat Ukraine as a "strategic partner." On March 25, Ukraine received the first shipment of the Chinese Covid vaccine ([CoronaVac](#)). It was against the backdrop of vanishing ambiguity (Taiwan) and lingering neutrality (Ukraine) that Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov traveled to China on March 22-23 (just three days after the Anchorage meeting).

### Lavrov in Guilin

Wang received Lavrov in the southwestern Chinese city of Guilin, whose picturesque scenery and mild weather were a sharp contrast to the freezing Anchorage climate of a few days before. "China offers a very intense agenda" while "all has been quiet on the Western front," [remarked Lavrov](#), referencing the German anti-war novel of the 1920s turned Academy Award-winning movie of 1930, suggesting Russia was completely at odds with Europe.



Figure 4 Lavrov and his team take a boat ride in the Li Jiang River, Guilin on March 22 before the formal meeting with Wang Yi. Photo: DW News

Lavrov and his team take a boat ride in the Li Jiang River, Guilin, on March 22 before the formal meeting with Wang Yi. Sources: [DW News](#).

In the two-day meeting, the foreign ministers covered a wide range of issues in "extremely business-like and practical talks," and with "a traditionally friendly and trust-based manner," said [Lavrov](#) in the post-meeting press briefing. Relations with the Biden administration topped the agenda. [Wang and Lavrov briefed](#) each other on their US policies and coordinated policies to offset Biden's "[coercion](#)" (打压). The two diplomats also discussed a host of international and regional issues, including the Iranian nuclear deal, Afghanistan, Myanmar, UN reform, climate change, the region as a whole, Syria, Sudan, etc. They reached broad [consensus](#) in four areas: 1) maintain close and active interactions between the two presidents; 2) closely coordinate pandemic policies; 3) promote pragmatic economic ties; and 4) work together to enhance global stability, which was in jeopardy as a result of the West's effort to "invent their own rules and to impose them on all others," remarked [Lavrov](#).

To better synchronize foreign policies, Wang and Lavrov signed a [joint statement](#) for "Global Governance in Modern Conditions." "The world has entered a period of high turbulence and rapid change. In this context, we call on the international community to put aside any differences and strengthen mutual understanding and build up cooperation in the interests of global security and geopolitical stability, to contribute to the establishment of a fairer, more democratic and rational multipolar world order," said the statement. The document addresses four areas in international governance: 1) the importance of the "universal,

indivisible, and interrelated” human rights as opposed to the use of human rights they consider politicized, intrusive, and applied inconsistently; 2) the rights of sovereign states to choose their own path for developing democracy; 3) the importance of the UN as an anchor for international peace and security; and 4) the need for an open, equal, and non-ideological multilateralism for global governance, strategic stability, and development.

Wang and Lavrov also worked on [a series of bilateral issues](#), including drafting the joint statement for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China.” Putin and Xi are expected to sign it in 2021. The two ministers also signed an annual plan for consultations between the two ministries for “practical discussions on a wide range of global and regional matters.”

### Limits and Potential of “Partnership without Alliance”

“Russia and China do not ally against anyone,” said [Lavrov](#) at the end of the formal meeting in Guilin. The key for stable Sino-Russian relations was “that both sides follow the principles of non-alliance, non-confrontation, and not being against any third party,” echoed [Wang](#). Speculation about forming an alliance, however, never subsided and even gained momentum as the Biden administration and its Western allies applied growing pressure on Moscow and Beijing. On March 17 (the day Biden called Putin a “killer”), a paper published by Russia’s newly established [Institute of International Political and Economic Strategies](#) (IIPES) called for a “strategic military-political alliance between Moscow and Beijing” as the main condition for peace and stability of the world. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi started from early 2021 to define China’s strategic relations with Russia as one of “[no limit, no forbidden zone, and no ceiling to how far this cooperation can go](#) (没有止境, 没有禁区, 没有上限).” In Guilin, Wang repeated the new formula.

Back home, [Lavrov](#) outlined the nature of relations with China: “our relations are not a military alliance, and we are not pursuing this goal,” he said in an interview with Channel One’s *Bolshaya Igra* (*Great Game*) talk show. In

comparison to NATO’s “traditional” military alliance, “[O]ur relationship with China is completely different ... Maybe in a certain sense, it is an even closer bond,” added Lavrov. The alliance issue, therefore, remained open-ended, at least at the official level, with space for further convergence as well as comfort for free and independent actions. One example was China’s failure to follow [Russia’s effort](#) to move away from the US dollar-based international payment system. Given their very different degrees of economic integration with the outside world, China’s response to efforts by Biden and Trump to de-couple has been to further its opening to the outside world, noted [Feng Yujun](#) of Fudan University in Shanghai. In mid-February, the Chinese navy went as far as to [opt out](#) of a joint naval drill with Iran and Russian in the northern part of the Indian Ocean, which was described as a classic form of [tacit signaling](#) to China’s friends and foes.

Even the 25-year, \$400 billion [deal with Iran](#) signed on March 27 was a carefully calculated move taken only after [Washington decided to return](#) to the Iran nuclear deal. China waited [six years](#) for this window of opportunity when the impact of its Iran deal for Washington would be [minimized](#). For this goal, Foreign Minister [Wang Yi](#) first traveled to Saudi Arabia and Turkey, both are US allies, before heading for Tehran.

### America’s “China Syndrome”

By the end of April, both Taiwan and Donbass remained tense, yet Biden’s team seemed to have recalibrated the US approach to Russia and China, thanks to a growing cry from the media and pundits urging Biden to avoid a “[two-front confrontation](#)” against Russia and China simultaneously. Possibly because of this, a series of high-profile diplomatic moves, particularly by Washington, started to dissipate the Ukraine crisis, at least for the time being. Top Russian and US defense officials had kept lines of communication open, according to [Russian sources](#). On April 14, the [US Navy](#) canceled the deployment of two warships to the Black Sea. For its part, Russia publicly defined its buildup as a month-long “snap drill” to test combat readiness, to be concluded in late April. Three days later (April 17), [Biden called](#) Putin. In addition to urging Russia to de-escalate, Biden proposed a summit meeting with Putin in a third country in the coming months. Just a month

before, Biden [ignored](#) Putin's proposal for "a live-broadcast discussion" on Russia-US relations after Biden's "killer" reference. On April 23, Russia [ordered](#) its troops back to base from the area near the Ukraine border.

While the Donbass crisis created opportunities for Moscow and Washington to reengage, China remained ubiquitous in Washington and the US public space—a development Russian analysts watched warily. Almost every policy initiation of the Biden administration—ranging from infrastructure, climate, pandemic, education, social welfare, technology, to withdrawal from Afghanistan, Japan, the G7, etc.—was covered by the China shadow. A week after proposing a summit with Putin, [Biden](#) claimed in his first news conference that China would not "become the leading country in the world, the wealthiest country in the world, and the most powerful country in the world ... on my watch."

To drive the China issue home, [Jim Risch](#) of Idaho, the senior Republican on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, declared April 22 that "The issues facing us today in foreign policy, and perhaps for the entire 21st century, is going to be China, China, and China." He made those remarks at the Senate hearing on the [Strategic Competition Act of 2021](#), a document almost exclusively devoted to counter China in every conceivable way. It remains to be seen how the Biden team can navigate US foreign policy away from a *de facto* dual strategy for China and Russia given Democrats' intense dislike of Russia and Ukraine's ongoing request for [NATO membership](#). Short of this, a "dangerous convergence" between China and Russia may quicken its steps, warned [Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman](#)—authors of the previously mentioned CNAS paper—in a *Foreign Affairs* piece published on May 3.

An exclusive focus on China, however, may also be problematic, according to Henry Kissinger, a key architect of the China-US diplomatic breakthrough in the early 1970s. In recent months, the 97-year old US diplomat and strategist has become profoundly worried about the rapid escalation of the US-China rivalry. Three times in five weeks ([March 25](#), [April 25](#), and [April 30](#)), he warned of the danger of misunderstanding between the US and China leading to a WWI-type destruction, particularly in the nuclear age increasingly interfaced by AI.

Meanwhile, military balance across the Taiwan Strait increasingly favors the mainland. On April 23, Chinese President [Xi Jinping](#) attended an unprecedented commissioning ceremony of three large naval vessels for the PLA's South China Sea Fleet (below): a Type 094 nuclear-powered strategic ballistic missile submarine (12,000 tons underwater), a Type 055 large destroyer (13,000 tons), and the country's first Type 075 amphibious assault ship (helicopter carrier, 40,000 tons).



Figure 5 Chinese President Xi Jinping attends a commissioning ceremony of three large naval vessels for the PLA's South China Sea Fleet. Photo: Xinhua

Given China's rising and US anxiety, Russian analysts (see the [IIPES paper](#)) warned that provoking China into a military invasion of Taiwan has become the main strategic goal of the US up to 2030. Beyond that, the US is likely to lose the war with China because of the growth trajectory of China's military power.

### What Biden's First 100 Days Means for Moscow-Beijing Ties

In its first 100 days, the Biden administration had accomplished so much (vaccination, economic stimulus plan, returning to WHO and the Paris climate agreement, rebuilding alliances) yet also done so little in normalizing relations with Moscow and Beijing. For Russian and Chinese political and intellectual elites, the world is in a much more challenging, if not dangerous, place.

The day after talking to Biden in the phone, [President Putin warned](#) the Davos Economic Forum: "we will face a formidable breakdown in global development, which will be fraught with a war of all against all." "The situation could take an unexpected and uncontrollable turn—

unless we do something to prevent this ... The inability and unwillingness to find substantive solutions to problems like this in the 20th century led to the WWII catastrophe,” added Putin.

Putin’s warning was echoed by [Fyodor A. Lukyanov](#), chairman of the Presidium of the Russian Council on Foreign and Defense Policy. In the first 2021 issue of *Russia in Global Affairs*, Lukyanov produced a Fukuyamanian-style “endism”: ending the global governing institutions. Great powers would go it alone by solely pursuing their own interests and relying primarily on one’s own resources, said Lukyanov.

[Feng Shaolei](#), a leading Russologist in Shanghai, did not share Putin and Lukyanov’s pessimism. He did, however, anticipate a less stable, less predictable, and even chaotic and crisis-ridden phase of the world system after a dramatic and tragic 2020. “The old world is fading away, and a new world is yet to take shape,” remarked Feng shortly after Biden’s inauguration.

It remains to be seen how the three large powers would interface between the old and new worlds, not just for themselves but for the world and humanity.

# CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

## JANUARY – APRIL 2021

**Jan. 2, 2021:** Foreign Minister Wang Yi [tells](#) the media that China's strategic relations with Russia have "no limit, no forbidden zone and no ceiling to how far this cooperation can go" (中俄战略合作没有止境, 没有禁区, 没有上限).

**Jan. 12, 2021:** The US [sends](#) an invitation to Russia to attend the inauguration of President-Elect Joe Biden.

**Jan. 15, 2021:** Deputy Chinese Foreign Minister Le Yucheng and Russian Ambassador to China Andrey Denisov [meet](#) in Beijing. They exchange views on bilateral relations.

**Jan. 20, 2021:** Taiwan's de facto ambassador in Washington, Hsiao Bi-khim, [attends](#) Biden's inauguration.

**Jan. 26, 2021:** Biden [calls](#) Russian President Vladimir Putin. They discuss a new START treaty. They agree to maintain transparent and consistent communication.

**Jan. 26-29, 2021:** SCO National Coordinators [hold](#) a four-day meeting in Dushanbe of Tajikistan and discuss a wide range of issues regarding Tajikistan's SCO chairmanship in 2021.

**Jan. 28, 2021:** Deputy Chinese Foreign Minister Le Yucheng and Russian Ambassador to China Andrey Denisov [meet](#) in Beijing. They discuss issues of "[strategic coordination](#)."

**Feb. 4, 2021:** Chinese FM Wang Yi [meets](#) in Beijing with ambassadors of Eurasian states to China. SCO Secretary-General Vladimir Norov also joins. Russian Ambassador to China Andrei Denisov speaks on behalf of the diplomatic missions in Beijing. He offers heartfelt greetings to Wang Yi on the upcoming 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party.

**Feb. 4, 2021:** FMs Wang Yi and Lavrov [talk](#) on the phone. They discussed the issue of "non-interference of domestic affairs" and the importance of coordination between the two countries.

**Feb. 10, 2021:** President Biden [talks](#) to Chinese President Xi Jinping over the phone.

**Feb. 25, 2021:** Cheng Guoping, special envoy for external security affairs of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, [meets with](#) Russian Ambassador Denisov, in Beijing. The two exchange views on anti-terror and other bilateral issues.

**Feb. 25, 2021:** Russia's largest independent gas producer, Novatek, [signs](#) a long-term contract with a Chinese partner to deliver over 3 million tons of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to China over 15 years.

**Feb. 25, 2021:** The US [carries out airstrikes in eastern Syria](#) against buildings belonging to what the Pentagon said were Iran-backed militias.

**March 1, 2021:** An article on China's Defense Ministry's website [says](#) China's strategic partnership relations with Russia is not an alliance but a new type of relationship of "non-alliance, non-confrontation, and not targeting on the third party."

**March 8, 2021:** Russian Ambassador Denisov [tells](#) Phoenix TV (Hong Kong) that he will take a high-speed train to Taiwan in the future: "Technologically, China is absolutely capable of building it. Indeed, the two sides of the strait belong to the same land."

**March 9, 2021:** Roscosmos, the Russian space agency, [signs](#) agreement with China's National Space Administration (CNSA) on the joint creation of the "International Scientific Lunar Station." The project will be "guided by the principles of equal distribution of rights and responsibilities" and will "promote cooperation ... with open access to all interested nations and international partners," according to Russian sources.

**March 12, 2021:** Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova [warns](#) of the "destabilizing" effect of the deployment of US land-based intermediate-range and shorter-range missiles in the Asia-Pacific.

**March 18-19, 2021:** A US-China senior dialogue [is held](#) in Anchorage, Alaska.

**March 18, 2021:** Moscow [hosts](#) regular meeting of the extended Troika on Afghanistan (Russia, China, the US, and Pakistan), including representatives of the Afghan government, Afghanistan's political activists, the Taliban, Qatar, and Turkey. FM Lavrov delivers welcoming remarks.

**March 22-23, 2021:** Lavrov [travels](#) to China's southwestern city of Guilin to meet with Chinese counterpart Wang Yi. The two sign a "Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of China and Russia on Certain Aspects of Global Governance in Modern Conditions."

**March 24-30, 2021:** FM Wang Yi [visits](#) Middle Eastern countries of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Bahrain. In Iran, Wang [signs](#) a 25-year, \$400 billion strategic agreement on March 27.

**March 26, 2021:** Officials of Russian space agency and the CNSA [hold](#) a video conference. The discussed issue of jointly building the lunar space station.

**April 2, 2021:** In an interview with Russia's *Channel One*, Lavrov [says](#) that the relationship with China was not an alliance, stating "our relationship with China is completely different from that of a traditional military alliance. Maybe in a certain sense, it is an even closer bond."

**April 5, 2021:** Putin [signs](#) a bill into law enabling him to run for two more terms starting 2024.

**April 8, 2021:** Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova [criticizes](#) politicizing the Beijing Winter Olympics on her Facebook account.

**April 11, 2021:** Lavrov [calls](#) for talks to create a legally binding international instrument to ban the deployment of any type of weapons in space. In 2014, Russia and China jointly submitted a draft treaty to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva.

**April 13, 2021:** Biden [calls](#) Putin and discusses the Ukraine issue. Biden proposes a summit meeting in the foreseeable future.

**April 13, 2021:** Russia and China [hold](#) 7<sup>th</sup> dialogue on North Pole affairs by video conference, reaching a "broad consensus" regarding various issues.

**April 14, 2021:** Biden [announces](#) withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11, 2021. Russia's Foreign Ministry [criticizes](#) the "late withdrawal" for potentially escalating violence, "which in turn might undermine efforts to start direct intra-Afghan negotiations."

**April 20, 2021:** Russia and China [hold](#) 9<sup>th</sup> ruling party dialogue via video. Xi and Putin send congratulatory letters.

**April 23, 2021:** CNSA and Roscosmos [hold](#) conference for the international moon station in [Nanjing](#) on the sideline of the 58th session of the Scientific and Technical Subcommittee of the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space.

