

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

TESTING THE LIMITS OF STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

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In the summer months, both the upper and lower limits of the China-Russia strategic partnership were put to considerable tests. In the West, China's peace-probing effort continued despite virtual stalemate in the Ukraine war and its sudden twists and turns (drone attacks on the Kremlin and Wagner mutiny). Beijing treaded carefully in restoring relations with Kyiv with the new Ukrainian ambassador in place. In the East, Russian and Chinese militaries conducted a series of aerial and naval exercises/operations with unprecedented scope and closer interoperability for almost three months (from early June to late August), something not seen even at the peak of the Sino-Soviet alliance in the 1950s. All of this occurred against the backdrop of increasingly hardened US-led alliance networks both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Meanwhile, Moscow and Beijing remained "strategic partners" without the interlocking mechanism of the typical military alliance such as NATO's Article 5. Beyond these divergences and convergences, both sides tried to restore normalcy in bilateral interactions. Despite the absence of Putin from both the SCO and BRICS summits, these multilateral forums were able to grow in size amid unprecedented Western sanctions against Russia and China.

This article is extracted from *Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-Journal of Bilateral Relations in the Indo-Pacific*, Vol. 25, No. 2, September 2023. Preferred citation: Yu Bin, "China-Russia Relations: Testing The Limits Of Strategic Partnership," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp 161-174.

Becoming Normal but Not Quite Yet...

Summer was a busy time for China-Russia interaction as diplomats and senior officials frequented each other's capital and conversed in multilateral settings (SCO, BRICS, ASEAN-plus, Pyongyang, etc.). In late May, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail [Mishustin](#) visited China and met both President Xi Jinping and China's new premier, Li Qiang. Fifteen months into Russia's "special military operations" in Ukraine, both China and Russia were adapting to an increasingly hostile world with more indigenous resources and initiatives. Two-thirds of the record high bilateral trade (\$190 billion) in 2022 was done in local currencies (ruble and yuan). Mishustin was confident that trade volume would hit \$200 billion in 2023, during which Russia's gas exports to China are expected to be up [47%](#). Russia's difficult relations with the West apparently forced country to look East for reliable customers. Russia's gas giant Gazprom, for example, was working hard to launch the [2nd](#) and [3rd](#) gas lines to China.

Perhaps the most notable achievements for Moscow and Beijing were the significant expansion of both the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) group. Iran officially became a full member in early July at the [23rd SCO summit](#) and Belarus was in its final stage of joining. In Johannesburg, South Africa, the 15th BRICS Summit brought into its fold six developing countries (Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates).

All of this was done without the in-person participation of Russian President Vladimir Putin, a first in the history of these multilateral forums. It is difficult to measure the "loss" of the "other" for both China and particularly for President Xi. It is a different world, for better or worse. In this sense, ending the war, or reducing its adverse impact, is key to a normal bilateral relationship between Beijing and Moscow.

Not So Quiet in the West

Ukraine peace remained a [top priority](#) for Beijing in the summer months. The prospect of China's peace initiative, however, remained cloudy for several reasons. On the plus side, the [Zelenskyy-Xi](#) phone conversation on April 26 strengthened China's posture as an honest broker. This was followed by the appointment of Pavel [Ryabikin](#) as Ukraine's ambassador to Beijing. A few days later, Ukrainian Deputy Foreign Minister Andriy [Melnyk](#) was quoted as saying that China could bring about peace through its mediation efforts between Kyiv and Moscow. The situation on the ground, however, continued to deflect any effort for a pause for at least two reasons: the bloody stalemate between the warring parties and the widely shared belief in the West that the long-anticipated counteroffensive by Ukraine would [have to go ahead](#) regardless of Ukraine's logistical [inadequacy](#).

The drone attacks on the [Kremlin](#) in the small hours of May 3, ironically, put extra spin on China's peace-making effort. Russia immediately called the drone attack a "[terrorist action](#)" and "an [assassination attempt](#) on the Russian president" with [US support](#). While a "[proportional response](#)" was imminent, ex-President Dmitry [Medvedev](#), now deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council, went as far as to warn that Russia had no options but to physically eliminate Ukrainian President Zelenskyy "and his clique." Given the fast-moving events and dire consequences, China called for [restraint](#) from all sides to avoid further escalation. Prior to this, US Secretary of State [Blinken](#) publicly expressed his interest in China's [peace initiative](#).

Washington's [sudden interest](#) in Beijing's peace effort apparently alarmed Moscow. TASS, for example, had a quite unusual description of the Lavrov-Qin Gang talks in India on the sidelines of the SCO annual foreign ministerial meeting. "The [negotiations](#) [underline added by author] started without introduction remarks for the press and continued behind closed doors," wrote TASS, suggesting a rather unusual, if not necessarily more difficult, exchange regarding

the drone attack and its fallout. In contrast to the stark and brief wording (77 words) of the Russian media, [Xinhua](#) provided a rather normal and more substantive coverage (440 words) of the meeting by the two senior diplomats. On the Ukraine conflict, [Qjn](#) reportedly told Lavrov that China would “continue to facilitate talks for peace” and was “ready to maintain communication and coordination with Russia” for a political settlement of the crisis. Lavrov, in turn, told Qin that Russia agreed with China's “principled position” and was ready to maintain close communication with China “in a candid manner.”

On May 15, Ambassador Li Hui, China’s special representative for Eurasian affairs and special envoy on the Ukraine crisis, started his five-nation tour with Ukraine as his first stop. According to Xinhua, [Li](#) held talks with a wide range of officials including President Zelenskyy, Head of the Ukrainian President's Office Andriy Yermak, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, and officials of the Ukrainian ministries of Infrastructure, Energy, and Defense. Neither side disclosed details of these talks. A day after Li’s departure, Ukrainian First Deputy Foreign Minister [Emine Dzhaparova](#) was quoted by the Japanese media (*Asahi Shimbun*) that the mediating process for the Ukraine conflict “cannot be done without China.” [TASS](#) did not mention Li’s meeting with Ukrainian energy, defense and infrastructure officials, but cited Li as saying that “there was no universal method for resolving the Ukrainian crisis. China will provide assistance in its own way for handling the problem.”

Russia was the last stop of Li’s multi-nation peace journey. On May 26, [Li](#) held talks with Foreign Minister Lavrov and then deputies Rudenko Andrey Yurevich and Galuzin Mikhail Yuryevich. As China’s ambassador to Moscow for 11 years (2009–2019), Li was “welcomed” in Moscow for “his personal contribution” to strengthening Russia–China relations. Lavrov reportedly “thanked Beijing for its balanced position on the Ukrainian crisis,” according to [TASS](#).



Figure 1 Li Hui meets with Russian FM Lavrov in Moscow, May 26, 2023. Sources: Chinese Foreign Ministry.

China’s peace-searching effort in May, however, was largely neutralized as the drone attack on the Kremlin inflamed both the rhetoric and actions of the combatants. Meanwhile, the demand for Ukraine’s ultimate victory remained [strong in Washington](#) to the point that Ukrainian Ambassador [Vadim Pristayko](#) to London complained, the day after Li left Kiev, about “too much pressure, too much expectations” on Ukraine to “secure victory” for its Western allies. As more weapons systems were readied and/or being transported to Ukraine in the summer months (UK’s [depleted uranium munitions](#) or DUM in March, [cluster bombs](#) in July, [F-16s](#) in August, and US DUMs in September), Russian defense analysts started to deliberate for a quick nuclear “deterrence-escalation” ladder to avoid a bigger and more catastrophic nuclear war. “If we correctly build a strategy of intimidation and deterrence and even use of nuclear weapons, the risk of a ‘retaliatory’ nuclear or any other strike on our territory can be reduced to an absolute minimum,” argued [Sergei Karaganov](#) of Moscow-based Council on Foreign and Defense Policy.

Beijing was [alarmed](#) by the almost casual talk of the nuclear option. [Zhao Huasheng](#), one of the most prominent Russia scholars in Shanghai,

pointed to the near-absence of any institutional mechanism to regulate nuclear arsenals of both sides. In contrast, the Cold War after the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis was perhaps the safest time for the world.

Given the dire consequences, China's UN Ambassador Geng Shuang warned repeatedly against sending more lethal weapons to Ukraine, the warring sides should stay away from the [nuclear redline](#), and that a [political solution](#) of the Ukraine war was needed to avoid escalation and expansion of an already brutal war.

China skipped an international conference on Ukraine peace in Copenhagen on June 25. It was unclear if this was because of the 48-hour [Wagner mutiny](#) on June 23-24. The day after the mutiny, Chinese FM [Qin Gang](#) informed visiting Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko in Beijing that [China supported](#) "Russian leadership's effort to stabilize the situation in connection with the June 24 events." Ten days later, China accepted the invitation from Saudi Arabia for a meeting of 43 countries on the Ukraine conflict in the Saudi Arabian city of Jeddah.

Perhaps the only tangible outcome of the Saudi meeting was a pledge to hold more discussions in the future. [Ukraine](#), however, considered China's participation "a breakthrough" and "a historic victory." [Medvedev](#) said that any peace effort had a chance of success only if both sides of the conflict participated, the historical context was considered, and the current realities were taken into account. Russian FM [Lavrov](#) later noted that Saudi's real intention for holding the Jeddah meeting on Ukraine was "to convey to the Western participants and Ukraine itself the idea of the complete futility of any discussions without Russia's participation."

Regardless, Saudi Arabia, a neutral country in the Ukraine conflict as well as one with good relations with Russia and China, played a vital role in bringing together divergent forces and opinions in Jeddah while giving China, as well as the global south, a prominent seat in dealing

with a vital issue of global security. In the closed-door meeting, the seating arrangement for Ambassador Li Hui and US National Security Advisor Jack Sullivan (below) reflected the Saudis' delicate balancing act.



Figure 2 Representatives from China (L) and the United States (R) attended talks on Ukraine in Saudi Arabia over the weekend. Sources: Reuters

Immediately after the Jeddah meeting, Chinese FM Wang Yi talked to Russian counterpart Lavrov over the phone. Wang emphasized that "on any international and multilateral occasion," China would "uphold an independent and impartial position, make objective and rational statements, actively promote peace and talks, and strive to seek a political solution to the Ukraine crisis."

Summer Heat in the East

In contrast to the stagnant Ukraine war and peace efforts, in the East Asia and northern Pacific there were much broadened and deepened Russia-China mil-mil interactions, ranging from joint aerial patrol, joint naval drills and patrols, to the mutual visits by top defense officials.

Unlike previous cases, the sixth joint aerial patrol in 2023 was a two-stage operation. In the first stage on June 6, two Chinese *H-6K* strategic bombers flew over the Tsushima Strait from the East China Sea to meet two Russian *T-95* bombers over the Sea of Japan. The group then headed back to the East China Sea and [landed in a Chinese military airfield](#) in east China. The second stage of the joint aerial patrol was conducted the following day (June 7) as the mixed bomber group took off from [a Chinese airfield](#) for an eight-hour joint patrol of the west Pacific via the Miyako Strait. Throughout the joint patrol, up to 15 [China's jet fighters](#) provided escort for the bombers. Chinese

military analysts hailed the [unprecedented](#) two-stage aerial patrol as a more complicated and more difficult operation, which required closer coordination and interoperability of the two sides.

While the annual joint aerial patrol scored many “firsts,” China-Russia naval cooperation in the summer months was far more extensive in terms of both scheduled and ad hoc items. On July 3, Russian Navy Commander Adm. Nikolai [Yevmenov](#) arrived in Beijing and met China’s defense minister. Li told his Russian guest that China hoped for increased exchanges, joint exercises and other forms of cooperation that would take defense ties to “reach a new level.”



Figure 3 Russian navy chief Nikolai Yevmenov meeting Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu in Beijing, July 3, 2023. Photo: Weibo

A submarine expert who became Russia’s top naval officer in 2019, Yevmenov’s busy schedule in China included meeting the commander of the Chinese Navy, Dong Jun, visiting naval ports, training facilities, and shipyards in Qingdao and Shanghai. Many of these facilities were open to Russian counterparts for the first time. A key item of Yevmenov’s visit was seeing the PLAN’s latest and most powerful warship [Type 055](#) (a displacement of 11,000 tons) stealth guided-missile cruiser (the PLAN defines it as a “large destroyer” or 大驱). By early 2022, *Type 055s* were reportedly armed with [YJ-21](#) hypersonic (Mach 10) anti-ship ballistic missiles with a [range](#) of 1,000 to 1,500 km. Yevmenov also joined sailors of [two Russian missile corvettes](#) (Project-20380 *Steregushchiy* class) the *Gromkiy* (335) and *Sovershenniy* (333).

Their week-long port call (June 5-11) at Shanghai was the first visit for the Russian navy to China after the three-year Covid restrictions. Russian and [Chinese media](#) described the ship call as either a “[friendly](#)” or “[business](#)” visit. While their arrival was greeted by PLAN’s full military band, Chinese analyst Wang Shichun (王世纯) depicted the Russian ship call as a “somewhat surprise visit” ([有些意外的访问](#)), which was announced by Russia’s Pacific Fleet on the same day (July 5) the two ships began their week-long visit in Shanghai. Prior to this, the Russian squadron participated Indonesia’s multinational naval Exercise [Komodo-2023](#) (June 5-8). Unlike the two PLAN destroyers (a *Type-052D* and a *Type-054A*) returning home on [June 14](#) after *Komodo-2023*, the Russian ships were sighted sailing just 26 nautical miles [east of Taiwan](#) in late June, then [around Japan’s Yonaguni Island](#) and transited the Miyako Strait on June 30. Wang also noted that on July 1-3, the Russian ships were found [anchored](#) 50 miles northeast of Miyako Island, which lies 185 miles southwest of Okinawa. He wondered if these ships were plagued by mechanical problems. Whatever the case, this “surprise visit” by the Russian vessels to Shanghai may serve as a precedent for reciprocity between the two navies whenever needed, noted Wang.

The Russian naval vessels’ week-long visit turned out to be a precursor for a series of operations by the two navies in the next five weeks. [Four days](#) after the corvettes left China’s most prosperous city, a flotilla of five PLAN ships—two *Type 052D* destroyers *Qiqihar* and *Guiyang*, two *Type 054A* frigates *Zaozhuang* and *Rizhao*, plus *Type 903* supply ship *Taihu*—departed from Qingdao to the Sea of Japan for the “[Northern/Interaction-2023](#)” joint drill (July 20-23). They were to be joined by four Russian warships in the middle of the Sea of Japan (the large anti-submarine ships *Admiral Tribunts* and *Admiral Panteleev* as well as the corvettes *Gremyashy* and *Hero of the Russian Federation Aldar Tsydenzhapov*). A Chinese Y-20 military cargo plane (equivalent to the US C-17) [flew](#) to a Russian airfield near Vladivostok with a forward detachment of the PLAAF, to be

followed by J-16 fighter-bombers, KJ-500 AWACS, and Z-20 helicopters.



Figure 4 PLAN Type-052Ds (front) and Type-054As for “Northern/Interaction-2023” and the following joint patrol of northern Pacific. Sources: Chinese online media.

The theme of the four-day “[Northern/Interaction-2023](#)” was to “safeguard the safety of strategic maritime passages,” presumably the Tsushima Strait and Tsugaru Strait. The Chinese and Russian warships conducted about [20 combat maneuvers](#) including joint maritime and air escort, deterrence and expulsion, anchorage defense, and joint artillery firing at various types of targets. In the closing ceremony, Rear Adm. [Qiu Wensheng](#), commander of the Chinese forces, pointed out that the exercise was “a major combat-style operation ([重大实战行动](#))” for the security of the strategic maritime passages and “a multidimensional test of the Chinese-Russian combat interoperability in high seas.”

Despite its location (the Sea of Japan) and PLAAF use of Russian airfield, “Northern/Interaction-2023” was said, at least according to [Chinese media](#), to be largely organized and commanded by the PLA with a [joint command](#) in the PLAN’s *Qiqihar* destroyer (Type-052D). Until this point, all joint drills in the Sea of Japan were organized by the Russian side. The Russian role in the “Northern/Interaction-2023,” however, was more basic and even fundamental as the PLAAF planes operated from the Russian airfield for the first time in history. Following the four-day joint exercise in the Sea of Japan, the PLAN flotilla paid a [five-day port call](#) at Vladivostok for resupply before heading out for the third

annual joint patrol of the northern Pacific by the two navies since 2021.

Between July 28 and Aug. 21 a total of [11 Russian and Chinese warships](#)—the same eighth Russian and Chinese warships and two oilers participating in “Northern/Interaction-2023,” plus a PLAN surveillance ship *Kaiyangxing*—sailed through the La Perouse Strait from the Sea of Japan to the Sea of Okhotsk toward the Aleutian Islands, and then reached international waters near Alaska by Aug. 5. The 25 days of voyage (6,500 nautical miles) ended as the joint flotilla entered the Chinese naval port Qingdao via the Miyako Strait on Aug. 21. A [news release](#) by the Chinese defense ministry said that the patrols “are not directed against third parties and have nothing to do with the current international and regional situation.”

The US reaction, however, was far more substantial than that of a year before when the second Russia-China joint patrol of seven warships, including a Type-055 Chinese destroyer *Nanchang*, attracted only a lone [US Coast Guard cutter](#) on the scene near the Aleutians. This time, [four US warships](#) and a P-8 surveillance aircraft were dispatched to shadow the Russian-Chinese flotilla. The US never specified the [precise location](#) of the Chinese-Russian combined fleet. This “historical first” voyage to the waters near Alaska, however, was “highly provocative,” according to a [WSJ commentary](#).

Beijing, however, saw this as a reciprocity for intensified US “freedom of navigation” operations to the SCS and the Taiwan Straits. [Wu Dahui](#), a prominent Russia scholar in Beijing, noticed the increasing frequency of US surveillance operations near the Chinese and Russian coastlines and SCS areas. “In the future, the Chinese Navy could conduct more far sea patrols like this...The Americans should get used to it,” commented [Fu Qianshao](#), a military expert in Beijing.

The routinized, albeit enhanced, joint patrol of the northern Pacific was not a typical tit-for-tat response to US tactics, but an asymmetrical move to highlight the least defended area of the US homeland via the shortest route (northern Pacific). [Chinese media](#), for example, pointed to the fact that all US destroyers dispatched to the Alaska waters were from distant areas: *USS John S. McCain* from Hawaii and the *USS Benfold*, the *USS John Finn* and the *USS Chung-Hoon* all the way [from Yokosuka](#), Japan.

Beyond and behind the regional implications, the joint Pacific patrol was the end of a much larger joint air-naval operation/exercises starting from the sixth joint aerial patrol by strategic bombers in early June and through “*Northern/Interaction-2023*” in late July. An almost ubiquitous feature of all these aerial and naval operations was utilizing each other’s airfields and naval ports by various aircrafts and warships either as part of the operation/drill or under any *ad hoc* circumstances as was the case of the “business call” by the two Russian corvettes to Shanghai in early July. Another case in point was that at the end of the third Pacific patrol, the Russian ships did not split the formation in the East China Sea for their home port of Vladivostok but entered Qingdao port for a few days of resupply.

The two militaries were apparently testing and perfecting a joint command-operational interface ([联合指挥作战体系](#)) not only for seamless communication between Chinese and Russian languages but also interoperability between various weapon platforms of their forces. In the “*Northern/Interaction-2023*” drill, for example, PLAAF KJ-500 AWACS were said to guide Russia’s *MIG-31* interceptors; PLAN’s shipborne radar commanded Russian ship-to-air missiles; and Russian ships coordinated naval artillery firing. To this, a Chinese commentator remarked that a *de facto* joint fleet was in the making, which was not the case even when China and the Soviet Union were allies.

The Japan Factor for Russia and China

Behind the much extended and more integrated summer drills and joint patrols was a growing sense of alarm between Moscow and Beijing regarding a rapid hardening of the US-led alliance mechanism in Indo-Pacific. On May 20, Ukraine President [Zelenskyy](#) was in Japan for the annual G7 meeting, while a [NATO liaison office](#) in Japan was proposed. The alliance-building effort culminated in the Aug. 18 three-way summit (Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul) at Camp David, traditionally a place for peace and reconciliation. Now it assumed a new mission to institutionalize the three countries’ security cooperation against Beijing and Moscow, a “double containment” according to Lavrov.

To the dismay and alarm of Russia whose forces were largely bogged down in the west, Tokyo and Seoul were perhaps more eager and capable than most NATO members to contribute to Ukraine’s war operations. In early summer, Seoul appeared ready to send a [half million 155mm rounds](#) of artillery shells to Ukraine, albeit indirectly via the US. [Japanese aid](#) to Ukraine topped \$7.6 billion by late summer and [more](#) is in the pipeline including “[military aid](#).” For Beijing, its “principled neutrality” in the Ukraine war was [repeatedly countered](#) by Japan’s Ukraine - today - could - be - East - Asia - tomorrow rhetoric, which was seen as a fast and convenient track to revitalize the “[Taiwan-problems-means-Japan’s-problem](#)” claim (Dec. 1, 2021) by late Japanese PM Abe Shinzo. Moreover, Japanese helicopter carrier [Izumo](#) made the first port call to Manila in late August following a [joint naval exercise](#) with the US, Australia, and the Philippines in the SCS.

An increasingly proactive, and presumably more independent, Japan in the Asia-Pacific security context was a profoundly disturbing development for Moscow and Beijing. On Dec. 16, 2022, the Kishida administration approved three new, and “[controversial](#),” strategic documents: the [National Security Strategy](#), the [National Defense Strategy](#), and [Defense Buildup](#)

[Program](#), which identify China as “the greatest strategic challenge” for Japan and the “international community,” followed by North Korea and Russia. Accordingly, Japan will sharply increase its defense spending from 1% to 2% in the next five years (a [56.5% increase](#) from the current five-year plan of 2019–23), acquire “counterstrike capabilities” (1,500 US *Tomahawk* cruise missiles, indigenous missiles such as Type-12, etc.) and develop new capabilities (hypersonic missiles, etc.). Such a “[dramatic transformation](#)” of Japanese post-WWII national security policy may even imply that Japan takes “[primary responsibility](#) to disrupt and defeat an invasion” with or without a US security guarantee. This occurs as US forces in western Pacific are in the process of redeployment to “[more defensible position](#)” such as Guam because of an “[evolving threat](#)” from China’s increasingly advanced systems including the new hypersonic weapons.

Japan’s new national security strategy is meant to “return to rampant militarization,” said Russia’s temporary charge d’affaires in Japan [Gennady Ovechko](#) in early May. [Chen Hongbin](#), a veteran Japan observer in Shanghai, pointed to the historical parallel between the three documents to the three 1907 defense outlines published in 1907—the Imperial Defense Policy (帝国国防方针), Force Utilization Outlines (用兵纲领), and Force Requirements (所需兵力). Despite the vast historical span of time, both the 1907 and 2022 defense documents were passed by the Cabinet without any legislative deliberation, said Chen. The 1907 documents eventually militarized Japan to the point of no return till 1945 when it found itself simultaneously fighting three continental powers (China, the US, and Russia), noted Chen.

Given a tenuous strategic environment in northeastern Asia in general and a more assertive Japan in particular, Russian and Chinese sources indicated that more integrated operations and exercises by the two militaries would continue [in the future](#). The two continental powers, however, had different needs for these joint operations. For Russia,

whose forces were primarily deployed in the West, China’s growing conventional capability would be a useful counterbalance to the US-led alliance and a more proactive Japan. For Chinese military strategists, Russia’s vast strategic forces, though dated, served as a useful deterrent in any security contingency including Taiwan. At a tactical level, PLA’s access to Russian airfields and naval ports along Russia’s northern Pacific coast would significantly expand PLA’s operational scope. [Fu Qianshao](#), a prominent military commentator in Beijing, noted that use of Russian airfields by the PLAAF’s tactical aircraft such as the multipurpose J-16s “greatly” enhanced operational capability regarding “threats in the Sea of Japan.”

Fu did not specify the sources of these “threats.” Nor did the announcement of the annual “Northern/Interaction” by the Chinese Defense Ministry. Previously, almost all joint exercises with Russia were defined as not targeting any third party. This nearly ubiquitous statement was, however, [missing](#) for *Northern/Interaction-2023*. Five days later, Japan’s [2023 defense white paper](#) warned that Russia, China and North Korea contributed to “the most severe and complex security environment since the end of World War II.”

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The stage was, therefore, set for a far less predictable and perhaps more dangerous future for Northeast Asia. Major powers may not just return to the 1950 Sino-Soviet treaty of alliance with the sole designated target of a possible rebirth of “Japanese militarism.” Nor would it be a further throwback to the turn of the 19th–20th century when a Westernized and militarized Japan defeated the two continental powers (1895 and 1905).

For Japan, the switch from [chrysanthemum to sword](#) by the Meiji samurai-turn-reformers gave rise to a rapid and ambitious military ascendance for half a century (1895–1945), only to be capped by the combined forces of Russia, the US and China, plus US nuclear weapons in

1945. A 21st-century showdown between continental and maritime powers in this part of the world will make the Ukraine war, for all of its destruction and despair, child's play if they, and the rest of the world, survive such a catastrophic clash.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

MAY—AUGUST 2023

May 4, 2023: Chinese FM Qin Gang and Russian FM Lavrov meet on sidelines of the SCO annual foreign ministerial meeting in New Delhi, India.

May 16–17, 2023: China’s Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs Li Hui [visits](#) Ukraine, the first stop of his five-nation tour (Poland, France, Germany, and Russia) to discuss a peaceful end to the Ukraine conflict. Li holds talks with President Zelenskyy and other senior officials. In late February, China publishes its 12-point “position paper on the political settlement of the Ukraine crisis.”

May 18–19, 2023: First 5+1 summit between China and five central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) [is held](#) in Xi’an, China. President Xi Jinping chairs the summit and gives a keynote speech calling for more practical and institutionalized cooperation. The heads of the six nations issue the Xi’an Declaration and six other documents. More than 100 cooperation deals are inked during the two-day summit. A Chinese diplomat is quoted as saying that the newly elevated China-Central Asian platform does not target any third party. Nor does it intend to compete with any other mechanisms.

May 19, 2023: China’s Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs Li Hui [visits](#) Poland and exchanges views with Polish officials on the Ukraine issue.

May 23–24, 2023: Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin visits China. He starts his trip in Shanghai where he holds talks with President Xi and Premier Li Qing. The two prime ministers [sign](#) five agreements in the areas of investment, customs phytosanitary requirements, patent rights, sports, etc. In Beijing, Mishustin visits Qinghua University and lays a wreath at the Monument to the People’s Heroes in Tiananmen Square. In Shanghai, he meets the Russian

business community, joins a Russia-Chinese business forum, meets BRICS New Development Bank President Dilma Rousseff, and visits Shanghai Research Institute of Petrochemical Technology.

May 21–28, 2023: Chen Wenqing, head of the Commission for Political and Legal Affairs of the CPC Central Committee, [travels](#) to Moscow for the 11th International Meeting of High Representatives for Security Issues. Chen gives a speech on May 24. On May 22, Chen and Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev co-chair the eighth meeting of the China-Russia law-enforcement and security cooperation mechanism. Chen holds separate meetings, on the sidelines of the Security Conference, with Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Director Sergei Naryshkin, heads of the SCO and BRICS delegations.

May 24, 2023: President Xi [is invited](#) to deliver a speech to the second Eurasian Economic Forum of the Eurasian Economic Union via video. The forum is held online and offline in Moscow.

May 26, 2023: China’s Special Representative for Eurasian Affairs Li Hui [visits](#) Russia as the last stop of his five-nation tour (Ukraine, Poland, France, and Germany) to discuss a peaceful ending of the Ukraine conflict. Li held talks with FM Lavrov and Deputy Foreign Ministers Rudenko Andrey Yurevich and Galuzin Mikhail Yuryevich.

June 6–7, 2023: Two Russian Tu-96 and two Chinese H-6K strategic bombers [conduct](#) the [sixth](#) joint patrols of the Sea of Japan, East China Sea and Western Pacific. Russian bombers landed and took off from a Chinese military airfield.

June 15, 2023: President Putin [sends](#) a message for President Xi’s 70th birthday. This is

reciprocity for Xi's greeting message to Putin's 70th birthday on Oct. 7, 2022.

June 16, 2023: In his speech to the plenary session of the 26th St Petersburg International Economic Forum, President Putin [says](#) that over 80% of Russian trade with China is in the ruble or the yuan.

June 20, 2023: Ukraine's new ambassador to China Pavlo Riabikin presents copies of letters of credence. His appointment was made immediately after the Xi-Zelenskyy telephone talks on April 26. Riabikin is the former Ukraine Minister for Strategic Industries. His arrival fills a position that has been vacant since his predecessor died in February 2021.

June 23, 2023: China's UN Ambassador Geng Shuang [warns](#) that warring sides should stay away from the nuclear redline.

June 25, 2023: Foreign Minister Qin Gang [holds](#) meeting with Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Rudenko. The meeting is a day after the Wagner mutiny (June 23-24). Rudenko also holds separate meetings with Deputy FM Ma Zhaoxu and Special Representative of the Chinese Government on Korean Peninsula Affairs Liu Xiaoming. He also participates in the 8th international conference "Russia and China: Cooperation in a New Era" on June 27.

June 25, 2023: China [supports](#) the Russian government in its effort to stabilize the country following the Wagner "events."

June 26-27, 2023: Beijing [hosts](#) the Eighth International Conference "Russia and China: Cooperation in the New Era" jointly chaired by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Russian FM Lavrov and Chinese counterpart Qin Gang greeted participants during the conference opening in a video message.

July 3, 2023: Russian Navy Commander Adm. Nikolay Yevmenov [begins](#) eight-day visit to

China. After meeting Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu in Beijing, Yevmenov traveled to Qingdao and Shanghai where he visited naval facilities, submarine training centers, and naval shipyards.

July 4, 2023: 23rd SCO summit is held online, despite the lift of COVID restrictions. Iran formally becomes a full member state of the SCO. The 2,400-word New Delhi Declaration calls for "a more representative, just, democratic and multipolar world order" as opposed to "bloc, ideological, and confrontational approaches," "interference in the internal affairs of other countries under the pretext of combating terrorism and extremism," "global anti-missile systems," and "weaponization of outer space." It also calls for an early settlement of the Afghan issue and supports the Belt and Road Initiative (with the exception of India).

July 5-11, 2023: Russian missile corvettes (Project-20380 *Steregushchiy* class) *Gromkiy* (335) and *Sovershenniy* (333) [call](#) at Shanghai for a week-long (June 5-11) "business visit." Both vessels belong to Russia's Pacific Fleet, headquartered in Vladivostok. Their port call follows a six-week deployment to and back from Indonesia. Upon departure from Shanghai, the two ships conducted communication, maneuvering, and search and rescue exercises with Chinese naval vessels.

July 12, 2023: Russian FM Lavrov, Chinese FM Wang Yi and Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi [hold](#) trilateral talks during the 56th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM) with dialogue partners in Jakarta. Besides China and Russia, ASEAN's other dialogue partners include India, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, South Korea, the European Union, the UK, Canada, and the US. Lavrov and Wang Yi express support for ASEAN centrality in regional affairs.

July 13, 2023: Russian FM Lavrov and Chinese FM Wang Yi [hold](#) talks in Jakarta on sidelines of the annual AMM events. They discussed

bilateral, regional, and global issues, as well as SCO and BRICS affairs.

July 19-21, 2023: Ukraine's Deputy Economy Minister Taras Kachka [visits](#) China and holds talks with China's vice commerce minister where the two chair the 7th session of the China-Ukraine commission of economic and trade cooperation. China expresses interest in “importing quality products from Ukraine.” Kachka is quoted as saying that as an important partner of China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), Ukraine will “step up efforts to protect the safety of Chinese-funded enterprises in Ukraine.” Kachka is the first high-level visit by a Ukraine official to the country. The visit is apparently worked out by new Ukraine ambassador Pavlo Riabikin, who began his posting a month before.

July 20-23, 2023: Russia and China [conduct](#) joint naval drill “North/Interaction-2023” in the Sea of Japan. Five Russian and five Chinese naval ships participate. The Chinese ships pay a “friendly visit” to the port of Vladivostok after the drill. In total, about 20 combat maneuvers were conducted, including joint artillery firing at various types of targets.

July 21, 2023: Chinese UN Ambassador Geng Shuang [calls](#) in a UNSC session for the earliest resumption of grain and fertilizer export by Ukraine and Russia. The key for the Ukraine conflict is its political resolution, says Geng.

July 24, 2023: FM Wang Yi [meets](#) Secretary of the Russian Federation Security Council Nikolai Patrushev on the sidelines of the annual session of BRICS security officials in Johannesburg, South Africa. The two exchange views on bilateral and multilateral issues. Seven non-BRICS nations (Belarus, Burundi, Cuba, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) are invited and join the conference.

July 27, 2023: Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chinese Politburo member Li Hongzhong [join](#) celebration in Pyongyang,

DPRK for the 70th anniversary of the armistice agreement ending fighting in the Korean War. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un separately meets Li and Shoigu.

July 28-Aug. 21, 2023: Chinese and Russian navies [conduct](#) the third joint patrol of the western and northern Pacific.

Aug. 4, 2023: Chinese Embassy in Russia [lodges](#) representations over Russian border officers' “obstruction” of the entry of five Chinese citizens. The Russian side is said to have “brutal and excessive law enforcement conduct” toward the five on July 29 when they tried to enter Russia by car from Kazakhstan through Karauzek port in Astrakhan Oblast. The Russian side says it is an isolated incident and “is out of the political context,” and Russia holds no discriminatory policies or actions against Chinese citizens. Russia's initial investigation shows that “the destination of their visa application is not consistent with the actual destination, which is in violation of relevant Russian laws and regulations.”

Aug. 5-6, 2023: Ambassador Li Hui, Chinese special envoy for the Ukraine conflict, [participates](#) in international conference on the Ukraine-Russian conflict in Saudi Arabia.

Aug. 7, 2023: Chinese FM Wang Yi calls Russian counterpart Lavrov and told him that “on any international and multilateral occasion,” China would “uphold an independent and impartial position, make objective and rational statements, actively promote peace and talks, and strive to seek a political solution to the Ukraine crisis.”

Aug. 10, 2023: Russian Ambassador to South Korea Andrey Kuli [meets](#) Chinese Ambassador to South Korea Xing Haiming at the Chinese Embassy. They discussed Russia-China relations and issues surrounding the Korean Peninsula “in a warm, friendly mood.” This is eight days before the trilateral summit in Camp David between US President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol.

Aug. 12, 2023: Chinese Ambassador to North Korea Wang Yajun [invites](#) and meets Russian counterpart Ambassador Alexander Matsegora, his wife, and other Russian diplomats at the Chinese diplomatic mission in Pyongyang. “The sides exchanged opinions on a wide range of issues and agreed to continue close working contacts and friendly cooperation,” according to China. Chinese media also reports that the first secretary of the Russian Embassy in Beijing Kravchenko (Кравченко) also joined the meeting.

Aug. 14-19, 2023: Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu [attends](#) 11th Moscow Conference on International Security in Russia on Aug. 14-16 and pays a visit to Belarus on Aug. 16-19. In Moscow, Li delivers a speech at the conference, and meets with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and defense heads from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan, Vietnam and others. In Belarus, Li meets President Alexander Lukashenko and Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin.

Aug. 22-24, 2023: 15th BRICS Summit is held in Johannesburg, South Africa and invites six countries (Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) to join the group, from Jan. 1, 2024. BRICS' New Development Bank, headquartered in Shanghai, has provided more than \$35 billion for about 100 projects of its member states since 2015.

Aug. 23, 2023: Russia and China [react](#) strongly to the pending release of nuclear wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear power plant beginning Aug. 24. China lodges a strong diplomatic protest. Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told *Moskva-24* television that Japan should allow interested countries to take samples of wastewater from the nuclear power plant.

