

# Reviewing the Relations between China and Russia by the Realist Perspective

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**Abstract:** This article explores the development and evolution of China Russia relations from the perspective of structural realism. The article first outlines the basic concepts of structural realism theory, and then analyzes the changes in Sino Russian relations during and after the Cold War, particularly in terms of cooperation and confrontation in response to the unipolar world order dominated by the United States. The article emphasizes the strategic cooperation between China and Russia in the economic and military fields, and uses the Ukraine crisis as an example to illustrate the interaction between the two countries in the global power dynamics.

**Keywords:** China Russia Relations; Structural Realism; Strategic Cooperation; Global Power Dynamic.

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## 1. Introduction

The intricate dynamics of Sino-Russian relations have long been the subject of close attention and debate in the field of international relations [3]. Given their status as prominent global powers, the relationship between China and Russia carries extensive consequences for global politics, security, and economics. Following the conclusion of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union represented the establishment of a unipolar global order in which the United States emerged as the dominant power. China and Russia's growing influence in global affairs is leading to increased convergence between the two nations. This convergence is driving the trend towards a multi-polar world and challenging the dominance of the United States-led unipolar order [4]. Nevertheless, the United States has shifted its strategic focus towards the east and is now pursuing a "contact plus containment strategy" towards China and Russia. This poses a threat to the strategic security of both countries. In response to the pressure from the United States, it is important to consider the future direction of the China-Russia relationship. This research aims to investigate and examine the nature of this interaction through the lens of structural realism. Structural realism theory offers a conceptual framework for understanding the actions of states within the international system and their propensity for engaging in warfare.

Ultimately, in my term paper i just want to enhance the ongoing discourse on international relations theory by showcasing the practicality and constraints of structural realism in the crucial bilateral relationships of the modern world.

## 2. What is Structural Realism

Structural realism is the dominant theory in the field of international relations and the theoretical pillar for analyzing the complex dynamics of China Russia relations. This theory was mainly proposed by Kenneth Waltz in his pioneering work "International Political Theory", which argues that the anarchic structure of the international system is the main determinant of state behavior [16]. In an anarchic international system, there is no ultimate governing body, which forces countries to prioritize their own interests and

only focus on their own maintenance and protection.

Waltz distinguished the concepts of "system" and "structure". The international system is defined by its principles of order and the allocation of powers among units (countries). The lack of a central regulatory body in the international system means that countries must rely on self-help to ensure their interests. The system structure characterized by the distribution of power between countries determines the pattern of international relations. According to structural realism, states are rational actors who respond strategically to the constraints and opportunities brought about by international structures [1].

Mearsheimer extends Waltz's view by proposing a more aggressive version of structural realism. He argues that great powers are not content merely to ensure their own survival; they are also driven by an intrinsic drive to acquire as much power as possible in order to ensure their own security. Structural realists recognize that states can go to war for any number of reasons, which makes it impossible to come up with a simple theory that points to a single factor as the main cause of war. There is no question that states sometimes start wars to gain power over a rival state and enhance their security. But security is not always the principle driving force behind a state's decision for war. However in other words, ideology or economic considerations are sometimes paramount [10].

Structural realism provides an important perspective for understanding the relationship between China and Russia. As two important post-Cold War powers and as key players in the global structural system, the perspective of structural realism allows us to take into account the changes in the global distribution of power and the choices made by China and Russia in the light of international upheavals.

## 3. Long Time Sino-Russian Relations

The development of China Russia relations is a complex process, so after clarifying the historical relationship between China and Russia, we can better explore China Russia relations from a structuralist perspective.

### 3.1. The Cold War Period

During the Cold War, Sino-Russian relations were initially characterised by a strong ideological and political alliance

based on a common communist orientation. In the 1950s, China and the USSR signed the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, marking a period of close cooperation between the two countries [2]. China and the Soviet Union exhibited notable parallels in their historical experiences, encompassing the collapse of their respective old imperial structures, profound societal upheavals, and significant contributions to the global conflicts. Nevertheless, the imbalance or disparity between the two nations has endured, evident not only in the Soviet Union's ongoing expansionist agenda, but also in the substantial disparity in overall national strength between China and the Soviet Union, as well as the profound influence of Soviet Communist ideology on the reshaping and assimilation of Chinese society. The impact of the Soviet Union on twentieth-century China can be characterised as comprehensive, long-lasting, and significant. Without a doubt, the extensive economic and technical support offered by the Soviet Union to China during the initial period of friendly relations between the two countries played a vital and indispensable role in revitalising China's economy, establishing key industries, and protecting the independence and security of the newly formed government. The transfer of technology, particularly nuclear technology, from the Soviet Union to China on a huge scale was unparalleled. However, the relationship soon deteriorated due to ideological fissures, border disputes, and competition for leadership within the communist bloc [17]. The level of Soviet interest and engagement in China's internal affairs reached an unprecedented magnitude. Mao was deeply concerned by the complete adoption of the Soviet model of centralization in China. The distinct experiences and personalities of Mao and Khrushchev hindered effective communication between the two leaders, ultimately prompting Mao to revert back to the "mass line". Mao Zedong demonstrated exceptional leadership skills, progressing from surpassing Britain and approaching the United States during the Great Leap Forward, engaging in ideological debates in the 1960s, to uncovering individuals with similar ideologies to Khrushchev during the Cultural Revolution and the 7,000-mile march. In the 1960s, Sino-Soviet relations underwent a significant transformation from being comrades and brothers to becoming enemies of the world in just over a decade. This change was influenced by the great ideological debates of the Cultural Revolution, the scrutiny of Khrushchev's policies, and the presence of millions of troops along the 7,000-kilometer border between China and the Soviet Union. The ideology played a role as a "multiplier," magnifying and distorting the similarities and differences in the bilateral relations. Such a dynamic is rarely observed in the history of international relations. This occurrence is a rarity in the annals of international relations. The Sino-Soviet split was a significant division during the Cold War era that had a profound impact on the global political scene.

### 3.2. Post-Cold War Period

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 signified a significant transformation in Sino-Russian ties. In the period following the Cold War, the two nations discovered shared interests in their collective resistance against the U.S.-dominated global power structure [5]. During this period, there was a steady improvement in relations between the two countries due to shared challenges in the global arena and a mutual desire to counteract the influence of Western

powers. In 1996, the bilateral relationship was officially elevated to a 'coordinated strategic partnership', indicating increased collaboration between the two nations in several domains including as politics, economy, and security.

In the 2000s, the alliance was strengthened even more due to mutual economic interests and similar security concerns. The increasing energy needs of China and the abundant natural resources of Russia have resulted in substantial collaboration in the energy sector between the two nations. The primary objective of the meeting between the Russian and Chinese premiers was to execute the agreements and consensus established by the two heads of state during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Russia in March. As part of the agreement, a formal contract was signed, affirming that Russia would provide China with an extra 10 million tonnes of crude oil annually. In 2009, Russia possessed 8.2 billion tonnes of confirmed oil reserves, accounting for around 4-5% of the global confirmed reserves. This positioned Russia as the eighth largest holder of oil reserves worldwide. Russia's energy sector serves as the primary catalyst for its economic growth. In the last decade, it has successfully supplied 100 million tonnes of oil, amounting to a total value of \$85 billion, due to the significant surge in global energy prices. Without a doubt, the Russian side will benefit from this, but it has also become a crucial assurance for our progress. Furthermore, China and Russia are currently collaborating on the construction of the Tianwan nuclear power facility in Jiangsu province. China primarily invests in Russia's energy sector, mineral resources development, forestry, trade, textiles, home appliances, telecommunications, services, and property development. From a political standpoint, the two nations have similar views on global governance and frequently present a unified front in international forums to oppose Western interference. This is evident in their attitudes on matters like the Syrian conflict. China and Russia together advocate for the preservation of stability and sovereignty in Syria. On political and humanitarian issues related to Syria, representatives from China and Russia advocate for upholding justice in the country. During the meeting, Chinese representatives strongly expressed their disapproval of foreign intervention in Syria's internal affairs, as well as their disapproval of undermining Syria's security and stability. In contrast, the Russian representative clearly stated that the US air strikes on Syria violated international legal norms, violated Syria's autonomy, and could potentially exacerbate the situation in the region. These activities help strengthen their strategic alliance. The alignment of interests between the two countries in opposing American power and advocating for a multipolar global system is a significant feature of their relationship in the 21st century.

### 3.3. Structural Realism Perspective

Structural realism views the historical development of Sino-Russian ties as a reaction to the evolving dynamics of the global system. In the era of the Cold War, the globe was divided into two opposing powers, which initially formed an alliance. However, when their interests diverged, competition arose, leading to a state of rivalry and alienation. Both sides aimed to increase their relative dominance inside the communist bloc [2]. In the period following the Cold War, the United States has become the dominant power in the world. This has led China and the United States to join forces in order to counterbalance this dominance and promote a world with

multiple centres of power. Additionally, China and Russia have once again formed a strategic partnership due to shared interests, reflecting the power dynamics at the core of structural realism.

## **4. Structural Realist Analysis of Sino-Russian Relations**

### **4.1. Power Dynamics in the Post-Cold War International System**

The Cold War, a conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, lasted over 40 years. It concluded with the complete fall of the Soviet Union and a decrease in the dominance of the United States. This ultimately led to the disintegration of the two-tier pattern of world politics, fundamentally altering the pattern of global power, and giving birth to a unipolar world dominated by the United States [6].

In the post-Cold War era, China has continued to pursue the policy of focusing on economic construction, deepening reforms, and single-mindedly carrying out modernisation, with a view to reaching the level of a medium-developed country by the middle of the century. Thanks to its domestic political stability, rapid economic development and growing national strength, China's international status has steadily improved and its international influence has grown, making it an increasingly important force in the world for maintaining peace and promoting development [15].

Nevertheless, China's ascent has brought about substantial alterations to its global surroundings, distinct from the conditions prevailing in the post-Cold War era. China is facing heightened strategic strain. During this period, the global situation was undergoing a transition, and the United States did not consider China to be a significant prospective rival due to the uncertain geopolitical dynamics among major countries [8]. China's burgeoning economy is posing a significant challenge to the dominant position of the United States, since its strategic objectives are being swiftly achieved. In addition to the disparities in social systems, China and the United States also experience differences and conflicts in ideology, human rights, trade, and other areas. The United States, driven by a Cold War mindset, perceives China as its primary potential adversary in the future. Consequently, the China-United States relationship has transitioned from a cooperative strategic partnership to a relationship characterised by strategic competition. Simultaneously, the situation in Russia is far from optimistic. In the global arena, Russia's national security is confronted with unparalleled threats when compared to the Cold War era. Russia is under significant pressure from Western countries, particularly the United States, to undermine its power and impose limitations on it. The amicable relationship between Russia and the West has terminated, with the West harbouring no desire for Russia to attain strength through reforms. Instead, the West seeks to establish Russia as a subordinate and reliant little ally. Hence, although offering some assistance to Russia's reforms, the Western countries have seized the chance to undermine Russia by means of NATO's expansion towards the east, resulting in the relinquishment of a substantial portion of Russia's land and the erosion of its strategic standing. Recently, due to Western influence, the majority of Eastern European countries have wholeheartedly aligned themselves with the West. They have either joined or are actively pursuing membership in the two prominent Western organisations, namely the European Union (EU) and the

North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Consequently, Eastern Europe has once again assumed the role of a protective barrier for the West in its dealings with Russia.

China and Russia are experiencing a growing alignment of their strategic goals as the global balance of power shifts. This convergence exemplifies the notion of structural realism, in which states adapt their policies in response to shifts in the global power dynamics. Amidst a global power structure dominated by a single superpower, China and the United States are striving to establish their influence and position themselves as a balancing force against U.S. dominance, with the aim of fostering a world characterised by several centres of power[8]. China and Russia share the belief that a multipolar world is the most democratic and beneficial model for the international political landscape. They consider it to be in the best interests of all nations and conducive to resolving complex global issues. Both countries are committed to working towards the creation of a fair, peaceful, and rational new international order. The Asia-Pacific region is poised to dominate the future and is committed to fostering lasting peace and cultivating amicable, collaborative relationships within the region. Given the widespread agreement, China and Russia will have the ability to engage in thorough discussions and collaborate effectively on global matters. They will find middle ground while considering their respective national interests, and consistently align their actions to promote peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and globally.

Due to the dominant influence of the United States and the meddling of Western powers in China and Russia, these two countries, existing in a chaotic state within the international community, are compelled to address these challenges and opportunities by forming an ever-changing alliance, a phenomenon that aligns with the principles of structural realism.

### **4.2. China-Russia Strategic Alliance: From the Perspective of Structural Realism**

At a time of US hegemony, both China and Russia are seeking greater regional and global influence, and both are pursuing power-maximisation strategies. The alliance between the two countries does not stem from ideological agreement, but is based on a pragmatic realisation that the combined power of the two countries will pose a stronger challenge to Western dominance [7]. This strategic alliance is manifested in a number of areas, including military co-operation, economic partnership, and political alignment on global issues.

#### **(1) Economic Cooperation: Energy as a Cornerstone**

A mutually beneficial partnership has been developed between Russia and China, driven by Russia's rich natural resources and China's rapid economic growth and increasing energy demands. China and Russia have engaged in growing dialogue within the energy industry in recent years, with a shared commitment to forging a fresh partnership centred around energy collaboration. The exchange of energy resources plays a crucial role in the strategic collaboration between China and Russia. The increasing compatibility between these two nations indicates promising opportunities for economic cooperation. This collaboration extends beyond simple commerce and represents a strategic endeavour within the context of structural realism, highlighting reciprocal advantages and diminishing reliance on the energy market dominated by Western powers. The Siberian gas pipeline,

which Russia is actively endorsing, has the capacity to invigorate the development of both countries and enhance economic collaboration.

#### (2) Military Co-operation: Counterbalance to the West

The profound integration of the Chinese and Russian forces is important because it establishes a stronger basis for military cooperation, hence enhancing the strategic cooperative relationship between the two countries. The profound integration of military and technical cooperation between China and Russia will unavoidably exert a discernible influence on the hegemony of the United States. In recent decades, the United States has established worldwide dominance through its formidable military capabilities and advanced military technologies. The enhanced military technology collaboration between China and Russia has enabled them to jointly enhance the combat prowess and operational capacities of their armed forces, even surpassing the United States in several crucial domains. As a result, the US influence and position in global affairs have unavoidably diminished, perhaps paving the way for challenges to US military supremacy in specific regions.

The military cooperation between Russia and China has brought enormous advantages to the armed forces of both countries. The implementation of the cooperation initiative not only improved the military hardware and technical proficiency of the two factions, but also greatly strengthened the armed forces of the two countries. The joint military exercises held by the two countries, including the Vostok exercise and naval cooperation exercise, demonstrate military strength and symbolize strategic repositioning. These military exercises and weapons agreements demonstrate the commitment of both sides to assist each other and maintain each other's security concerns, especially in the context of combating US influence.

### 4.3. Case Study: Ukraine Crisis

The Ukrainian crisis is an important case study for analysing Sino-Russian relations from a structural realist perspective. In the Ukrainian crisis, Russia's actions can be interpreted as a response to the encroachment of the West (especially NATO) on its influence within its traditional sphere of influence [11]. China's endorsement of Russia's stance, however careful, can be interpreted as a calculated manoeuvre to bolster a crucial ally in counterbalancing against the Western powers while sidestepping direct conflict.

Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed and issued the Joint Declaration of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Deepening Comprehensive Strategic Collaborative Partnership in the New Era in the Kremlin in Moscow on the afternoon of 21 January 2023. This declaration affirms that both parties agree that the principles and objectives outlined in the United Nations Charter should be followed and that international law must be upheld in relation to Ukraine. The Russian side acknowledges and approves of the Chinese side's objective and unbiased stance on the Ukrainian problem. The parties strongly condemn any State or coalition of States attempting to gain military, political, or any other advantages at the expense of the legitimate security interests of other States. The Russian side reiterated its commitment to restarting peace talks as soon as possible, which China appreciates, and welcomed China's willingness to play an active role in resolving the Ukrainian crisis through political and diplomatic means [14].

Evidently, China and Russia are in complete agreement over the Ukrainian matter. This alignment is indicative of the structural realist viewpoint, wherein states modify their policies and alliances in reaction to shifts in the global power dynamics and perceived risks to their security and interests.

Structural realism offers a robust framework for comprehending the strategic realignment between Russia and China, although it does have some drawbacks. These limitations become evident when considering elements such as cultural influences, domestic politics, and individual leadership.

## 5. Limitations of Structural Realism in Sino-Russian Relations

### 5.1. Cultural and Ideological Factors

Structural realism, which prioritises power and survival within an anarchic international system, tends to underestimate the influence of culture and ideology in international relations. Nevertheless, the dynamics of Sino-Russian relations are shaped not solely by geopolitical considerations, but also by the effect of cultural and historical connections [9]. Diplomatic relations can be significantly influenced by mutual views of cultural affinity and a shared history of interaction.

Furthermore, the divergent ideological trajectories pursued by China and Russia after the Cold War - with China adopting economic reforms and Russia undergoing a turbulent shift towards a market economy - have significantly influenced their individual foreign policies, which cannot be entirely accounted for by structural realism [12].

### 5.2. Internal Political Factors

Structural realism sometimes fails to consider the influence of domestic political dynamics in the field of international affairs. Domestic political issues significantly influence foreign policy decisions in both China and Russia [13]. For instance, the presence of patriotic sentiments within the domestic spheres of both nations might influence foreign policy decisions towards a more forceful approach. This is because leaders in both countries aim to enhance their credibility and gain popular backing by showcasing their power on the global stage.

### 5.3. The Interconnectedness of Economies and the Process of Global Integration

Structural realism fails to adequately account for the intricate nature of economic interconnection and globalisation, which is a further drawback. The economic partnership between China and Russia, particularly in the energy industry, serves as both a strategic alliance and a manifestation of the two nations' integration into the global economy. The economic interconnectedness between both countries results in shared vulnerabilities and limitations, which can influence the foreign policy decisions of both nations and foster collaboration that goes beyond a simple power equilibrium.

Furthermore, the impact of non-state actors and transnational companies, along with international financial system and trade networks, enhances the interconnectedness of the international system and deviates from the typical recognition of structural realism, which portrays it as more chaotic and without order.

Although structural realism offers useful insights into the

strategic aspects of Sino-Russian ties, its shortcomings become evident when taking into account cultural, ideological, internal political, and economic issues.

## 6. Conclusion

In this final paper, I analyze the complex relationship between China and Russia from the perspective of structural realism, which provides important reference value for the behavior of China and Russia in the international community under an anarchic system.

Through the analysis of the historical trajectory of China Russia relations, from the perspective of structural realism, it is not difficult to find that China Russia relations have changed with changes in the global power landscape. During the Cold War, the interaction between the two countries was influenced by ideological and geopolitical differences. On the contrary, throughout the post Cold War period, the motivation for strategic cooperation between China and Russia was a common goal, which was to weaken the hegemony of the United States, reduce the dominant position of Western countries, and promote the development of a multipolar world pattern. This measure aligns with the core principles of structural realism, which prioritize the balance of power and the adoption of survival strategies within a global framework of anarchy.

The development trajectory of China Russia relations is expected to be determined by the continuous changes in global power dynamics. As the international system is expected to shift towards multipolarity, the strategic alliance between Russia and China will be further strengthened. However, this relationship is dynamic and will be influenced by several factors, such as internal political progress, economic fluctuations, and global events.

Essentially, examining China Russia relations from the perspective of structural realism helps us understand the strategic alliance between China and Russia. However, it also emphasizes the importance of integrating other perspectives and variables to comprehensively grasp the complexity of this crucial bilateral connection. This article can provide a brief reference for the current international situation.

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