

‘NO LIMITS’: XI’S SUPPORT FOR PUTIN IS UNWAVERING

BY MATTHEW JOHNSON, JOHN POMFRET, AND MATT POTTINGER

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INTRODUCTION

After nearly three years of self-imposed isolation, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping traveled abroad last month to Kazakhstan and then Uzbekistan to attend the Beijing-backed Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit. On the meeting’s sidelines, Xi also held a much-publicized one-on-one exchange with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the first time the two autocrats have met in person since the Russian leader launched a full-blown invasion of Ukraine in February. Media coverage of the bilateral exchange concluded that the Sino-Russian “no limits” partnership was cooling. In fact, a closer examination of statements and actions by Beijing and Moscow before, during, and after the exchange suggests the opposite.

It is perhaps no coincidence that just after the meeting, Putin returned to Russia and, in a September 21 speech, ordered a partial mobilization and again threatened retaliatory use of nuclear weapons in the event “of a threat to the territorial integrity of our country and to defend Russia and our people.” Putin added: “This is not a bluff.”¹ In a follow-on ceremony and speech on September 30, Putin declared the Russian annexation of about 15 percent of Ukraine’s territory and brandished his nukes yet again, saying the United States had “created a precedent” by dropping atomic bombs on Japan in 1945. If Xi has reservations about the war in Ukraine, an educated guess would be that he wants Putin to get the job done faster.

The enduring nature of Xi and Putin’s animosity toward the West poses significant challenges for Washington and its allies as Moscow continues its war in Ukraine. Thus far, Beijing has held back from supporting Moscow in a manner that could trigger major U.S. sanctions. Yet Xi may decide to cross that threshold if push comes to shove.

SAMARKAND SUMMIT “CONCERNS”

Until last month, Xi had not traveled abroad since a trip to Myanmar in January 2020, made before COVID-19 had erupted into a global pandemic. For Xi, simply showing up in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, for the SCO summit was a statement of how much he has invested in his partnership with Putin. Xi’s travel also coincided with a sensitive moment on China’s political calendar, occurring mere weeks before CCP leaders are scheduled to hold the Party’s 20th Congress, during which Xi is expected to secure a precedent-breaking third term as general secretary.

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1. President Vladimir Putin, Russian Presidential Administration, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” September 21, 2022. (<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/69390>)

To judge by the headlines, Xi's purpose in traveling to Uzbekistan was to signal his growing ambivalence about Putin's war in Ukraine. That interpretation rested on a single comment by Putin, delivered to Xi in front of the press: "We [Russia] appreciate our Chinese friends' balanced position in connection with the Ukraine crisis. We understand your questions and concerns in this regard."²

Three key words — "questions and concerns" — supposedly betray a widening gap between the two authoritarian giants. *The New York Times* declared the meeting "subdued" and "lukewarm."³ The following day, when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi criticized Putin's war in a televised meeting, journalists conflated Modi's blunt remarks with Putin's ambiguous comment. According to the *Financial Times*, the "West sees Xi and Modi critique of Putin as shift in view of Ukraine war."⁴

For reporters, policymakers, and market players yearning for good news after many months of geopolitical unrest, news of a potential Sino-Russian split appeared welcome. The National Security Council's coordinator for strategic communications, John Kirby, cited Modi's comments and the purported critique by Xi as signs that Putin was "only further isolating himself."⁵

The evidence does not support this view. Xi, in contrast with Modi, made no public criticism. Nor did Putin elaborate on his brief reference to China's "questions and concerns."

Putin's full quote is even more ambiguous. Immediately after promising to address Xi's "questions and concerns," Putin added: "though we have spoken about this before." Many press reports elided that qualification, which complicates the narrative about the supposedly new Xi-Putin disaffection. More importantly, in his actual public remarks in Samarkand, Xi re-upped his commitment to "work with Russia to extend strong mutual support on issues concerning each other's core interests, and deepen practical cooperation in trade, agriculture, connectivity and other areas."⁶ Clearly, Putin's "core interests" include Ukraine. And, while press reports emphasized that Xi did not mention the word "Ukraine," reading it as another sign of distance from Putin, references to Ukraine have been omitted from every readout of meetings between the two leaders, including their joint statement on February 4, just before Putin's invasion and the start of Beijing's strong support.

To put it another way, the media put words in Xi's mouth. Xi did not state an anti-war position. He did not publicly press for Russia to withdraw, cease hostilities, or make concessions in Ukraine — and there is no evidence to suggest he did so in private, either. More likely, although one can only speculate, is that Xi complained privately that Putin is not winning the war.

2. Russian Presidential Administration, Press Release, "Meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping," September 15, 2022. (<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69356>)

3. "Putin acknowledges China may have 'questions and concerns' about the war," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2022. (<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/09/15/world/ukraine-russia-war>)

4. @FT, *Twitter*, September 18, 2022. (<https://twitter.com/FT/status/1571520299002109952>)

5. National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby, The White House, *Remarks to the Press*, September 16, 2022. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2022/09/16/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-national-security-council-coordinator-for-strategic-communications-john-kirby-september-16-2022>)

6. PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press Release, "President Xi Jinping Meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin," September 15, 2022. (https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202209/t20220915_10766678.html)

XI'S EMISSARY TRAVELS TO MOSCOW

In their haste to report Sino-Russian tensions, journalists also ignored signs of steadfast Chinese support for Russia that emerged just before the summit in Uzbekistan. On September 9, close Xi confidant and CCP Politburo Standing Committee member Li Zhanshu visited Russia for meetings with Putin and representatives from the State Duma, the lower house in Russia's rubber-stamp legislature. Li's meeting received scant mention in the Western press until a Russian video of Li's remarks began circulating on social media.⁷

Speaking to Duma representatives, Li declared that “on issues representing the vital interests of Russia, we also always provide our support and our understanding.” Li continued: “For example, as to the current Ukraine problem, the United States and NATO forced themselves up to Russia's doorstep in a move that compromised Russia's national security and the livelihood of the Russian people. In that situation, Russia took the only action that could be taken. China expresses its understanding and from multiple aspects China coordinated strategic responses. I think it can be said that Russia was cornered. In that sense, Russia, to protect its core national interests, launched a counterattack.”⁸

In other words, just days before Xi and Putin's meeting, Beijing sent an emissary to Moscow to deliver the strongest official statement of Chinese support for Putin's war that exists in the public record. Li even endorsed Putin's claim that the invasion of Ukraine was a “counterattack” on NATO forces. He used the Chinese term “策应,” which means to “coordinate strategic responses” with an ally during wartime. The term has been a fixture in Chinese military texts since the Song dynasty, appearing in the martial classics *Outlaws of the Marsh* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.⁹

Chinese media apparently did not broadcast Li's comments, indicating they were meant to be heard in Moscow alone. That his words contradict Beijing's official public position — that China supports mediation in Ukraine¹⁰ — provides a glimpse into how China and Russia communicate directly with each other in settings not meant for the consumption of global audiences.

After Li's trip to Moscow and the Putin-Xi meeting in Samarkand, Putin sent his own confidante, Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, to China. Beijing's state media said subjects of the meeting included “the increasingly intensified regional conflicts in the continents of Europe and Asia” — code for Ukraine and Taiwan. The two sides agreed to closer contacts between their militaries, to more joint exercises, and to “always firmly support each other on issues concerning each other's core interests.”¹¹ Just one week later, Russian state media outlet TASS announced that China and Russia had signed contracts for mutual hosting of ground stations for their Beidou and GLONASS global navigation satellite systems, which would improve targeting and guidance of both countries' weapons systems.¹²

7. @HAOHONG_CFA, *Twitter*, September 13, 2022. (https://twitter.com/HAOHONG_CFA/status/1569864010128039936)

8. *Ibid.*

9. “策应,” *Baidu*, accessed October 5, 2022. (<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%AD%96%E5%BA%94/4380360>)

10. Spokesperson Zhao Lijian, PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Remarks to the Press*, March 9, 2022. (https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202203/t20220309_10649938.html)

11. “Russia-Ukraine War: Russian Setbacks Are Hampering Army Recruitment, Says Pentagon Official,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 2022. (<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/09/19/world/ukraine-russia-war>)

12. “Russia, China sign contracts on mutual deployment of navigation stations,” *TASS* (Russia), September 27, 2022. (<https://tass.com/science/1514083>)

SANCTIONS WATCH: THE HARDWARE BEHIND THE HANDSHAKES

Diplomatic coordination and rhetorical support are not all that Xi has given Putin since the start of the Ukraine war. Bilateral trade is intensifying as well.

Overall, bilateral trade between China and Russia jumped 30 percent in the first seven months of 2022 compared with the same period last year, according to Beijing's own General Administration of Customs. Chinese sales of semiconductors to Russia fell 73 percent in March but rebounded in April, again per official figures. In July, they grew an additional 61 percent over June.¹³ In March, U.S. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo threatened to “shut down” any firm exporting to Russia because “almost every chip in the world and in China is made using U.S. equipment and software.”¹⁴ Overall, March-June 2022 semiconductor exports from China to Russia grew by 209 percent year over year.¹⁵

China has also become the biggest market for Russian energy, more than doubling its imports of steel-making coal from Russia in March, and in June overtaking Germany to become the largest buyer of Russian oil.¹⁶ Russian imports of Chinese aluminum oxide (used in weapons development but also in tin cans) have jumped by a factor of more than 600, hitting 153,000 metric tons in May 2022 compared with 227 metric tons in May 2021, although Russia's aluminum stores are still far below pre-war levels.¹⁷ In June, the U.S. Commerce Department blacklisted five Chinese entities “for their continued support of Russia's military efforts.”¹⁸ And earlier this month, U.S. officials declassified evidence of Moscow buying weapons from North Korea.¹⁹

Russian dependency on China works to Xi's advantage, giving Beijing significant bargaining power for China's energy and food needs and obliging Moscow to provide military cooperation where it can still offer it. By the same token, a grievously weakened — or even deposed — Vladimir Putin could become a serious liability for China. Nevertheless, Xi and his minions have, thus far, been careful not to cross a threshold that could spark massive U.S. sanctions on, for example, Chinese banks.

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13. PRC General Administration of Customs, “Customs Statistics,” accessed October 5, 2022. (<http://43.248.49.97/indexEn>)

14. “Chip exports to Russia plunged by 90% after curbs-U.S. official,” *Reuters*, June 29, 2022. (<https://www.reuters.com/technology/chip-exports-russia-plunged-by-90-after-curbs-us-official-2022-06-29>)

15. Francois Chimits and Antonia Hmaid, “China moves to fill the void left by Russian sanctions – on its own terms,” *Merics*, August 26, 2022. (<https://merics.org/en/short-analysis/china-moves-fill-void-left-russian-sanctions-its-own-terms>)

16. “China Buys Cheap Russian Coking Coal as World Shuns Moscow,” *Bloomberg*, April 20, 2022. (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-20/china-buys-cheap-coking-coal-from-russia-as-world-shuns-moscow>); Reid Standish, “Interview: How Much Is China Helping Russia Finance Its War In Ukraine?” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, June 26, 2022. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/china-russia-ukraine-war-sanctions-analysis/31915619.html>)

17. Brian Spegele, “Chinese Firms Are Selling Russia Goods Its Military Needs to Keep Fighting in Ukraine,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 2022. (<https://www.wsj.com/amp/articles/chinese-firms-are-selling-russia-goods-its-military-needs-to-keep-fighting-in-ukraine-11657877403>)

18. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Industry and Security, Press Release, “Commerce Rule Applies Powerful Restrictions Directly on Entities Seeking to Supply Russia's Military Since Start of Invasion of Ukraine,” June 28, 2022. (<https://www.bis.doc.gov/index.php/documents/about-bis/newsroom/press-releases/3042-2022-06-28-bis-press-release-russia-backfill-entity-list/file>)

19. Julian E. Barnes, “Russia Is Buying North Korean Artillery, According to U.S. Intelligence,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 2022. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/05/us/politics/russia-north-korea-artillery.html>)

THE SINO-RUSSIAN PARTNERSHIP IS STRONG, AND SO IS XI

Xi will stand by his partner in Russia, and Putin will reciprocate, because both are seeking a force multiplier in their long-term strategies to erode Western power. For Xi, Putin is the central partner in the creation of his authoritarian bloc. For Putin, Xi is the indispensable backstop keeping Russia's economy afloat while the country weathers sanctions.

In his main speech to the SCO, Xi urged the assembled heads of state to “support each other's efforts to safeguard security and development interests” and “prevent external forces from instigating ‘Color Revolutions’” — the latter a reference to anti-authoritarian uprisings and the West's supposed strategy to subvert and liberalize by means of “smokeless war.”²⁰ This echoes language Xi has directed at internal audiences since last year, when he gave an epochal speech to the Party's Sixth Plenum meeting in Beijing. A joint battle against Western-instigated color revolutions is the ideological common denominator that has bound Xi to Putin and undergirded the “no limits” pact unveiled at the Beijing Winter Olympics in February.

In his SCO remarks, Xi went on to propose a series of initiatives to protect against the specter of Color Revolution: new currency payment and settlement systems (to circumvent sanctions), more cooperation on supply chains and big data (to improve surveillance capacity and shift production away from Western-built systems), and a new security architecture covering terrorism, space, cyber, and biological threats (as counters to NATO and “Quad” initiatives).

All things considered, Xi's solidarity with Putin goes far beyond a marriage of convenience between authoritarian powers looking to secure spheres of influence from U.S. intervention. Putin's grievances, and the background of Soviet collapse and post-Soviet dysfunction that brought Putin to power, form the bedrock of Xi's own worldview, which he has consistently inculcated in Party cadres and the Chinese public since he rose to power a decade ago.

Xi's SCO speech received far less coverage than Putin's comment about Chinese “questions and concerns,” but its significance was greater. The shared Xi-Putin worldview was on full display. To Xi, Putin's Ukraine setbacks are just that — setbacks. They do not obviate Xi and Putin's shared mission of cleaving the international order into authoritarian and democratic blocs. If anything, those setbacks underscore the threat from the West and the importance to both Xi and Putin of Russia's ultimate victory in Ukraine. Indeed, that victory is necessary for China: Without it, Xi may be unable to count on reciprocal support from his “best and most intimate friend” as he looks out across the Taiwan Strait.²¹

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20. President Xi Jinping, *Address at the 22nd Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, September 16, 2022. (<https://archive.ph/p000M>)

21. “China's Xi awards ‘best friend’ Putin friendship medal, promises support,” Reuters, June 8, 2018. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-russia-idUSKCN1J41RO>)

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Matthew Johnson is a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution. **John Pomfret** is the former Beijing bureau chief for *The Washington Post*. **Matt Pottinger** is the chairman of FDD's China Program.

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