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Chinese Perspectives on China–Russia Relations since 24 February 2022¹

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Abstract

This article provides a review of Chinese official discourse, expert debates, and media narratives on China's relationship with Russia since February 24, 2022. It suggests that it remains an open question whether China's relationship with Russia will develop as one determined by China–US relations or as a genuine endogenous relationship.

From late 2021 to February 24, 2022, Russian military maneuvers in the area around the Ukrainian border sparked intensive discussion and debate in China, both within the expert community and among the general public, with a focus on what to make of Russia's true intentions and possible plan for Ukraine. Although a lot of Chinese experts and Russia-watchers expected that Russia might send troops into the two self-proclaimed independent republics in eastern Ukraine or replicate the operation conducted in South Ossetia in 2008, very few predicted the full-scale attack that began on February 24.

Since the war broke out, the Chinese state has, generally speaking, maintained a consistent set of policy stances and narratives. It has tried to walk a fine line between the two sides by making vague statements about the need to uphold the UN principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, while respecting all parties' legitimate security concerns. Official media have been discouraged from using terms such as “war” and “invasion” to describe the Russian action in Ukraine; early on, the term “Russian–Ukrainian conflict” was preferred, while more recently the situation has often been described as the “Ukrainian crisis.” Meanwhile, the Chinese state has consistently framed the US and NATO's eastward expansion as the root cause of the war. The Chinese state has also declined to mediate between the warring parties directly, emphasizing that China is not a party to the conflict and “whoever started the trouble should end it.” More recently, Chinese official sources have expressed the view that “the Ukraine crisis is not what we want to see;” and have increasingly emphasized “promoting dialogue for peace” as China's basic position.

In the analysis of some Chinese specialists, China's position on the Russian–Ukrainian conflict is not actually “neutral,” because neutrality requires taking no position regardless of the behavior of either party to a conflict. In fact, China has not recognized the independence of Crimea, Luhansk or Donetsk and still

openly advocates the preservation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Moreover, China's voting record on all UN resolutions related to the Russia–Ukraine conflict suggests that the country votes on an issue-by-issue basis (Zhao 2022).

On the one-year anniversary of the Russia attack, the Chinese state somewhat unexpectedly issued a document entitled “China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis” (Government of China 2023). In addition to reiterating several key stances, the position paper outlines a number of major policy areas as either implicit red lines or key areas for follow-up work, including outlining a clear message cautioning against the worst-case escalation scenario: use of nuclear weapons. Due to its lack of a concrete “road map” or “timetable,” the document cannot be called a peace plan in a strict sense. However, it demonstrates Beijing's increasing political ambition to show the world it has put something on the table.

Since the 20th Communist Party Congress and the recent Two Sessions (annual legislative meetings) in early March 2023, the Chinese leadership seems more prepared to play a significant role on the international stage, partly building on the momentum gained during the Chinese government's highly unexpected—and successful—mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023. In the Iran–Saudi case, China, which has historically worked from the sidelines, managed to work out a deal, and was willing for its role in the process to be known publicly. Even though it would be very difficult to replicate this in a possible mediation between Russia and Ukraine, if China could claim to have had any role in a future “resumption of peace talks” or some form of a limited ceasefire, it would be a tremendous victory for Chinese diplomacy. No matter how one evaluates China's engagement and the outcome of Xi's trip to Moscow on March 20–22, Beijing appears to be reserving a central spot at the table in any future political process aimed at ending the war in Ukraine and undertaking

¹ This article was prepared immediately prior to Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow on 20–22 March 2023.

post-conflict reconstruction—or even post-war reforms of the international order.

Meanwhile, within Chinese society, an array of opinions, encompassing different segments of the political spectrum, have been expressed on the nature of the war and political crisis, as well as on how China and the world should respond. Online debates on social media, as well as debates within the expert community, have been quite heated and sharply divided. Such debates explore a series of fundamental questions about how the world should be organized, focusing, among other topics, on: the justifications for war and violence; the contemporary manifestations and relevance of fascism, imperialism, and colonialism; the tension between national sovereignty and national self-determination; the crisis of the liberal international order and the possible shift to multipolarity; the role of historical justice and popular sovereignty in international law; the policy implications for personal and national ontological security. For some Chinese, such debates constitute a soul-searching process that has led them to ask not only “who are our enemies? who are our friends?”, but also “who are we?”

At the official level, in the year following 24 February 2022, overall economic ties between Russia and China appear to have grown. The target set by the two sides of an annual trade volume of US\$200 billion, regarded as a very challenging task by many commentators, will likely be reached earlier than planned. Prior trade and financial ties and other forms of collaboration between the two countries have continued unaffected by the war. Chinese businesses also increased their market share in some sectors of the Russian economy as Western capital left Russia. Furthermore, the two countries continue to conduct joint military exercises.

On the Russian side, during the early stages of war in Ukraine, a consensus was seemingly reached that the war will inevitably increase Russia’s dependence on China. The economic data bear this out. A couple of years ago, there was hope among many Russian officials and experts that Russia should and could act as a “balancer” between the United States and China, taking on the position historically held by China in the US–Soviet Union–China Cold War Big Triangle (TASS 2020). But this discussion of Russia’s so-called “pragmatic neutrality” between the US and China that had begun in 2018 during the U.S.–China trade war had, by early 2022, shifted to a similar discussion about China’s “strategic neutrality” between Ukraine (and the “Collective West”) and Russia. In this context, leading China experts in Russia do not hide their perception that China and Russia have a shared interest in countering U.S. hegemony, and that such common security is the guarantor of stability within the China–Russia relationship (*Novaya Gazeta* 2022).

As the war progressed during the spring and summer of 2022, the Russian leadership and key opinion leaders increasingly came to present the military campaign in Ukraine as an anti-imperialist war. This framing allowed them to portray Russia as the leader of a global resistance movement against Western hegemony. It paints the war as the harbinger of a genuine multipolar world—albeit in a dramatic, even brutal way. The Russian state also intends to present such a framing to its Chinese counterparts. Recently, the Russian side has specifically sought to draw an analogy between the security concerns facing Russia in Europe and the Eurasian region to those China faces in the Asia-Pacific region. Such efforts resonate well with those within China who perceive the “NATO-ization of Asia-Pacific” and the “Asia-Pacification of NATO” as a real threat. This position has been growing rapidly within China in recent years as the U.S. government has openly admitted that it seeks to contain and encircle China, including in the economic sphere, and has redoubled its efforts to form new security and intelligence blocs (AUKUS, QUAD, etc.), with China as the clear threat they are focused on countering. As a result, there is real concern within China that the negative security spiral and risk escalation that has been unfolding for more than two decades between Russia and the US/NATO in Europe may be replicated in the Asia-Pacific. Within Chinese society, while there are very divergent assessments of Russia’s military actions in Ukraine, one particular strand enjoys strong support, the view that: while we don’t necessarily agree with the Russian state’s justifications for the war, we would not want to see Russia lose because “if Russia is crushed, we (China) will be left alone against the US” or “the West will come for China after it decapitates Russia; the only way to survive is by standing with Russia now.” Certain elements of the Position Paper suggest that China is sending a message primarily to the US, namely that “in terms of security perceptions and security concerns, we are in a similar situation to Russia. So don’t push us further.” The success or failure of Russia’s efforts to convince China of the essential similarity between the Russia–NATO conflict in Europe and the China–U.S. one in Asia-Pacific will have a significant impact on the future of the bilateral relationship.

On a related note, the Chinese and Russian states seem to have recently engaged in some tacit coordination, constructing shared meanings and knowledge by offering new concepts as shared discourses. For example, the Russian state has intensified its use of the term “the collective West” since 2021 (Comai 2023). While there is no direct equivalent of “the collective West” in Chinese discourse, a similar concept has recently gained popularity within official narratives: *Meixifang* (US and the west). (For a representative voice on *Meixifang* by

a researcher at a key foreign affairs think tank in China, see Shen 2022). Shared discursive constructions can also be seen in such key documents as China's recently released Global Security Initiative, which adopts the idea of "indivisible security," a key concept long advocated by Russia, albeit putting China's own spin on it.

On the flip side, whereas the war seems to have provided a strong impetus for Western unity, "the Rest" differs sharply in its reaction to the invasion. Much of the Global South or the non-Western world has adopted a relatively passive attitude toward the Russian invasion. China's position is in some ways similar to such reactions. Meanwhile, both Russia and China are actively reaching out to the Global South. Such efforts include Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov's recent visits to

Africa, the holding of a Russia–Africa summit in Russia, China's successful mediation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the clear emphasis on non-Western countries and regions in China's Global Security Initiative.

It remains to be seen whether China is willing to approach its relationship with Russia as one predominantly dictated by its perception of US–China relations, or rather build it on genuine endogenous relations between the two countries; and whether Russia will be successful in convincing China of the structural similarity between the two countries when it comes to security. Such mutual perceptions and altercasting efforts will influence not only the future trajectory of Sino–Russian relations, but also the international order as a whole.

About the Author

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Sino–Russian Recalibration in Central Asia?

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Abstract

The article examines Sino–Russian relations in Central Asia against the background of the deepening partnership between Moscow and Beijing. We have yet to see any substantial Sino–Russian cooperation in Central Asia, even though Xi and Putin pledged at their March 2023 summit meeting to expand such cooperation. China’s Central Asian diplomacy has been more active of late, but this has not necessarily come at the expense of Russian influence. While some Chinese experts see Russia’s distraction with the war in Ukraine as an opportunity to advance the PRC’s economic interests in the region, others point to China’s soft-power deficit as an obstacle to further gains. Despite China’s growing economic clout, Russia retains considerable negative hegemony and has sought to check Chinese plans for energy connectivity to maintain its own role as a regional energy supplier. Though the two countries share an interest in preventing the expansion of Western influence, Russian and Chinese actions have in fact led the Central Asian countries to seek partners outside the region.

China and Russia are in greater alignment than ever before on the threats they perceive to their respective interests from Western alliances—but are they in agreement on security and economic governance in their immediate neighborhood in Central Asia? Previously, experts believed that there existed a division of labor between Russia and China in Central Asia, according to which Russia provided security in a region it has always considered its sphere of influence while China became increasingly involved in trade and investment in the region. Has the deepening partnership between Moscow and Beijing led to new Sino–Russian harmony in Central Asia? Or is a war-weakened Russia now obliged to cede ground to China in Central Asia?

One of the surprising features of the statement Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin signed at their March 20–22, 2023, summit meeting was their agreement to cooperate in Central Asia, long considered a region where the two countries had competing interests. Not long after the summit, the Russian leader summoned all of the Central Asian leaders to Moscow to celebrate Victory Day on May 9, although originally only the Kyrgyzstani leader had indicated he would attend (Umarov 2023b). Within a couple of weeks, the five Central Asian leaders got on a plane once again, this time heading for China’s Central Asian summit in Xian. Although the summit was billed as C5+1, involving the five Central Asian states plus China, a Kyrgyzstani official explained that it was actually C5+2—with Russia in absentia (Panfilova 2023).

China + 5: A Realignment?

Chinese officials hailed the summit as a “milestone” in regional cooperation, as it was the first in-person sum-

mit meeting between China and all five Central Asian leaders. Although the meeting had an aura of multilateralism (Freeman, Helf, and McFarland 2023), state visits coincided with it, giving the appearance of a succession of bilateral events, complete with a photo of each leader with Xi. The next C5+1 summit will be held in 2025 in Kazakhstan, though there are more immediate plans to deepen economic cooperation and create a permanent secretariat to oversee the cooperative agenda. While over-promising a new blueprint for relations between China and Central Asia, the Xian summit produced no new major economic or security agreements (Bogusz and Popławski 2023). The event did, however, provide an opportunity for Xi to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the launching of the Belt and Road Initiative and to highlight the relevance of his latest foreign policy concepts in an appeal for common development, universal security, and harmonious interactions in the Central Asian region.

Russian commentators were quick to point out that Putin had a six-month lead on Xi: Russia held a summit with Central Asian leaders in October 2022. (Of course, other countries—including the US, Japan, and South Korea—have also held C5+1 meetings with the Central Asian leaders.) And some Russian observers noted that Russia and China were on the same page regarding the need to limit Western influence in Central Asia and maintain regime stability. Then there was Kremlin spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, who warned that “In the Central Asian capitals, it is well understood that neither the West nor anyone else will be able or willing to compensate for the damage from the artificial restriction of ties with Russia” (Postnikova 2023).

Overlapping (or Rival?) Integration Frameworks

While mostly intended for Central Asian leaders fearful of secondary sanctions, Zakharova's warning could well have been directed at the PRC, in case Chinese officials might be contemplating taking advantage of the war in Ukraine to expand the PRC's influence in Central Asia. Although Chinese experts have long complained that Russia has sought to slow-walk, if not impede, China's economic ties to Central Asian states, the two countries have avoided open competition (Kaczmarek 2019). Behind the scenes, however, Russia for many years resisted Chinese proposals to create a regional free trade zone in Central Asia and, more generally, to use the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a vehicle for regional economic integration (Yau 2020).

By 2014, Russia and China had created overlapping, if not rival, integration frameworks. The Belt and Road Initiative has invested in infrastructure to transit Central Asia en route to Europe, while the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has sought to create a free trade zone in Eurasia. For China, this has involved being mindful of Russian sensitivities and talking up the synergies between the two frameworks, despite the considerable limitations of the EAEU compared to the BRI (Christoffersen 2020). The EAEU has enabled Russia to avoid the indignity of signing an individual bilateral agreement with China on cooperation with the BRI, instead linking the EAEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt as organizations (Denisov and Lukin 2021, 544). Russia has thus sought both to avoid being excluded from the BRI and to maintain its own sphere of influence in Central Asia.

In 2016, in response to Russia's deepening isolation from the West, Putin proposed a "Greater Eurasian Partnership" to open up membership beyond the EAEU to other multilateral organizations, including the SCO, ASEAN, and potentially even the EU down the road. This was Russia's rejoinder to Xi's vision of a China-centered trade and transit network, though it requires Chinese investment within the framework of the BRI. China, for its part, needs Russia's tacit agreement to, if not its cooperation with, Beijing's economic (and political) agenda for Eurasia (Köstem 2020).

For Pan Guang, a leading PRC expert on Central Asia, Russia's invasion of Ukraine provided strategic space for China to seize opportunities for greater cooperation with Central Asian states. He cited the economic impact of the war on Central Asian states as providing an opening for increasing economic ties and reducing barriers to trade (Pan Guang 2023).

Until the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the assumption was that Russia would guarantee regional security in Central Asia, although China has been bol-

stering neighboring states against perceived threats from Afghanistan since at least 2016 (Dunay 2020). This support has included regular border exercises as well as the establishment of two border outposts in Tajikistan (Eurasianet 2022). China has, however, stayed on the sidelines of most conflicts within Central Asia—and Russia has been content to keep it that way thus far.

Since 2022, Chinese scholars have addressed the security implications of the war in Ukraine for China's interests in Central Asia. Russia's distraction by the war has been raised to justify the PRC's greater involvement in Central Asian affairs—with the aim of forestalling Western countries from taking advantage of a vacuum (Xiao Bin 2023). Some PRC observers see the US as seizing an opportunity to use Central Asia to "squeeze China's strategic space" and further destabilize the region (Zeng Xianghong and Pang Weihua 2023). The two countries' longstanding shared interest in checking Western influence in the region has served to attenuate some of Russia's concern about China's increased role in Central Asian security in recent years, according to a Kazakhstani China expert (Kaukenov 2021).

Russia's Negative Hegemony in Central Asia

If Russia has been tolerating China's more energetic involvement in Central Asia of late, this is only partly due to the deepening Sino-Russian partnership. Despite the many negative impacts of the war on the Russian economy and the country's global standing, Russia maintains considerable negative hegemony in Central Asia: Moscow has the power to obstruct energy relations between Central Asian states and China and to limit the flow of migrants from Central Asia, an important source of remittance income in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in particular (Putz 2023).

Xi and Putin appear to be at odds over proposals for an additional gas pipeline—as much as Sino-Russian relations are deepening in a number of areas, China remains committed to diversifying its suppliers and reducing supply risks (Wishnick 2023). Putin backs the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline, which would transit Mongolia to help Yamal gas previously destined for Europe to find a new market. However, Xi Jinping has been more enthusiastic about a fourth pipeline from Turkmenistan, line D, which would support Central Asia's economic integration with China and its domestic gasification plans (Webster 2023). Given Xi's lukewarm approach to Power of Siberia 2, Putin seems to have developed a plan B—shipping Russian gas to Kazakhstan and then to China through a new pipeline connecting Russia to China via northern Kazakhstan (Reuters 2023). This is part of a broader Russian plan to create a Russia-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan gas union, which would export Russian gas to the Central Asian states, enabling them

to avoid repeating this year's domestic shortages while meeting export obligations to China. In the context of the Russian war in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were wary of a formal gas union with Russia when Putin first proposed it in November 2022, but growing domestic demand and protests over shortages led the two countries to sign bilateral agreements with Russia in 2023 for additional gas. This will enable Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to buy cheaper gas from Russia and then sell it at a higher price to China. (Umarov 2023a).

Continued Russian economic leverage over Central Asia is not the only obstacle China faces in expanding its role in the region. Chinese scholars acknowledge the Sinophobia in the region and the persistence of "China threat" views that complicate China's relations with Central Asian states. One recent PRC analysis points to the fundamental lack of cultural commonality between China and Central Asia and greater receptivity in the region to Western soft power (Lu Gang 2023) as key obstacles to China's engagement with Central Asia.

Russian and Chinese Parallel Engagement with Central Asia

Despite both men's claims that they seek cooperation in Central Asia, we have yet to see Xi and Putin take

concrete steps in this direction. We have seen Russian acquiescence to Chinese efforts to improve regional connectivity, but no real joint efforts to date. On the contrary, we have seen parallel if not competitive agendas in the energy sector and a tendency by Russia and China alike to engage separately with the Central Asian states.

Central Asian states also engage separately with Russia and China and are mindful of the risks involved in each partnership. As Kazakhstani analyst Dosym Satpayev colorfully explained, "one of the foundations of the security of the countries of Central Asia should be the support and preservation of the geopolitical balance of power in the region both in relation to Russia and in relation to China, which, like a big boa constrictor, can digest our region for a long time and slowly." In Satpayev's view, greater integration with Turkic countries provides an alternative to getting pulled into the orbit of the region's two great powers (Satpayev 2023). We have also seen the US and the EU activate their Central Asia diplomacy of late, developing new areas for engagement beyond fossil fuels and counter-terrorism.

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Selected Natural Gas Pipelines (Operating, under Construction, Proposed) in Russia, China and Central Asia



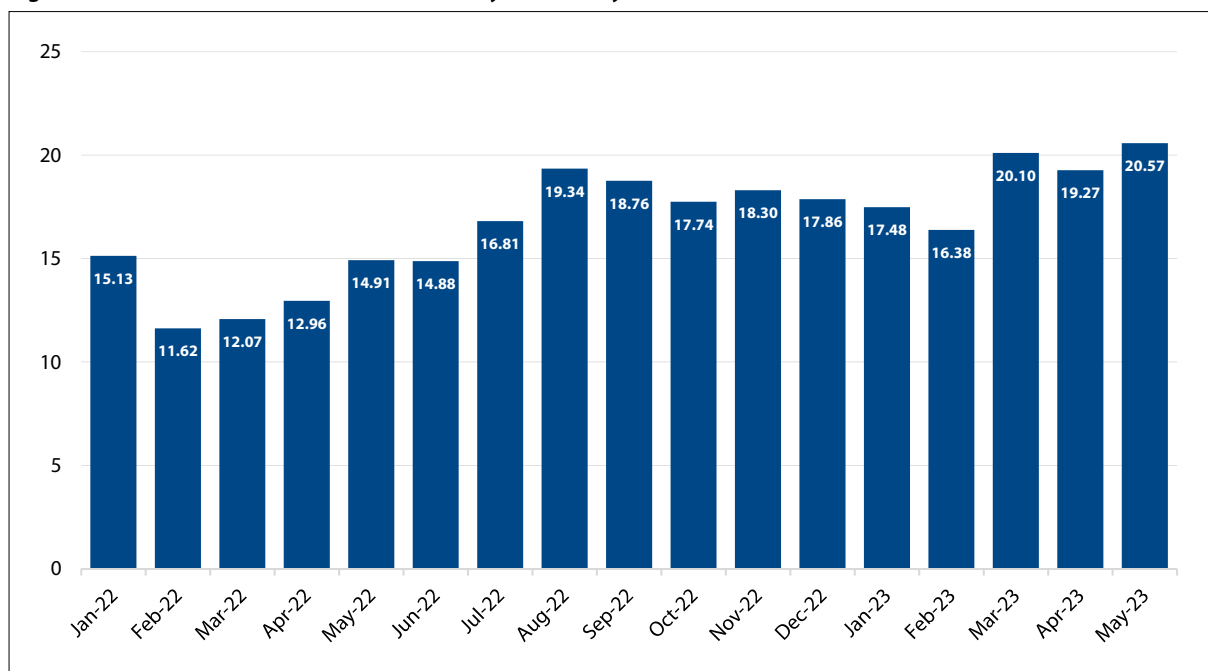
KG: Kyrgyzstan; TJ: Tajikistan; TU: Turkmenistan; UZ: Uzbekistan

Map data: Openstreetmap contributors; Global Gas Infrastructure Tracker, Global Energy Monitor, December 2022 release

STATISTICS

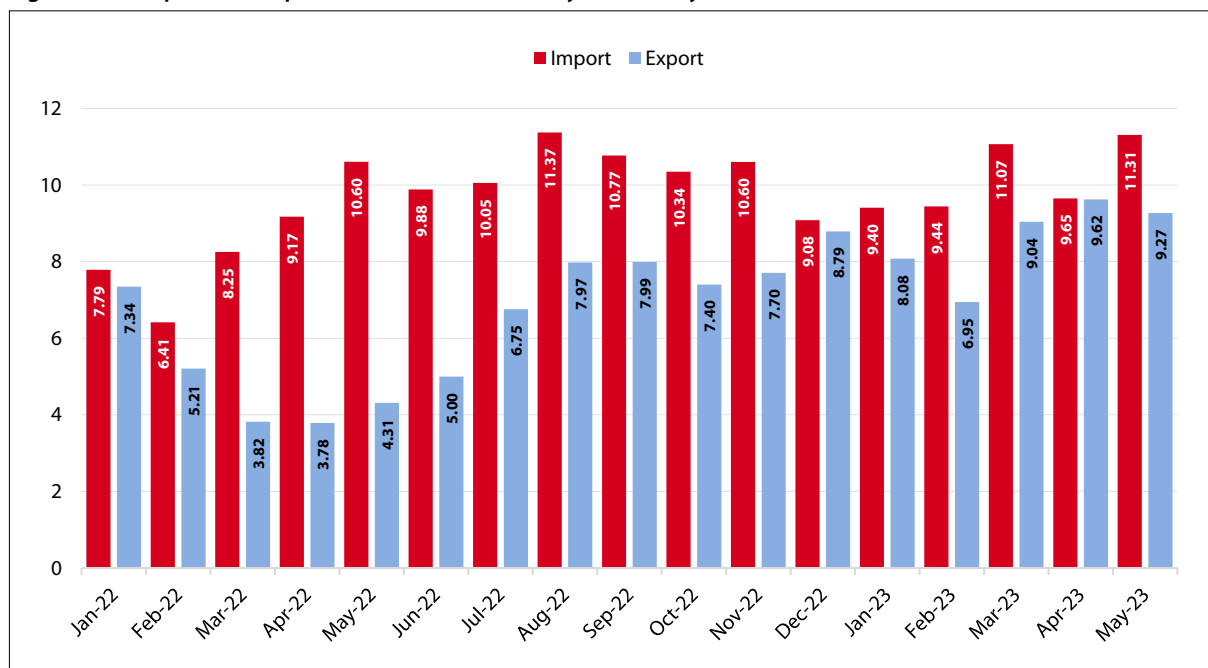
China–Russia Trade January 2022 – May 2023 (Total Trade and Natural Gas Imported by China from Russia)

Figure 1: Total Trade China – Russia (January 2022 – May 2023, bln USD)

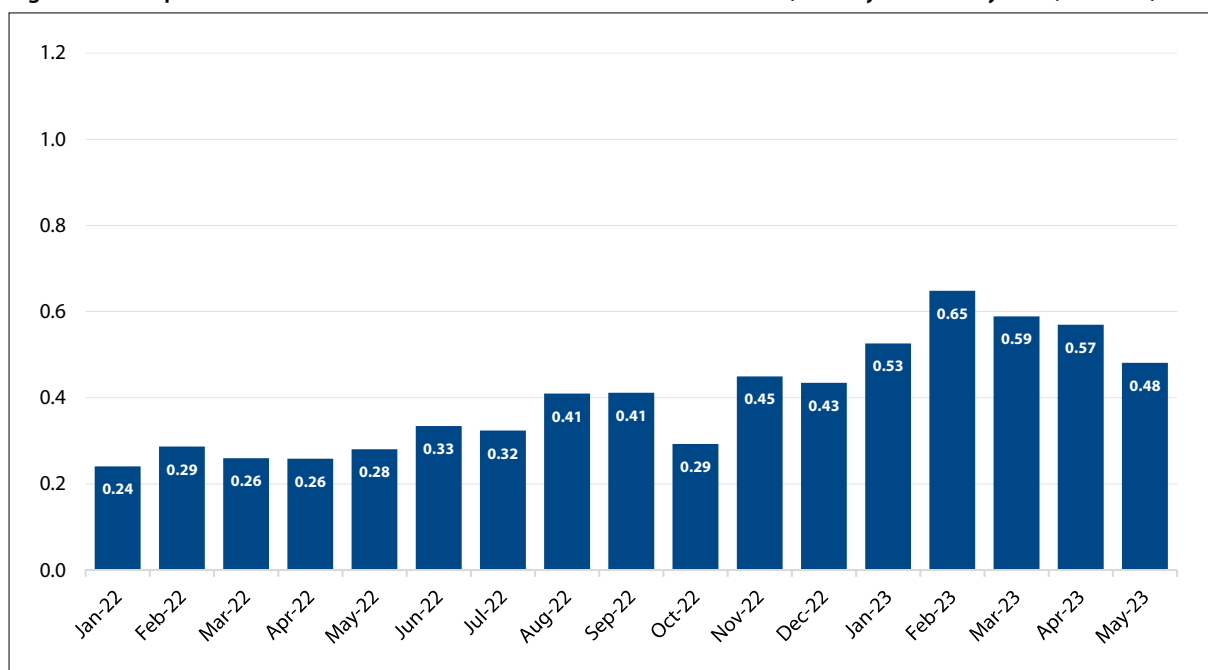


Source: Customs statistics, General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China, <http://stats.customs.gov.cn/indexEn>

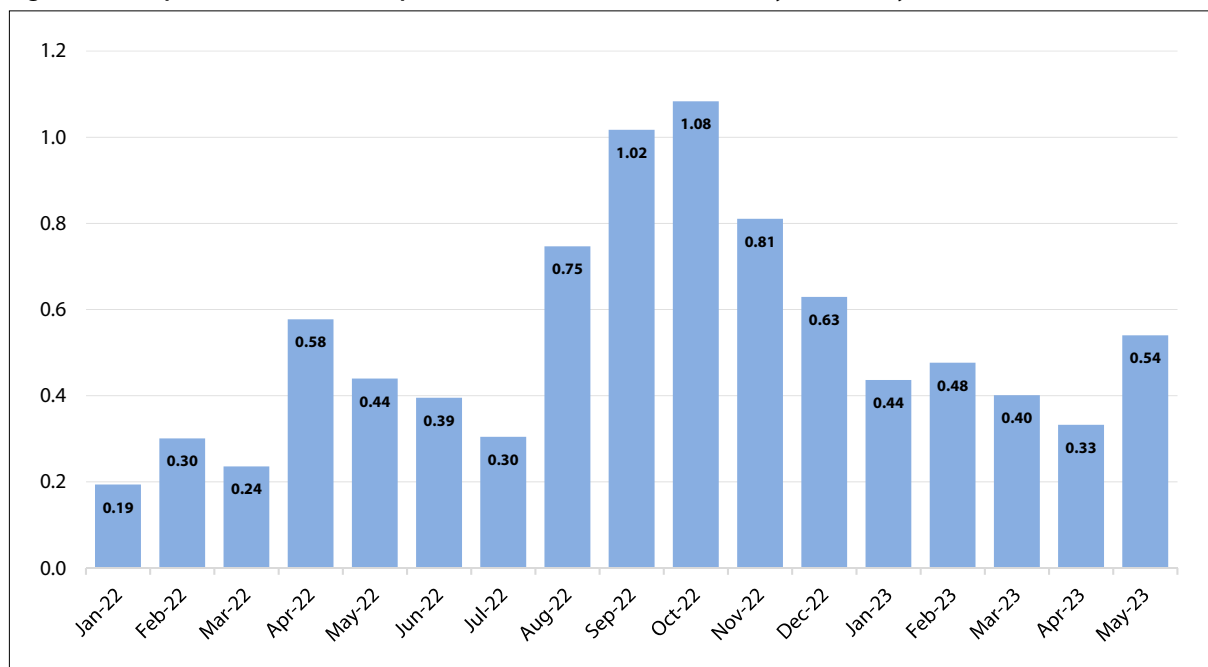
Figure 2: Import and Export China – Russia (January 2022 – May 2023, bln USD)



Source: Customs statistics, General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China, <http://stats.customs.gov.cn/indexEn>

Figure 3: Import of Natural Gases in Gaseous State from Russia to China (January 2022 – May 2023, bln USD)

Source: Customs statistics, General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China, <http://stats.customs.gov.cn/indexEn>

Figure 4: Import of Natural Gas, Liquefied from Russia to China (January 2022 – May 2023, bln USD)

Source: Customs statistics, General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China, <http://stats.customs.gov.cn/indexEn>

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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