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From Split to Multipolar Axis: The Evolution of Sino-Russian Strategic Partnerships and Multilateral Frameworks (1949–June 2025)

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Abstract

The evolution of Sino-Russian relations from 1949 to June 2025 reflects a transition from ideological solidarity to pragmatic geopolitical alignment, shaped by strategic partnerships and multilateral institutions. Initially forged through the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty amid Cold War tensions, the alliance provided China with Soviet aid for industrialisation and military support during the Korean War, but ideological rifts led to the 1960 split and border conflicts like the 1969 Ussuri clashes, eroding bilateral ties. Reconciliation began in the late 1980s with Gorbachev's 1989 Beijing visit, culminating in post-1991 normalization under Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin. The 1996 Shanghai Five and its 2001 evolution into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) introduced multilateral mechanisms for regional security, counterterrorism, and economic integration, while the 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness formalized bilateral commitments. From 2000 to 2014, frameworks like BRICS and RIC amplified cooperation, aligning interests in energy, trade, and opposing U.S. unipolarity. Western sanctions post-2014 Crimea annexation deepened interdependence, with initiatives like the Power of Siberia pipeline and BRI-EAEU integration. The 2022 "no-limits" declaration amid Russia's Ukraine invasion escalated ties, boosting trade to \$244.8 billion by 2024, though asymmetries and sanctions posed challenges. By mid-2025, SCO and BRICS reinforced de-dollarisation and anti-Western strategies. This paper analyses how these partnerships and frameworks have fostered resilience, enabling both nations to challenge global hegemony despite historical mistrust, drawing on archival and contemporary sources to highlight implications for multipolar order.

Keywords: China, Russia, Strategic Partnership, Multilateral Frameworks, SCO, BRICS, Geopolitical Alignment

Introduction

Picture a world where two global giants, bound by shared ambitions yet damaged by past rivalries, forge a partnership that reshapes the geopolitical landscape. What compels China and Russia to align strategically despite decades of mistrust? This research paper delves into the evolution of their post-split strategic partnership and the multilateral frameworks that have sustained it from 1949 to June 2025. Far beyond mere alliances, their collaboration reflects a calculated response to global power shifts, aiming to counter Western influence and promote a multipolar order. Consider the stakes: How do their joint efforts influence global stability, challenge U.S. dominance, and redefine international cooperation? This study traces their journey from ideological unity to pragmatic alignment, exploring the mechanisms—bilateral treaties, SCO, BRICS—that have fortified their ties. Engaged with the question of whether these frameworks can endure external pressures like sanctions or internal tensions. By examining their strategic interplay, this paper invites you to uncover the forces driving one of the most consequential partnerships in modern geopolitics, urging a deeper understanding of its global implications.

Now, imagine the intricate framework of multilateral institutions that binds nations in a complex global arena. Why do China and Russia, with divergent histories, lean on frameworks like the SCO or BRICS to amplify their influence? This introduction prompts reflection on the strategic imperative - economic resilience, security coordination, and ideological divergence—that shape their post-split partnership. As this study explores this evolution, it envisions negotiations and summits that have rebuilt trust since the Sino-Soviet

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split, fostering cooperation through shared goals like de-dollarisation and energy security. What limits their alignment, and how do multilateral platforms mitigate these constraints? This paper challenges you to question whether their partnership is a robust counterweight to the West or a fragile accord vulnerable to asymmetry. By analysing historical shifts and contemporary frameworks, the study aims to ignite curiosity about the unseen dynamics at play, encouraging a critical assessment of how this alliance reshapes global power and the delicate balance of international relations.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative historical analysis to examine the evolution of Sino-Russian strategic partnerships and multilateral frameworks from 1949 to June 2025. Primary data is drawn from archival documents, official joint statements, and diplomatic records, including the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty and 2022 Xi-Putin declarations. Secondary sources, such as peer-reviewed journals, think tank reports (e.g., CSIS, ORF), and credible news outlets (e.g., Al Jazeera), provide contextual depth. The study uses a chronological framework, dividing the analysis into six periods to trace shifts in bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Thematic coding identifies key themes like ideology, pragmatism, and anti-Western alignment, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of geopolitical dynamics.

The methodology integrates a case study approach, focusing on pivotal events like the Sino-Soviet split, Shanghai Five formation, and BRICS initiatives. Data triangulation cross-verifies sources to enhance reliability, addressing biases in Western, Russian, and Chinese narratives. The analysis draws on international relations theories, particularly realism, to interpret strategic interests and power dynamics. Limitations include restricted access to classified Chinese and Russian archives, mitigated by using declassified documents and multilingual reports. This approach ensures a robust, evidence-based exploration of Sino-Russian relations, suitable for academic scrutiny in the Indian academic context.

The Evolution of Sino-Russian Strategic Partnerships and Multilateral Frameworks (1949–June 2025)

1949–1960: Ideological Alliance Before the Split

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 initiated a Sino-Soviet alliance rooted in Marxist-Leninist ideology and opposition to Western imperialism. The 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance formalized this partnership, fostering cooperation in economic, military, and diplomatic spheres. Soviet aid supported China's industrialisation, while both nations aligned against the U.S. during the Cold War, notably in the Korean War. Mao Zedong emphasised this unity, stating, "*Our alliance with the Soviet Union is a shield against imperialist aggression.*" Strategic interests were clear: China sought Soviet technology and security, while the Soviet Union aimed to expand its influence in Asia. However, this period lacked multilateral frameworks, as cooperation was bilateral and ideologically driven. The absence of broader institutional mechanisms made the alliance vulnerable to ideological disputes, which surfaced by the late 1950s. The impending Sino-Soviet split highlighted the limitations of bilateral ties without diversified frameworks, setting the stage for post-split

efforts to rebuild relations through strategic partnerships and multilateral platforms that could sustain cooperation beyond ideological alignment ^[1].

1960–1989: Sino-Soviet Split and Absence of Frameworks

The Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s dismantled the earlier alliance, driven by ideological disagreements over Soviet "revisionism" and China's radical policies. The withdrawal of Soviet aid and the 1969 Ussuri River border clashes marked a collapse of strategic ties. Both nations competed for influence within the communist world, with the Soviet Union aligning with India and China pursuing 'Third World' leadership ^[2]. Strategic interests diverged: China aimed to assert its ideological autonomy, while the Soviet Union prioritised détente with the West. The absence of multilateral frameworks exacerbated tensions, as there were no institutional mechanisms to mediate disputes or foster cooperation. The split fractured the communist bloc, forcing smaller nations to choose sides. Indian media noted the Soviet pivot to New Delhi as a counter to China, while American reports highlighted the U.S.'s exploitation of this rift through rapprochement with China in 1972. The lack of a post-split strategic partnership or multilateral platforms during this period underscored their importance in maintaining relations. The eventual reconciliation in the 1980s would rely on pragmatic partnerships and new frameworks to rebuild trust and align interests, learning from the split's consequences ^[3].

1989–2000: Post-Split Partnership and Emerging Frameworks

The late 1980s marked the beginning of a post-split strategic partnership, driven by pragmatic normalization rather than ideology. Mikhail Gorbachev's 1989 visit to Beijing, amid the Tiananmen Square protests, restored diplomatic ties and resumed normal state-to-state and party-to-party relations with Deng Xiaoping. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 further facilitated cooperation, as Russia, under Boris Yeltsin, sought economic partnerships with China, leading to the demarcation of their land border. In May 1991, Chinese leader Jiang Zemin visited Moscow to resolve portions of the longstanding border dispute. The 1996 formation of the Shanghai Five—comprising China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—introduced a multilateral framework focused on regional security, trade, and confidence-building measures in border areas, including mutual military force reductions. This framework aligned with strategic interests: China needed a stable northern border to focus on economic growth, while Russia sought markets for its energy and arms. In 1996, the relationship was upgraded to a "partnership of strategic coordination" during Yeltsin's visit to Beijing. Joint declarations, such as the 1997 statement on a multipolar world, opposed U.S. unipolarity and signalled a shared goal of countering Western dominance. The post-split partnership, supported by emerging multilateral frameworks like the Shanghai Five (precursor to the SCO), provided a platform for dialogue and cooperation, laying the foundation for deeper strategic ties in the 21st century by institutionalizing mutual interests ^[4].

2000–2014: Strengthening Partnership Through Multilateralism

Under Vladimir Putin and Chinese leaders Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and later Xi Jinping, the post-split strategic partnership deepened, bolstered by robust multilateral frameworks. The 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation formalized bilateral commitments, while the SCO, established in 2001 by Kazakhstan, China, the Kyrgyz Republic, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, expanded to address counterterrorism, separatism, extremism, trade, and energy cooperation. The Russia-India-China (RIC) troika, initiated under Yevgeny Primakov's doctrine in the late 1990s, and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) emerged as additional platforms for coordination, reflecting growing strategic ties. These frameworks aligned strategic interests: Russia sought Chinese investment to modernize its economy, while China needed Russian energy and military technology to counter U.S. containment. Joint military exercises under the SCO framework, including annual exchanges, and UN Security Council coordination on global issues built mutual reliability. The multilateral frameworks provided institutional resilience, enabling cooperation despite occasional tensions, such as Russia's wariness of China's economic dominance in Central Asia. By diversifying their partnership through bilateral and multilateral channels, both nations enhanced their strategic alignment, positioning themselves as counterweights to U.S. influence ^[5].

2014–2022: Partnership Amid Western Sanctions

Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and subsequent Western sanctions accelerated the post-split strategic partnership, with multilateral frameworks playing a pivotal role. The Power of Siberia pipeline, operationalized in 2019, symbolized economic interdependence, with supplies reaching 22 billion cubic meters in 2023 and expected to increase to 38 billion by 2025, while the SCO and BRICS facilitated coordination against U.S.-led sanctions ^[6]. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) integrated with Russia's Eurasian Economic Union, aligning infrastructure goals through projects like the China-Russia-Mongolia corridor and the Eurasian land bridge. Strategic interests converged: Russia relied on Chinese markets to offset sanctions, with bilateral trade surging from \$147 billion in 2021 to \$190 billion in 2022, while China secured discounted energy and a partner to challenge U.S. dominance. Joint military drills, like Vostok 2018, reinforced their alignment. Multilateral frameworks provided a platform for both nations to amplify their influence, particularly in the Global South, through BRICS initiatives like de-dollarization and alternative payment systems such as CIPS (Cross-Border Interbank Payment System) and SPFS (System for Transfer of Financial Messages) ^[7]. Despite Russia's concerns about China's growing influence and increasing dependence, the SCO and BRICS ensured sustained cooperation, demonstrating the resilience of their post-split partnership in navigating global tensions ^[8].

2022–June 2025: No-Limits Partnership and Global Frameworks

The Russia-China strategic partnership evolved significantly from 2022 to June 2025, catalysed by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The partnership gained momentum with the February 2022 "no-limits" declaration by Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, outlined in a joint

statement on international relations and global sustainable development, though the phrase was later redacted post-invasion, indicating Beijing's cautious strategic alignment rather than full endorsement of Moscow's actions. This period saw bilateral trade escalate from US\$147 billion in 2021 to US\$190 billion in 2022 (a 29–30% surge), reaching US\$240 billion in 2023 (a 26.3% increase), and climbing to US\$244.8 billion in 2024 (a 1.9% rise), driven by Russia's energy exports like oil and natural gas amid Western sanctions ^[9]. On March 21, Xi and Putin signed a Pre-2030 Development Plan at the Kremlin, emphasizing mutual respect, long-term growth, and enhanced cooperation in trade, finance, energy, technology, innovation, and agriculture for food security, with a focus on increasing local currency usage ^[10].

Multilateral frameworks, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) for counterterrorism and economic integration, and BRICS for de-dollarization via the New Development Bank (NDB) and Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), alongside the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), bolstered their challenge to the U.S.-led order ^[11]. Russia depended on China's markets for raw materials to mitigate sanctions, while China secured a reliable energy supply, with trade reaching US\$244.8 billion in 2024. Trade imbalances persisted, with Russia's exports to China at 30% of its total versus China's 3% to Russia, raising dependence concerns. From 2024 to mid-2025, normalization and trust-building advanced through diplomatic efforts, such as Wang Yi's April 2024 meeting with Lavrov, where mutual support against Western interference was emphasized, and the May 2025 Moscow summit marking 75 years of ties, where Xi and Putin reaffirmed long-term collaboration. Economic trust faced hurdles as Chinese banks halted yuan payments by August 2024 due to secondary sanctions, prompting Russia's September 2024 laws allowing foreign bank branches. The October 2024 BRICS summit in Kazan reinforced their coordinated stance, though historical mistrust and asymmetry remain challenges, with China's role in Russia's economy growing amid sanction pressures ^[12].

From 1949 to June 2025, the post-split strategic partnership and multilateral frameworks have transformed Sino-Russian relations from ideological allies to pragmatic partners. Overcoming the Sino-Soviet split, these factors aligned their strategic interests—countering U.S. dominance, securing resources, and promoting multipolarity—through institutionalised cooperation. The SCO, BRICS, and bilateral treaties have provided resilience, enabling both nations to navigate global crises, particularly post-2022. Supported by credible sources, this partnership remains a cornerstone of their anti-Western strategy, reshaping global geopolitics.

Conclusion

The journey of Sino-Russian relations from 1949 to June 2025 reflects a remarkable shift from ideological unity to a pragmatic partnership, underpinned by strategic interests and robust multilateral frameworks. Initially forged through the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty, their alliance crumbled due to the 1960 split, only to be rebuilt post-1989 through pragmatic normalisation. The Shanghai Five, evolving into the SCO, and BRICS provided platforms for cooperation in security, trade, and countering U.S. dominance. Post-2014,

Western sanctions accelerated their interdependence, with initiatives like the Power of Siberia pipeline and BRI-EAEU integration strengthening economic ties. The 2022 “no-limits” declaration marked a peak, with trade soaring to \$244.8 billion by 2024, despite challenges like trade imbalances and sanctions. These frameworks have ensured resilience, enabling both nations to challenge global hegemony. This evolution underscores their ability to navigate mistrust and external pressures, reshaping the global order towards multipolarity.

The post-2022 phase, particularly Russia’s Ukraine conflict, highlights the strategic depth of this partnership. Multilateral frameworks like SCO and BRICS have facilitated coordination, from de-dollarisation efforts to joint military drills like Vostok 2018, reinforcing their anti-Western stance. China’s cautious support, balancing neutrality with economic aid, reflects a calculated approach to maintain global influence while avoiding direct confrontation. Russia’s reliance on Chinese markets, especially for energy, has mitigated sanction impacts, but asymmetries raise concerns about dependency. Summits, such as the 2025 Moscow meeting marking 75 years of ties, reaffirm their commitment. Yet, challenges like Chinese banks halting yuan payments in 2024 signal vulnerabilities. These frameworks provide institutional stability, allowing both nations to project power in the Global South and beyond, but historical mistrust and external pressures question the partnership’s long-term cohesion.

Looking ahead, the Sino-Russian partnership will likely evolve amidst global economic shifts and geopolitical tensions. The SCO and BRICS will remain pivotal, supporting initiatives like alternative payment systems and regional integration. However, trade imbalances and differing priorities—Global economic ambitions of China versus Sanction-driven needs of Russia—may strain ties. The analysis of this paper grounded in credible sources, invites reflection: Can this partnership sustain its momentum against Western countermeasures? Its resilience lies in institutional frameworks that transcend bilateral mistrust, positioning China and Russia as key players in a multipolar world. Scholars and policymakers must monitor this dynamic, as it continues to influence global stability and India’s strategic choices in an increasingly interconnected geopolitical landscape.

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