

# Who Poses a Greater Threat to the West- China or Russia?

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China and Russia are two nations which are synonymous with the term *superpower*, just like the United States; however, unlike their American counterparts, both countries play an adversarial role in global politics. Throughout most of the twentieth century, the world has been bipolar with a Western and an Eastern bloc. The Western Bloc was and still is dominated by the United States, which heads the Western Alliance, and holds significant influence in key international institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. The US is the largest effective total contributor to the IMF and has the largest voting bloc, holding veto power on many decisions (AAF, 2015). Likewise, in the World Bank, the US is the shareholder that retains veto power regarding changes in its structure. The critical role and power the US has in these key institutions enable it to shape pro-Western economic and political policies that influence the global economy. The main competitor to the US in the twentieth century was the Soviet Union, whose political ideology, communism, was tailored, in part, to be the antithesis of Western-style capitalism. Throughout most of the 20th century, both ideologies' desire for global dominance resulted in a forty-five-year Cold War and almost led to a nuclear conflict over the deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962. The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 helped the US, gain for a time, unipolar status and promote a Western liberal ideology globally.

However, since the 1980s, Communist China has experienced exponential economic growth and development after embracing market liberalization in critical sectors of its economy (Hu and Khan, 1997). The rapid rise of China has led to it becoming the second largest economy in the world and the largest military globally. It now acts as the US's main

competitor economically and militarily. Conversely, since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has struggled with its adjustment to shock therapy in the early 1990s; however, the rise to power of Vladimir Putin began a rebuilding of the Russian economy and military, which has made Russia a significant player in the global system again. Currently, Russia has the highest number of nuclear weapons in the world, and because of its recent military actions in Crimea and Ukraine is considered a geopolitical threat to the West, although its failures in the invasion of Ukraine, begun 24 February 2022, have demonstrated that the country's military is vastly inferior to the West's. Ultimately then, the question of who poses a more significant threat to the West is complex. Because of its military power and economic power, China poses a considerable threat. Russia, on the other hand, is a significant current and active threat due to its recent, though frustrated, military operations in Ukraine. This paper will analyze the scale of the threat that both countries pose at the political, economic, and military level and ascertain who presents a significant overall threat to the West.

### **Chinese Political Ideology and Foreign Policy**

To assess the threat a nation poses to others it is pertinent to analyze it in terms of its political ideology and foreign policy. When looking at China and Russia politically, both countries share similar characteristics. Both are highly nationalistic and authoritarian; the leaders of China and Russia, Xi Jinping, and Vladimir Putin, have a strong hold on domestic politics and are, in many ways, ideologically aligned. Although China is a one-party state ruled by the Chinese Communist Party, Russia is a multiparty system dominated for the last twenty years by Putin's party of power United Russia (Robinson, 2018). Both nations are similar in that they have taken a solid line against all domestic dissent and have disregarded the law to maintain their power. Additionally, both arguably adopt a realist perspective on

international relations. Realism is a significant theory in international relations and seeks to explain states behaviors under a specific set of rigid assumptions and guided by three key concepts: statism, survival, and self-help. According to realism, states are the only entity that matter on the international stage: they act alone and in the best interests of their state. Realist politicians and theorists believe the international system is characterized by anarchy; thus, states operating in such an anarchical system must implement self-help as states cannot trust others in their objective of survival and thus, must maximize their security (Korab-Karpowicz, 2010).

According to John Mearsheimer, a prominent realist political theorist, China adopts an offensive realist approach, and thus, he sees China as the US/West's most immediate threat. Mearsheimer argues that the anarchical system of the international arena, in turn, forces great powers to compete and act aggressively towards each other; in essence, great powers are afraid of each other. Under this thesis that great powers act in such a manner as they are driven by the instinct of survival rather than lust for power (Mearsheimer, 2001). Consequently, Mearsheimer sees Chinese continued economic growth and military modernization as a significant threat to the US, which he believes will result in the two becoming adversaries. For Mearsheimer, a wealthy China would not stay a status quo power but rather become an aggressive state seeking regional hegemony (Steinsson, 2014). Under these conditions, it is possible that the US/West could come into conflict over Taiwan in the South China sea; the territorial disputes in the region could lead to NATO focusing its attention on China, increasing the potential for conflict (Michaels, 2021). From an offensive realist approach, power maximization is, at its core, means becoming the most dominant power in the system. A great power acting in such a way would be a revisionist one, not content with the status quo, and thus seeking a rebalance of power until it is the dominant player in the system.

However, it is crucial to analyze whether China fits into Mearsheimer's offensive realist theory before analyzing its threat to the West.

To ascertain if China's actions follow offensive realism theory, it's crucial to understand whether China displays revisionist tendencies, acting aggressively towards its neighbors and demonstrating power-maximizing behavior. As such, such an understanding would determine whether China operates in a revisionist nature or one of a status quo power. Historically, China has displayed characteristics of offensive realism, particularly under the Mao regime (1949-1976), which had a policy of supporting revolutions against government it deemed imperialist proxies (Feng, 2005). Under Mao, China threatened neighboring states and many Western allies, such as the Philippines and Thailand, by looking to export its brand of socialism regionally (Garver, 2016). Nonetheless, China has become less revisionist since the 1970s, which demonstrates leadership's more defensive realist traits in its current political and foreign policy. Defensive realism asserts that the anarchical international system encourages states to pursue moderate and reserved policies to achieve security; defensive realists stipulate that the aggressive expansion of offensive realists hinders the tendency of states to conform to a balance of power theory, in turn decreasing the primary objective of the state which is to ensure security (Snyder and Lieber, 2008).

Since the 1970s, China has adopted a more cooperative security approach regionally and internationally. China has generally sought a peaceful relationship with neighbors. This pursuit was manifest in their disagreement with India over the Doklam plateau, a disputed territory over which both China and India claim sovereignty (South Asia@LSE, 2018). China sought to facilitate relations with India, which they consider a significant rival, rather than engage in conflict. Their avoidance of conflict further highlights their tendency to pursue peaceful relations. Since China's economic rise in the

1980s, they have evidently benefited from the current international order and are more interested in reforming it rather than replacing it. China ultimately seeks to take advantage of the international order to benefit its new global standing and strategic interests (Garner, 2016). China has consistently asserted its rise to power has been peaceful in an effort to avoid military conflict with the US and its allies.

Beijing has adopted a soft power approach to build economic and diplomatic relations globally. This is exemplified through its "Belt and Road Initiative," a global project aimed at expanding China's interdependent market by creating a high-technology economy and promoting its vision of win-win cooperation (Bal Kishan Sharma et al., 2017). Beijing's creation of several hundred Confucius Institutes globally aimed at teaching its language and culture has been another mechanism of soft power tactics. Currently, China has nineteen Confucius Institutes in Africa that offer cultural exchange programs. Such initiatives and projects have helped China become the leading destination in Asia for international students and Anglophone African students globally (Kell and Vogl, 2010). China's global initiatives, particularly in Africa, have effectively asserted its global dominance politically and economically while simultaneously competing with Western influence on the African continent.

### **Russian Political Ideology and Foreign Policy**

When looking at Russian political ideology and foreign policy, we see that Moscow, like Beijing, has evidently adopted a realist approach to international relations; however, unlike China, Russia implements a more offensive realist approach to international relations (Mearsheimer, 2001). Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has expanded over 1000 miles eastwards toward the Russian border including former Soviet states, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (the Baltics) This has caused much anxiety in Moscow. Therefore, at the 2008 Bucharest NATO

Summit, which announced that Ukraine and Georgia could join NATO, Russia began to present a more rigid stance on such NATO expansion, describing it as a *security threat* (Donaldson, 2017). In 2008 Russia further highlighted its offensive realist approach by amassing troops on the Georgian border, as Russia feared Georgia's move westwards to NATO and the EU. At the time, Russia demanded independence from Georgia for two rebellious provinces, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia, which are pro-Russian regions; Georgia subsequently attacked rebellious factions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, resulting in a swift Russian response and with Russian forces moving within 10km of the Georgian capital Tbilisi. After 16 days of war, a ceasefire was agreed upon, with Georgia losing de facto sovereignty over parts of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (S. Frederick Starr, 2009). However, the tipping point came in 2014 after the removal of pro-Russian Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich and the election of a pro-Western government, which began enacting a series of Russo-phobic policies, such as voting to repeal of minority language rights. Soon after the Ukrainian revolution, Russia, in March 2014, annexation of Crimea due to fear of losing their warm water naval base in Sevastopol (Wilkenfeld, 2023). Consequently, pro-Russian factions in Donetsk and Luhansk of Ukraine's Donbass region wanted to break away in 2014 from Kiev and form autonomous states that they hoped would likewise be annexed by Russia. Since 2014, pro-Russian forces and Ukraine have been embroiled in a bitter conflict in eastern Ukraine.

In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine which has been the most significant direct threat to the West since the end of the Cold war, in particular eastern Europe. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has already led to immense European political and economic uncertainty. Russia has faced a wave of sanctions; moreover, the EU has simultaneously adopted a policy to limit Russian gas and oil exports and reduce dependence on Russian energy

(European Council, 2022). These policies have led to economic turmoil in Europe as most European countries face a “winter of discontent” with high energy bills; in August 2022, European gas prices were ten times higher than their average ten years prior (Rosen, n.d.). Russia has also been using nonmilitary methods to assert its power and undermine international law with its alleged interference in the 2016 US elections. Experts have described allegations of political assassinations and cyberattacks as actions of a rogue state who has contempt for international law (Eschroeder, 2022). Evidently, the offensive realist stance Russia implements in its foreign policy, both in a nonmilitary and military sense, poses more of a political threat to the West than China. Thus, Russia’s actions further highlight that Russia seeks power and influence to achieve security through domination and regional hegemony. Moscow is far more proactive in its foreign policy stance, whereas Beijing tends to take a long-term approach to its foreign policy and competition with the West. China’s defensive realism approach poses less of a direct threat to the West. In essence, China uses the international order to its advantage and seeks more soft power approaches to increasing its influence and protecting its interests, as exemplified by the Belt and Road Initiative and growing influence in Africa (Rotberg, 2009).

### **The Chinese Economic Threat**

A further component to analyze when considering the threat of China and Russia to the West is the economic aspect. Since the 1970s, China has transformed its economy, moving from a centrally planned economy to embracing market liberalization in specific sectors of its economy. China has phased out collectivized agriculture, eliminated price controls, increased autonomy of state enterprises, diversified the banking sector and opened Chinese markets to foreign direct investment. This has created exponential growth in the private sector. The restructuring of the economy has led to a tenfold increase in GDP since 1978, which hit \$17 trillion in 2022. As

a result, China has become the second-largest economy in the world and the largest exporter globally, accounting for 18,6% of global GDP (World Bank, 2022). The admittance of China into the WTO was hailed as a resounding success by the West; it was considered pivotal for the global economic system and a signal that China was willing to embark on a path of reform. The US and the West believed Chinese entry into the WTO would set them on the way to market liberalization and, in turn, would be fully integrated into the international liberal economic order (Smith and Guobin Zhu, 2002). However, in 2018, US trade representative Robert Lighthizer said that the US had “erred in supporting China’s entry into the WTO.” (Donnan, 2018). Lighthizer stated that China’s “state-led, mercantilist trade regime” was “incompatible” with the market-based approach viewed by the vast majority of WTO members (Tan, 2021). Many Western officials, including two Obama officials, Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner, stated that the liberal international order had failed to control and contain China (Campbell and Ratner, 2018). Washington and many Western nations feel that China has not embarked on a path to market liberalization but instead implemented and consolidated a form of state capitalism, which Beijing now hopes to export globally.

In effect, Chinese WTO membership has allowed it access to US, Western and other global economies without truly adopting the standards of the international liberal world order. In essence, China seems to be paying lip service to international liberal norms while implementing its own rules, such as taking advantage of loopholes and flawed foreign policymakers. Western policymakers have been concerned with China’s significant economic rise. This is particularly true for the US, which has seen its trade deficits rise from \$10,4 billion in 1990 to \$355 billion in 2020 (Statista, 2021). Likewise, the EU currently has seen its trade deficit with China increase from €129 billion in 2011 to €248 billion in 2022 (Statista, 2021). Many experts in the West view such exponential trade deficits as an indicator that China



implements unfair trade practices, such as deliberately undervaluing its currency and subsidizing domestic producers to flood Western markets with cheap low-cost goods. Consequently, this restricts exports from US and other Western economies, threatening jobs, wages and living standards. China's move towards producing and exporting high-value products such as computers and cars could exacerbate the situation and hamper Western economies further. The increased acquisition of major US firms by Chinese entities such as General Electric and China's accumulation of \$1,095 trillion of US treasury securities has raised alarm bells (U.S. Department of the Treasury, n.d.). The US congress has introduced numerous bills such as sanctions against China for its failure to address its currency policy and other unfair trading practices. As it stands China's GDP is estimated to surpass the US's GDP by 2030 (CEBR, 2022). Evidently, China poses a significant threat to the West, in particular the US. The fundamental question is what the US and the West can do to counteract this without creating economic uncertainty globally.

## **The Russian Economic Threat**

Russia's economy pales in comparison to China's. Russia has a GDP of \$1,77 trillion, which is ten times smaller than China's and around thirteen times smaller than the US's (Statista, n.d.). Although Russia has embarked on various reforms and embraced market liberalization to a certain extent, it has yet to have the economic success the Chinese economy has experienced. However, Russia shares similar characteristics to China, in the sense that it could be described as a state-capitalist economy. State capitalism can be described as an economic system in which the state undertakes business and commercial economic activity, and also where the means of production are state owned enterprises. The definition of state capitalism can also include the state dominance of corporate government agencies, or publicly listed companies where the state has the controlling shares (The Economist,

2012). In essence state capitalism can be described as a private economy that is subject to government interventionism, economic planning, and considerable state control over the allocation of investment and credit. In Russia 55% of the economy is controlled by the state with over 20 million workers employed by the government (Djankov, 2016). Likewise, Russia's biggest three banks in terms of asset value are all state owned, namely Sberbank, Gazprom Bank and VTB who collectively control 60% of the country's total banking assets (Belton, 2022). Evidently, the Russian state has significant control in the direction of their economies and use state owned enterprises and capitalism to pursue their economic agenda.

In terms of economic sectors Russia's economy relies heavily on energy exports; in 2021, energy made up 50% of total exports and 28% of GDP (Myllyvirta, 2022). Currently, Russia is the third largest supplier of crude oil, around 14% of global supply, and the second biggest exporter of crude oil, with China and the EU being their biggest export markets (IEA, 2022). Regarding gas, Russia has the largest gas reserves in the world and is the second largest producer behind the US. Although Russia's GDP in 2021 only accounted for around 1,7% of global GDP, its immense energy resources mean that it has a stranglehold on most European countries that are heavily dependent on Russian energy (Atlantic Council, 2022). As of March 2022, 45% of Europe's gas came from Russia's pipeline; however, since the invasion of Ukraine, the European Commission has announced plans to reduce Russian gas dependence by two-thirds by the start of 2023. Such drastic measures have had catastrophic effects in Europe, with gas prices soaring by 700% in 2022, sending many European nations into economic downturns and with many heading for a recession (Natural Gas Intelligence, n.d.).

Many experts believe Russia is using energy resources as a political weapon to punish Europe for its support of Ukrainian resistance to the 2022 Russian invasion. In essence, Russia

may be an economic minnow globally, but Europe's dependence on its energy resources means Russia is a significant economic threat to the European continent. Across the Atlantic in the US, Russian energy exports do not have the same stranglehold; in 2021, Russian oil imports accounted for 8% of total US oil imports. Conversely, US LNG exports to Europe increased 137% in 2022 because of the significant drop in shipments from Russia, suggesting that the US is benefiting greatly from the conflict in Ukraine (Maguire and Maguire, 2022). As such it is clear that the Russian economy is an economic threat to Europe, however, outside of Europe its economic impact is meager. In essence, China poses the most significant economic threat to the West, simply because of its share size of world output, GDP, and manufacturing prowess. China's increasing global investments and ownership of Western public debt make it a significant economic threat to the West.

### **The Chinese and Russian Military Threat**

Another component to consider when assessing who is a more significant threat to the West, is to analyze Chinese and Russian military capability. Both China and Russia have formidable militaries. In 2021 China spent around \$293 billion in defense spending, while Russia spent around \$65,9 billion on its military. (SIPRI, 2022). However, the US spends around \$801 billion on its military according to April 2021 figures, which is still more than the following nine countries combined. The sum of the following nine countries' defense spending accounts for just \$777 billion (SIPRI, 2022). When considering military spending alone, China and Russia are not a match for the US and the West. Nonetheless, when comparing military strength, the picture is a bit different. China has an active manpower of around 2.000.000 and Russia around 830.000 compared to the US's of approximately 1.390.000 active personnel, according to 2022 figures (Statista, n.d.). In terms of nuclear weapons, Russia has the largest stockpile of nuclear warheads in the world at around 5.997 compared to the US's 5.428. China on the other hand has around 400 nuclear

warheads but is expected to increase that to over 1500 by 2035 (Statista, n.d.). Although China's military manpower may pose a more significant threat to the West in the long term, Russia's nuclear capabilities are more of a current and direct threat. China may be ahead in economic terms compared to Russia; however, Russia is at least as formidable a military, if not stronger, than China. In terms of naval capability, Russia's navy is much smaller but more capable than the Chinese navy, especially because of the former's nuclear submarine and missile forces. In terms of military experience, Russia has had recent battle experience in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine, which would suggest Russia is more battle ready than China. However, according to Western military experts, Russia's performance in Ukraine casts doubt on their military prowess, while others, such as retired US Colonel Douglas Macgregor, see this as a proxy war between NATO and Russia, and believe Russia will achieve their objectives in Ukraine (Newsroom, 2022).

When looking at foreign intelligence, it could be argued that Russia has had significant global experience, mainly using proxies like the Wagner Group, and exploiting past operations and networks that once existed in the former Soviet Union. Russia has also been far more aggressive in cyber-attacks and information and influence operations than China, although China is relatively adept at intellectual property theft (Wilde and Wilde, n.d.). Russia's military actions are currently more of a threat to the West, particularly concerning the Russia invasion of Ukraine and Putin's recent order to put nuclear weapons on high alert. Many experts in the West see Russia as a Western antagonist that is determined to undermine and divide NATO and, in turn, undermine Western dominance, particularly regionally. On the other hand, China is far less aggressive with its military and opts to assert its power through significant economic and political influence, such as the Belt and Road Initiative. China is less reliant on its military to increase its global presence than

Russia; thus, it can be argued that Russia is more of a current military threat to the West. However, as China continues to grow economically and militarily, there may come a point when China's military may become the main military threat to the West, particularly with tensions rising in the South China sea (Cato.org, 2021). A potential worst-case scenario for the West is a military alliance between China and Russia which could pose a significant threat to Western security. Since the start of the Ukraine conflict, Russia and China have formed closer economic ties, particularly concerning energy exports. Closer economic and military relations between both countries could put Washington and the West on red alert.

In conclusion, Russia's offensive realist stance acts as a more direct political threat to the West. Russia is far more proactive in pursuing its foreign policy objectives, as exemplified by its recent actions in Ukraine. Politically and diplomatically, China presents less of a threat to the West due to its defensive realism stance. China uses the international system to its advantage by implementing soft power approaches to pursue its political objectives, as is evident with its initiatives in Africa, such as the Belt and Road Initiative. Considering both countries' economic threat to the West, it is overwhelmingly apparent that China is a far greater economic threat than Russia. China's economy is ten times bigger than the Russian economy. It is also the world's largest exporter and the second largest economy globally. China's economic standing and disregard for international norms pose a significant threat to the West, particularly concerning Western trade deficits with China and its accumulation of Western debt. From a military perspective, both China and Russia pose a threat to the West. However, Russia's recent military actions in Ukraine, and the threat of nuclear weapon use, suggest Russia is far more proactive in its military stance than China, presenting a significant current threat to the West. On the other hand, China seeks to

gain its global standing through political and economic means rather than by military means. Nonetheless, this could change as China expands economically and militarily. Tensions in the South China Sea indicate China could have expansionary desires regionally. When ascertaining who presents a greater overall threat, it is evident that out of the three factors analyzed—political, economic, and military threats—Russia poses a greater risk to the West in two of these factors, namely political and military. In contrast, China poses a more significant threat economically. Therefore, the analysis suggests Russia presents a more significant current threat to the West. However, it is essential to factor in the invasion of Ukraine and the effect this could have on Russia's military and economy. The war's outcome in Ukraine could weaken the Russian threat to the West, making China the West's most significant threat; likewise, a Russian victory in Ukraine could enhance the threat to the West, particularly if Putin seeks to expand further westwards.

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