

China

Strength of 'limitless' China-Russia ties to be tested at summit

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Ukraine setback weakens Russian position as leaders prepare to jostle for regional influence in Uzbekistan

Major setbacks for Moscow's forces in [Ukraine](#) will further test the "limitless partnership" between China and Russia when their leaders meet this week for the first time since the invasion, analysts have said.

The meeting of Xi Jinping and [Vladimir Putin](#), scheduled for Thursday at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, is likely to involve jostling for influence in central Asia, where the two global powers have long waged a "quiet rivalry".

The SCO summit, an annual meeting of Eurasian leaders on regional politics, economics and security, occurs at a crucial time when a rising China and weakening [Russia](#) could shift the central Asia power balance in Beijing's favour.

Both leaders have also scheduled stops in Kazakhstan, where Xi first launched his [trademark "belt and road" foreign investment initiative](#) in 2013. Underscoring the importance of the region, Xi's visit will be his first international trip since the pandemic began and comes just a month before a crucial Communist party meeting expected to cement his precedent-breaking third term as leader.

Central Asia was "at the heart of Xi's strategies", said Therese Fallon, director of the Centre for Russia Europe Asia Studies. "If we think about China's grand strategy ... it's pretty clear they've been pushing westward."

Xi and Putin last met on the sidelines of the Beijing Winter Olympics, where they announced their partnership, just weeks before Russia invaded Ukraine. Russian officials have said the two leaders have a "full-fledged and detailed agenda" for the talks, and some analysts said they expect Putin to seek more help from China after Russia experienced one of its worst setbacks in the war.

Beijing has struggled to balance [its support for Moscow](#) with a wish to avoid the indirect impact on its economy of sanctions levelled at Russia by the west. It has refused to condemn the invasion, instead blaming the west for inflaming tensions. It has stopped short of supplying weapons support but has reportedly provided drone parts, and last week participated in joint military exercises in the Sea of Japan.

On Friday, Russia claimed that Beijing's third-highest ranking figure had offered an unprecedented endorsement of its actions in Ukraine. According to Moscow, Li Zhanshu told Russian lawmakers that China "understands and supports Russia", particularly "on the situation in Ukraine". The Chinese readout simply said Beijing would "continue to work with Russia to firmly support each

other” on core interests.

The strength of the global response to the invasion and [Russia's recent losses](#) have raised difficult questions for Xi about his foreign policy acumen in aligning with Putin, but he will probably remain supportive, said Prof Elizabeth Wishnick, a senior research scientist and the Center for Naval Analyses, on leave from Montclair State University.

“With Russia under pressure on the battlefield, Xi might feel compelled to express some greater rhetorical support for Russia, or at least to provide some additional criticism of Nato and the US,” said Wishnick.

Analysts have suggested that as Russia’s strength wanes, Beijing can gain ground on key issues of trade routes and the defence of its Xinjiang regime.

Niva Yau, a senior researcher at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, said China had a long-term goal to shift global trade from being sea-based to land-based, especially for energy trade routes “which can cushion sanctions on China if it ever comes to a military takeover of Taiwan”. She said trade and transport agreements, or rebranded “belt and road” investments could be announced at the summit.

Russia had similar goals to China, Yau said, but with diminishing power Putin would probably focus on ensuring Russia was not excluded from its regional interests by China’s plans.

Russia’s war on Ukraine has interrupted Chinese overland trade routes, complicated Chinese investment in central Asia and damaged Russia’s capacity to be the dominant security presence in the region, Wishnick said. It left open the question of whether China was prepared to take on a larger security role, and whether Russia and the region would accept it.

Prior to meeting each other, Xi and Putin were reportedly planning to each sit with Kazakhstan’s president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, a key figure in the region, particularly for China’s interests.

“What we expect from this trip is that [Xi Jinping](#) is really trying to see what Tokayev is like as a president, and in terms of China’s core principles,” said Yau.

Tokayev, a former diplomat who speaks Chinese and Russian, came to power in 2019 after almost three-decades of rule [by his predecessor](#). Analysts said that although Kazakhstan traditionally leaned towards Russia – in January it [called on Moscow for assistance](#) to quell [mass protests](#) – it was also interested in China and its “deep pockets”.

Another key factor for China will be to ensure regional support for its push back against global condemnation of its human rights abuses in Xinjiang, which borders Kazakhstan and is a Muslim-majority country. “Kazakhstan is arguably the most important country to get on board,” said Yau.

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P.-S.

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