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# China-Russia Convergence in the Communication Sphere: Exploring the Growing Information Nexus

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## Abstract

This paper examines China-Russia relations through the lens of information politics. Specifically, it analyzes the extent of the bilateral “information nexus” or the strengthening of ties between the two sides in the communication domain, and its key dimensions, limitations, and policy implications. Drawing on a mix of primary and secondary sources in Chinese and Russian languages, this study demonstrates a growing and systematic coordination and collaboration in the information sphere at the bilateral level. The analysis uncovers an increasing institutionalization and socialization in bilateral media relations and efforts at content co-production and synchronization of mutual media coverage. At the same time, this relationship also faces some limitations, including inconsistency and asymmetry in media interactions and limited coordination directed at global and non-official contexts.

## Policy Implications and Key Takeaways

US policymakers should treat the information domain as integral to China-Russia relations. In the past three decades, the two countries have institutionalized their media ties, embarked on routine socialization of their media professionals, co-produced selective content, and publicized mutually complementary content in their state media. While the joint distribution of explicit disinformation thus far presents a relatively minor part of this information nexus, the convergence in China-Russia communication ties still poses a number of challenges and implications for US policy interests:

- First, it creates opportunities for the diffusion of norms and values, and for shaping public opinion in both countries in favor of this relationship. It creates a symbolic cushion for this relationship that can potentially help mitigate other tensions and suspicions.
- Second, Chinese and Russian outlets practice subtle forms of disinformation in their mutual coverage, such as biased usage of sources. A broader conception of disinformation is needed to incorporate these less perceptible means of shaping public opinion.

- Third, China's symbolic ties with Russia serve to bolster China's discourse power and media reach in important global contexts like Central Asia, which further complicates the US-China competition for narratives.

The gaps in the China-Russia information collaboration also present opportunities for the United States:

- First, the concentration of bilateral efforts on partnerships amongst official national media leaves space for shaping public narratives about China and Russia through non-official channels. More investment into training and forums for independent Russian and Chinese journalists, many of whom are now part of the diaspora, would help construct alternative narratives in local languages.<sup>1</sup>
- Second, the Global Engagement Center and other institutions involved in public diplomacy should more forcefully target the post-Soviet space (especially Central Asia) in communicating both the US interests in the region and alternative narratives about China.
- Third, publicly underscoring the gaps and asymmetries in China-Russian information ties would help expose the limitations of this relationship, especially for audiences in the Global South that might be more inclined to consume Chinese and Russian media narratives.

## Introduction

As the Russia-Ukraine war persists, Chinese officials continued to hold bilateral meetings, including a visit by Xi Jinping to Moscow in March 2023, where Xi described Putin as a “dear friend” and the China-Russia relationship as “mature and resilient.”<sup>2</sup> Both leaders stressed the detrimental influence of the United States on the international order and the importance of joint efforts toward establishing multipolarity. Throughout the war, Chinese leaders abstained from overtly criticizing Russia. Instead, Chinese diplomats often criticized the West as the instigator of this conflict—a rhetoric widely invoked by the Russian administration. In some instances, Chinese officials even spread major disinformation claims concerning the war, including a rumor about Ukraine hosting US biological weapons.<sup>3</sup>

The unwavering ties between the Chinese and Russian leadership amidst Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have attracted concern from US policymakers, journalists, and the general public. The US government officials have repeatedly expressed warnings to China against supporting Russia.<sup>4</sup> Western journalists and commentators have described China and Russia as engaging in “an epic struggle against the West,”<sup>5</sup> and think tank analysts warned that the ties between the two will only “deepen” post-invasion, as Russia becomes more co-dependent with China.<sup>6</sup> The unease over China’s relations with Russia is also expressed in US public opinion. Pew Research Center survey from April 2022 found that 62 percent of the survey participants perceived the partnership between China and Russia as a serious concern. This compares to about 47 percent concerned about China’s involvement in US politics.<sup>7</sup>

Russia’s war in Ukraine, of course, does not mark the beginning of intensification in China-Russia camaraderie in the contemporary era. The growing convergence between the two regimes has been long observed by analysts and scholars in the field, with a special emphasis placed on economic,<sup>8</sup> security,<sup>9</sup> and geopolitical facets<sup>10</sup> of this partnership. China-Russia communication during the ongoing war in Ukraine, however, has underscored the importance of moving beyond these dimensions and examining this relationship through the lens of information politics and symbolic allegiances. Beyond their apparent anti-Western synergy, however, little is known about the extent to which the Chinese and Russian governments have attempted to coordinate their communication and build closer ties across their media domains.

This study engages with this question by tracing China-Russia media collaboration over a period of nearly three decades or since the start of Putin's regime, as well as by examining mutual media coverage over the past year. It draws on an in-depth analysis of bilateral media summits, co-production agreements, and narrative analysis of media reporting in major national media, amongst other sources, to explore the key facets of bilateral information convergence. The analysis demonstrates that while much of the emphasis in Western commentaries has been on China-Russia coordination in external messaging, more extensive media partnerships and interactions are present at the bilateral level. Specifically, this study uncovers multifaceted collaboration efforts, including growing institutionalization and socialization in China-Russia media relations, as well as efforts at co-production and harmonizing mutual coverage.

These efforts, however, also feature some limitations, including the uneven nature of collaboration, as manifested in episodic engagements and in notable power asymmetries, and in limited efforts made at expanding collaboration to transnational and non-official contexts. The paper proceeds to trace the different layers of media collaboration, starting with the institutionalization of media ties.

## **Part I. Institutionalizing China-Russia Media Relations**

Although some information exchanges took place between Chinese and Russian media representatives and officials from 1991 to 2000, the institutionalization of bilateral media ties was launched in 2002, with the establishment of the Russia-China work group on media cooperation.<sup>11</sup> The workgroup operated as part of the Russian-Chinese Commission on Cooperation in Education, Culture, Healthcare and Sports. Its main goal, as described by the former deputy prime minister, Valentina Matviyenko, was to develop cooperation in the fields of information exchange between the two countries "in a wide range."<sup>12</sup> This workgroup included high-level officials, including Russia's Ministry for Press, Television, Radio Broadcasting and Mass Communications and China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. The workgroup held meetings in 2002, 2004, and 2006. During the last meeting (in 2006), media outlets from China and Russia expressed

their willingness to exchange delegations and TV programs, as well as to hold joint seminars and conferences.<sup>13</sup>

In 2008, this workgroup transformed into the Media Cooperation Subcommittee of the Russian-Chinese Commission for Humanitarian Cooperation. Co-chaired by the deputy minister of Russia's Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media and the deputy head of China's National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), the subcommittee brings together top Chinese and Russian media and communication stakeholders. The 2021 meeting, for instance, included Russia's deputy minister of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media, Bella Cherkesova, and China's deputy head of NRTA, Meng Dong.<sup>14</sup> This gathering also featured representatives of major national media outlets, including top media managers, editors, and producers from Xinhua News Agency, CGTN, *People's Daily*, *China Daily*, Russia Today TV, Rossiya Segodnya media group, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Sputnik, TASS, and *Kommersant*.

Between 2008 and 2022, the subcommittee met 15 times, including three annual meetings in a row between 2020 and 2022 that took place remotely during the pandemic. The elevated status as a subcommittee came with more responsibilities, such as outlining biannual bilateral cooperation plans. The publicly available and leaked work plans publicized for periods of 2019–2020 and 2021–2022,<sup>15</sup> as part of the meetings of the Media Cooperation Subcommittee of the Russian-Chinese Commission for Humanitarian Cooperation, for instance, included 120 cooperation items in the former, and 64 in the latter. These cooperation items range from joint content production to plans for future forums and visits, to information exchanges, to organizing photo exhibitions, joint animation festivals, and movie screenings, to potential exclusive interviews with state leadership, and workshops and seminars with media experts.

While many of the pronouncements documented in these work documents carry an aspirational character, the institutionalization of China-Russia media ties has facilitated some tangible outcomes, including increasing socialization or network formation between Chinese and Russian media professionals and officials, joint content co-production by Chinese and Russian media outlets, and the apparent synergies in how Chinese and Russian media cover each other's countries respectively. The following section examines the deepening of socialization in China-Russia media ties.

## Part II: Growing Network Formation: Media Summits and Forum Diplomacy

The period between 2014 and 2022 featured an acceleration and an expansion in the China-Russia media network formation, as evident in media summit diplomacy, as well as in bilateral people-to-people exchanges between Chinese and Russian journalists. As for the former, several major forums were held regularly over the past seven years. The China-Russia Media Forum co-hosted by the CCP Propaganda Department and the Russian Presidential Administration, took place annually between 2015 and 2022. These forums engage with Russia-China media cooperation across different domains, including discussions on professional standards, content sharing, protection of personal data, and the role of media in supporting the Belt and Road Initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union, amongst other topics.

The China-Russia Internet Forum, hosted by *China Daily* and overseen by the Cyberspace Administration of China and the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media of Russia, is another major annual bilateral event. This forum is primarily dedicated to Internet governance with discussions focused on trends in new media, Internet security, challenges faced by online media companies in Russia and China, and usage of new technologies (big data, 5G and artificial intelligence, and cloud computing) in the media industry.<sup>16</sup>

Other than these routine forums, some major events took place on episodic bases, including the Russian-Chinese Forum of Young Journalists, held in Russia in 2016–2017, and the Forum of Russian-Chinese cinema cooperation, held in 2019. In 2016–2017, China and Russia also held joint “Media Years” marked by a large number of bilateral events in both countries. These events included, for example, the joint project, “Ten Masterpieces of Chinese Literature in Russia and Ten Masterpieces of Russian Literature in China,” initiated by TASS and *Guangming Ribao*, “This is China!” documentary series launch by RT TV channel and Beijing Zhongshi Yayun Center for the Promotion of Chinese Culture, and a joint photo exhibition, “Look into Past and Future,” dedicated to the 60th anniversary of cooperation between Xinhua and TASS.

Similar to the subcommittee meetings, media and Internet forums are attended by representatives of leading media outlets, industry-related organizations, and senior officials from both sides. For example, at the Fifth

Media Forum in Vladivostok in 2019, the Russian delegation was headed by at the time Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation and Chief of Government Staff, Konstantin Chuychenko, and the Chinese side was led by Xu Lin, at the time the Deputy Director of the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee and the Minister of the State Council Information Office. In total, the Fifth Forum was attended by more than 100 officials and media representatives.

Network-building between major state media on both sides also takes place through bilateral people-to-people exchanges, with Chinese editors and journalists visiting Russia and vice-versa. The joint tours tend to be organized around specific themes pertaining to China-Russia relations. In 2014 and 2016, for instance, a media tour titled *'The Russian and Chinese Border is the Border of Peace and Cooperation,'* organized by TASS and *People's Daily*, focused on bilateral journalistic immersion into the border region on both sides. In 2014, 40 participants visited the five largest cities of Heilongjiang Province.<sup>17</sup> In 2016, 41 Chinese and Russian journalists from both federal and regional media outlets visited Russia's Amur Region and Primorsky Krai, and met with heads of the two regions, as well as with the top directors of key enterprises, including joint ones.<sup>18</sup> Another media tour, called *'China and Russia on the Silk Road'*, was also held in 2016. For two weeks, a group of almost 40 reporters from major Russian and Chinese media outlets visited Xi'an, Dunhuang, Lanzhou, Urumqi, and other cities.<sup>19</sup>

Other than bringing together key stakeholders in China-Russia media industries for extensive and in some cases routine dialogues, these social events can facilitate new bilateral media agreements, as well as carry a symbolic value of signaling to Chinese, Russian, and international audiences the legitimacy of Chinese and Russia media, and the strength of China-Russia relations. As for binding agreements, careful tracing of all media agreements signed from 2015 to 2022 reveals a total of at least 15 publicly available agreements signed between Chinese and Russian media, including that between *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and China Radio International; Tass and Guangming Ribao; CCTV and Gazprom-Media; Russia Today and Renmin Wang, and between the China Media Group and "Rossiya Segodnya," amongst others (please see table 2).<sup>20</sup> While most of these agreements appear to primarily serve the purpose of publicly affirming bilateral ties by declaring strategic partnerships, some have



**TABLE 1.** Agreements between Russian and Chinese media outlets

N°	Parties	Type of Agreement
<b>2015</b>		
1	TASS and China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration	Joint publication of the album "Remembering History and Protecting Peace: On the 70th Anniversary of Victory in World War II"
2	<i>Rossiyskaya Gazeta</i> and China Radio International	Cooperation agreement, specific contents not available
<b>2016</b>		
3	TASS and <i>Guangming Ribao</i>	Cooperation agreement, specific contents not available
4	<i>Rossiyskaya Gazeta</i> and <i>China Daily</i>	Cooperation agreement, specific contents not available
5	CCTV and Gazprom-Media	Strategic cooperation agreement, specific contents not available
6	<i>Rossiyskaya Gazeta</i> and <i>China Daily</i>	Printing inserts in <i>China Daily</i> in 2016
7	Russia Today and Renminwang	Cooperation agreement, specific contents not available
8	Russia Today and <i>China Daily</i>	Cooperation agreement, specific contents not available
9	SPB TV and Jingji Ribao Media Group	China Economic Network channel global broadcasting via SPB TV platform
10	SPB TV and CCTV	CCTV international channels global broadcasting via SPB TV platform
11	Ostankino Television Technical Center and Poly Technologies Inc.	Ostankino renovation
<b>2017</b>		
12	National Media Group, CTC Media and Huace Film & TV	Cooperation agreement, as part of this agreement the Chinese side acquired the rights to showcase Russian series "Molodezhka"
<b>2018</b>		
13	China Media Group and "Rossiya Segodnya"	Strategic partnership, specific contents not available

more detailed pronouncements about collaboration plans, primarily involving sharing and distributing news materials and stories. This will be discussed more in the next section.

As for symbolic value, the analysis of media coverage of these events, especially of major media summits reveals extensive reporting by both Russian and Chinese media outlets, with the latter being more prolific. Xinhua News Agency, *People's Daily*, *China Daily*, CCTV, TASS, RIA, Sputnik, and *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, all cover the summits. The Chinese side goes as far as developing websites for some of the forums. For instance, *People's Daily* designed a website for the first China-Russia Media Forum, which took place in Saint Petersburg in 2015. The breadth and variety of content available on the website are overwhelming, ranging from articles to photo collections and infographics. The forum was categorized by *People's Daily* as 'a 2015 special topic' (2015年专题). Most of the reports tend to underscore successful and productive media collaboration between the two sides. The reports mention achievements like joint projects and signed agreements, the growing number of participants at the forums, the overarching significance of the forums, and deepening contacts between media organizations, amongst other highlights.

At times, media coverage of the summits also emphasizes successes in media cooperation as feeding into larger bilateral and global ambitions. For instance, at the start of the first China-Russia Media Forum in 2015, *China Daily* reposted a Xinhua article saying that 'remarkable achievements have been made in China-Russia media cooperation in recent years, which has played a positive role in promoting China-Russia relations and safeguarding world peace and stability.'<sup>21</sup> Media cooperation here is framed as a propeller for the enhancement of the relationship, which in turn contributes to global stability. A Xinhua report following the same forum featured an interview with Andrey Bystritskiy, dean of the Faculty of Communications, Media and Design (now Faculty of Creative Industries) of the HSE University who argued that the media forum is the optimal way to strengthen Russian-Chinese relations.<sup>22</sup>

These routine events, ranging from major summits to joint journalistic trips and smaller-scale thematic gatherings demonstrate the growing socialization in bilateral media ties, as media and creative professionals, as well as media governance officials, and in some cases also internet companies, form a friendly network as part of these exchanges. These networking events also

yield direct agreements between Chinese and Russian media outlets, some of which facilitate co-production that's discussed in the following section. The symbolic value of these social events is also significant, as the media in both countries use them to ascertain to domestic and global audiences the deepening of China-Russia ties in the information space and beyond. We now turn to the next dimension of China-Russia media cooperation: content co-production.

### **Part III: Launching Joint Content: China and Russia as Media Co-Producers**

From 2015 to 2022, China-Russia media and creative content co-production can be categorized into joint production ventures and deliberate distribution and circulation of each other's content for respective domestic audiences. As for the former, joint projects have been launched in the news, film, and animation spheres. In the news media sector, in 2017, China Radio International and MIA Rossiya Segodnya launched "Russia-China: Top News"—a standalone news app that produces daily news feeds on China-Russia relations, and on the latest developments in both countries. This application has a large following on both Russian and Chinese social media platforms, including 650,000 followers of the project on VK, a Russian social media networking service, and 590,000 followers on Weibo, China's most popular microblogging platform.<sup>23</sup> This application is also widely used by Russian journalists in their coverage of China-Russia relations, as well as of Chinese news events. For example, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Russia's official government newspaper, maintains a special section on its website with reposts or publications written based on content from the application. Titles include: "Chinese delegation holds talks with UN chief at COP27", "Quotes of Xi Jinping's 2022 New Year Address", and "China-Russia youth tour on the Yangtze River concluded,"<sup>24</sup> amongst others.

Between 2015 and 2022, Chinese and Russian counterparts also co-produced three feature films, two documentaries, and two animation series (see Table 3)—a number that's relatively small in comparison to China's film co-production with other major countries, such as the United States (American films produced with Chinese investment between 2015–2021 amounted to

**TABLE 1.** Agreements between Russian and Chinese media outlets

Title	Year	Genre/Type
<i>Ballet in the Flames of War</i>	2015	History/Feature
<i>Russia and China: The Heart of Eurasia</i>	2015	History/Documentary
<i>This is China!</i>	2017–2019	Documentary series
<i>How I Became Russian</i>	2019	Romance/Comedy/Feature
<i>Viy 2: Journey to China</i>	2019	Fantasy/Adventure/Feature
<i>Panda and Krash</i>	2021	Family/Animation series
<i>Ask Tina</i>	2022	Family/Animation series

134).<sup>25</sup> Some of these co-productions, however, carry a significant educational and symbolic mission of telling the China-Russia story. The 2015 documentary film, “Russia and China: The Heart of Eurasia,”<sup>26</sup> written and directed by a Russian journalist and editor-in-chief of *History* TV channel, Aleksey Denisov, with input from Chinese consultants and state media organizations, for instance, tells the story of joint struggles against fascism during WWII, featuring interviews with Putin and Xi. *Rossiya One* TV channel that first broadcast the film in 2015 introduced it as a story of shared sacrifices against fascism in the Second World War, noting that the two nations experienced the biggest losses during this war.<sup>27</sup> By building a shared narrative about the war, the film attempted to reassert the longevity and resilience of China-Russia relations.

As for content placement and circulation, these agreements span the broadcasting, print, and digital media sectors. In 2015, SPB TV and CNTV (China’s national web-based TV broadcaster) signed an agreement to broadcast all eight international CCTV channels on the territory of Russia as well as CIS.<sup>28</sup> The channels were launched in the SPB TV user app. In 2016, the

agreement extended to broadcasting all of CCTV's international content to global audiences via the SPB TV app.<sup>29</sup> The Russian company provided a channel for Chinese content to go beyond Russia, as the SPB TV app had 53 million users worldwide (as of March 2016).<sup>30</sup> Russian TV channels have also recently aired *Classics Quoted by Xi Jinping*—a video series of Xi Jinping's popular quotes. The new season launched in March 2023 on Russia 24—a popular TV channel.<sup>31</sup> Some Russian TV content has also made its way to China. Russia's entertainment channel, "Katyusha," has broadcast in China via CCTV. The content includes Russian cultural, educational, scientific, and historical programming, and is being transmitted in Russian language with Chinese subtitles.

In print media, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Russia's main official newspaper, produces an insert, titled *Toushi Eluosi* (*Perspective of Russia*), for the *Global Times* that covers Russian politics, culture, sci-tech, and business. *China Daily* produces an insert titled *Kitajskij Vzglyad* (*China Watch*) for *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, which tells Russian readers about China, including China's foreign policy, economy, scientific and technological innovations, cultural heritage, and stories on bilateral relations, amongst other topics. In 2016, when the insert was launched, Li Hui, at the time the PRC Ambassador to Russia, expressed hope that it would 'introduce China's contemporary reality, and serve as a 'window of friendship.'<sup>32</sup> The China Media Group also distributes its *Breath of China* journal via *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* which covers Sino-Russian friendship, BRICS and SCO cooperation, as well as Chinese culture and history, and publishes educational articles on mastering the Chinese language and cooking.

China-Russia content co-production ranges from direct collaborations, as in the case of the news app launch and joint work on selective films, as well as the more indirect co-production carried out through mutual content placement. The latter appears to be a more developed facet of this partnership, which has likely materialized from the socialization of bilateral media ties and the agreements signed between different outlets, introduced in the previous section. External communication through foreign media content placement, of course, is a tactic widely practiced by China across global contexts. What's interesting in the case of China-Russia relations is that Russia also appears to present a pathway for China to communicate with larger audiences, especially in the former Soviet Union, with the help of Russian media infrastructure

and programming that is widely used in the larger post-Soviet world. Russia, in turn, gets more access to the Chinese public opinion sphere through its content placement in Chinese media. We now move to the final section that examines how Chinese and Russian state media cover each other and the synergies that are apparent in their reporting.

#### **Part IV: Co-Shaping Narratives: Mutually Supportive Coverage in State Media**

In addition to different forms of direct co-production, there is also more implicit shared narrative formation taking place in Chinese and Russian media, as evident in their reporting about each other. The analysis of one year of content from two major national newspapers, *Rossijskaya Gazeta* and *Renmin Ribao*, from February 2022 to February 2023, reveals that their coverage of China and Russia respectively is mutually complimentary in different ways.<sup>33</sup> Specifically, whereas *Rossijskaya Gazeta* bolsters China's image by prioritizing positive stories about China's accomplishments, *Renmin Wang* indirectly reinforces Russia's official position in the context of its war in Ukraine. The two media outlets also devote some coverage to celebrating the breakthroughs in China-Russia relations.

The sampled articles from *Rossijskaya Gazeta*'s coverage of China over the selected time frame reveal the dominant themes of China's governance and Xi Jinping's engagements. In covering either China's policies or Xi Jinping's statements and appearances, Russian state media appears to serve a PR role for China by informing Russian and Russian-speaking readers of China's new governance directions, praising and celebrating China's policy successes, and reporting on Xi Jinping's meetings and public addresses. The coverage of China's domestic governance often carries at once a declarative and celebratory tone. Story titles include: "China is the world leader in the pace of air filtration,"<sup>34</sup> "China has conquered children's dependency on video games,"<sup>35</sup> and "The Chinese Communist Party has led its country towards rejuvenation."<sup>36</sup>

In reporting on China's policy accomplishments, *Rossijskaya Gazeta* tends to emphasize its achievements across different policy arenas, from rural poverty alleviation to technological innovation to environmental governance, to

global financial reach, amongst others. An article in a form of a letter to one younger self, for instance, published in January 2023,<sup>37</sup> tells a story of a young Chinese woman who experienced childhood poverty. She writes that in 20 years the small mountain village where she grew up “transformed completely, and there have been tremendous changes in people’s everyday life.” The positive changes mentioned include online shopping, better nutrition, and food deliveries, particularly, from other parts of China and from abroad, improved housing with air conditioning and heating, and transport infrastructure, e.g., an airport and high-speed rail. “Today, 20 years later, us, our village, our town, and our country, everything is becoming better,” concludes the article.

At times, the articles also highlight how China’s rise is being recognized globally. An article from August 2022, for instance, notes that the majority of respondents in a recent public opinion poll from 22 countries highly value China’s developmental accomplishments, with a special focus on its economic performance.<sup>38</sup> Another piece from November 2022 claims that overseas youth showed support for China’s development concepts, also quoting an opinion poll with respondents from 30 developed and developing countries.<sup>39</sup> This article further explains that among China’s achievements over the last 10 years, the respondents named economic development, sci-tech progress, and PRC’s growing international status. One more piece from the same date is titled “China’s Global Development Initiative received strong support from serious international organizations, including the UN.”<sup>40</sup> It quotes Antonio Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, as saying that “China has become the most important pillar of multilateralism and an irreplaceable, trustworthy force for the establishment of world peace and the development of countries.”

Moreover, *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* extensively covers Xi Jinping’s addresses and meetings, both domestic and international. Internationally, reports cover, for example, Xi’s 2022 state visit to Saudi Arabia, including bilateral meetings with leaders of Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, and Lebanon, as well as his remarks at the first China-Arab States Summit and the China-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit.<sup>41</sup> Across Xi’s domestic engagements, *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* published quotes from his 2023 New Year address, from the speech marking 25 years of Hong Kong’s return to PRC in July 2022, as well as from reports about the 20th CPC National Congress in October 2022.<sup>42</sup>

Across its China coverage, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* relies heavily on either the joint news application, introduced earlier, or on Chinese state media and official sources. The Russian sources used include federal-level media, Russia's official agencies, such as the Ministry of Economic Development, academic institutions, state representatives, and major companies. Non-official societal voices are largely absent in this coverage, as is any mildly critical or investigative take on China-Russia relations or on China's domestic policymaking.

The analysis of sampled coverage of Russia in *Renmin Wang* finds that Russia is most often invoked in the context of Russia's war with Ukraine— not surprising given that this conflict occupied much media attention over the past year. China's coverage does not directly endorse Russia's position or actions in Ukraine, but it does indirectly legitimize it by emphasizing the responsibility of the West, especially of the United States throughout this conflict, and by significantly channeling Russia's official voices and positions, including on controversial issues like the accusations about US biolabs in Ukraine.

The framing of the West, and especially of the United States as the key actor in this conflict permeates the sampled coverage throughout the past year. In the earlier months of the war, the focus was on NATO (and the US as the core member) as pushing Russia into the conflict. An article published in May 2022, for instance, features a cartoon with a Russian and Ukrainian bear lying side by side, and an eagle, symbolizing the United States, hovering over it and extending a sharp knife to the Ukrainian bear, presumably to attack Russia. The article argues that in the current situation of Russia and Ukraine evolving from being neighbors to resorting to arms, one cannot separate out the US "contribution."<sup>43</sup> The author further writes that the US quest for hegemony and "absolute security" has led to it using every means to encircle Russia. The United States has at once pressured Russia's regional security, and supported Ukraine's color revolutions that have tilted Ukraine's position against Russia, according to this article. Ukraine, therefore, in this case, is presented as an unfortunate victim of US geopolitical strategy, rather than of Russia's regional ambitions. Other articles around the same time period feature the arguments of critical US scholars, such as John Mearsheimer, who famously claimed that the root of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is NATO.<sup>44</sup>

As the conflict progressed the reporting shifted from explaining the origins of the conflict to explaining its prolonged nature, blaming the United States and



the West at large for inflaming tensions by providing immense ammunition to Ukraine, as well as for global economic costs of sanctions imposed on Russia. As for prolonging the war, an article from December 2022, for instance, notes that the United States and the West continue to “add oil to the fire” (*gonghuo jiao you*), citing a Russian expert who argues that the United States plays a critical role in providing ammunition and military intelligence to Ukraine.<sup>45</sup> Other articles also critique Western sanctions imposed against Russia for exacerbating an economic crisis. An article from September 2022, for instance, notes that Western sanctions have created the blockage of grain imports into African countries that are heavily dependent on buying grain from Russia and Ukraine. The article gives an example of Kenya as facing an especially dire situation of food security as a result of the current crisis that followed several years of very dry weather that cut the domestic grain yield by nearly 80 percent.<sup>46</sup> In other *Renmin Wang* writings, the United States is also blamed for dysregulating the global costs of natural resources around the world.<sup>47</sup>

Other than emphasizing Western and especially the US responsibility in this conflict, *Renmin Wang* reporting also indirectly bolsters Russia’s position by granting significant space to Russian official voices and perspectives in its coverage, thereby giving “discourse power” to Russia in Chinese media. The most blatant channeling of Russia’s narratives is manifested in articles about US biolabs in Ukraine. An article from July 2022, for instance, is titled as “Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs: There is no evidence that showcases that the US military’s biological labs in Ukraine are of peaceful nature.”<sup>48</sup> Another title around the same time reads as “Russia issues more evidence of US biological labs in Ukraine.”<sup>49</sup> In more routine reporting of the evolution of the conflict, *Renmin Wang* tends to give significant space to Russia’s perspectives and official voices. Reporting on perspectives from Ukraine tends to be balanced with Russian voices, whereas reports on Russian voices are not always complemented by perspectives from Ukraine. On major developments, such as the bombing of the bridge in Crimea, Russian voices are consistently prioritized. Some reports also appear to directly communicate Russia’s messages to other countries. In an article from June 2022, for instance, Russian officials issued a warning that Europe will face the consequences for the gas embargo.<sup>50</sup> In another article, *Renmin Wang* features Russia’s vice-foreign minister as warning the West to stop politicizing the grain issue.<sup>51</sup>

Overall, China's coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war tends to indirectly bolster Russia's position by highlighting the responsibility of the West (and namely the United States) throughout the period of the conflict, and by channeling Russia's narratives and perspectives, including in spreading rumors about US bioweapons and issuing warnings to the West. As such, without directly endorsing Russia or praising its actions, this coverage deflates Russia's responsibility and strengthens its discursive power.

Other than reinforcing each other's official narratives, mutual coverage in Chinese and Russian state media outlets also focuses on China-Russia relations. Both outlets cover bilateral meetings between their respective high-ranking officials. For example, over the sampling period, *Renming Wang* covered Li Zhanshu, the head of the China's legislature, meeting with Putin and other Russian officials during his visit to Russia in September 2022<sup>52</sup> and Russia's Ambassador to PRC Morgulov meeting with Heilongjiang province officials in January 2023,<sup>53</sup> while *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* published an article on Li Zhanshu meeting with Andrey Denisov, Morgulov's predecessor as Russia's Ambassador, in September 2022.<sup>54</sup>

The coverage in both papers also includes some stories of successful dimensions of bilateral relations, with Russian media placing a more pronounced emphasis on this theme. *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* emphasizes the implementation of joint agreements, such as the resumption of a visa-free regime in February 2023,<sup>55</sup> and underscores the future potential of strengthening bilateral ties through statements of high-level officials on both sides, but especially from Chinese counterparts. A number of these articles are almost entirely dedicated to publicizing the statements and interviews with Chinese officials. An article from October 2022, for instance, extensively quotes the Chinese ambassador to Russia on his view on China-Russia relations. "Sino-Russia relations have entered the best period in history and are characterized by the highest level of mutual trust, the highest degree of interaction, and the greatest strategic significance," reads the Ambassador's quote in *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*.<sup>56</sup> Some of the articles are also aspirational, highlighting the future prospects of China-Russia relations. In April 2022, for instance, *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* again quotes the Chinese ambassador as reassuring Russian businesses about the continuous demand for Russian goods on the Chinese market.<sup>57</sup> Overall, Russia-China relations are portrayed as

thriving across multiple domains, from people-to-people ties, to trade, to border relations, amongst other areas.

The coverage of China-Russia relations in *Renmin Wang* focuses primarily on trade and economic cooperation between the two countries, especially in border regions, and tends to place this cooperation into the broader context of China's economic engagements. An article covering Xu Qin, Party Secretary of Heilongjiang, trip to the border city of Heihe, where he visited different infrastructure objects. Among these objects is the China–Russia East-Route Natural Gas pipeline (Power of Siberia), which the article calls “a landmark achievement of the strategic collaboration between China and Russia in the field of energy.”<sup>58</sup> The article quotes Xu Qin, as stressing the need to deepen pragmatic cooperation between China and Russia in the field of energy. Another piece on trade expansion of China's Heilongjiang province<sup>59</sup> mentions Russia as one of the top three trading partners of Heilongjiang and gives the imports and exports data. Another piece, titled “Russian experts: China will remain the engine of global economic growth,”<sup>60</sup> puts cooperation with Russia into a larger context of China's economic development.

The analysis of how two major national media outlets, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Renmin Wang*, cover China and Russia respectively, demonstrates that the media play an important role in channeling, synchronizing, and legitimizing mutual official narratives on both sides. In the case of Russia's reporting, the dominant theme is that of China's success story, with Russian journalists vocalizing and at times directly transmitting China's official narratives about its multifaceted accomplishments. In the case of Chinese media coverage, the focus is less so on Russia's domestic breakthroughs, but more on echoing Russia's official rhetoric about the war in Ukraine. This is apparent in *Renmin Wang's* persistent emphasis on the West (and the United States) as the culprit in this conflict, as well as in the conflict coverage disproportionately featuring Russian official voices and perspectives. Both media outlets also cover bilateral official meetings and more broadly, China-Russia relations, though the tone is more targeted and optimistic in the case of the Russian press—a distinction that may be linked to Russia's growing isolation during the war and the need for external legitimation through China partnership. I discuss some of these asymmetries in more detail in the next section on limitations.

## Limitations and Frictions in China-Russia Media Partnership

Despite the increasing bilateral convergence in the information domain, the China-Russia media partnership also features some limitations, including the sporadic and uneven nature of the collaboration, limited coordination at the global or external level of communication, and the gaps between the official and unofficial focus of communication efforts.

As for the irregularity in China-Russia media engagements, tracing of bilateral media events over the past two decades, reveals a concentration of activities during specific years, followed by fewer encounters in others. The 2015–16 China-Russia Media Years, for instance, witnessed a flurry of events and bilateral agreements. The intensity of engagement then significantly waned from 2016 to 2019 and peaked again in 2019 with a slight increase in the number of bilateral events. However, due to the global outbreak of COVID-19, this peak point did not last long, and 2020–2021 saw a cooperation decrease. Even though some of the collaboration formats migrated online, cooperation has not returned to the pre-pandemic levels as of now, and major forums have been paused. Initially planned for 2020, the Sixth China-Russia Media Forum, for instance, has not been held as of June 2023. The China-Russia Internet Media Forum was held online in 2020 and 2021 (the fourth and the fifth one) but did not convene in 2022.

The implementation of joint pronouncements made as part of the Subcommittee meetings has also been relatively uneven, with more success delivered in content placement, hosting large-scale events, and synchronizing media narratives, but fewer outcomes recorded when it comes to joint production of content, especially in film and cultural spheres. Unlike China's co-production with Hollywood, moreover, the few films produced had limited popularity amongst viewers in both China and Russia.

The uneven ties are also manifested in notable asymmetry in power dynamics between China and Russia. The analysis of co-production and media coverage, in particular, suggests that China may be reaping more gains from this partnership. For instance, as discussed earlier in the paper, China-Russia content placement agreements allowed for large-scale Chinese broadcasting footage to be transmitted not only to Russia, but also to former CIS countries, and globally. China also managed to place political and arguably

ideological content on popular Russian TV. Russian broadcasting content, in contrast, has more limited diffusion in China and introduces largely soft cultural and entertaining stories to Chinese viewers. The mutual media reporting also features some power asymmetries, with Russian media publishing more explicit pro-China content than vice versa, and more forcefully underscoring the strength of the China-Russia relationship in comparison to more limited and generic pronouncements made in Chinese media. These power dynamics mirror the larger asymmetry in China-Russia relations, including in economic, security, and geopolitical spheres.<sup>61</sup> While the official aim of strengthening the bilateral media ties is that of bolstering and legitimizing the Sino-Russian relationship, in practice, media encounters also mirror its underlying frictions and inequities.

Other than the uneven developments in China-Russia media engagements, another limitation is their emphasis on coordination in domestic, rather than external contexts. While both regimes regularly proclaim their resistance to Western hegemony and the importance of rebalancing the global geopolitical order, when it comes to joint information and media governance, the pronouncements and initiatives are mainly of bilateral nature or focused on each other's public opinion environments. The analysis of available documents from Subcommittee meetings, as well as of co-production agreements and initiatives finds that generally, the focus is on creating a shared public opinion environment that's supportive of closer China-Russia relations. When it comes to constructing joint narratives for global audiences, it appears to take on a more episodic and opportunistic form, as in the case of Chinese media's anti-Western emphasis in its coverage of the war in Ukraine. Some scholars, like Berzina-Cerenkova, further find that in their external communication China and Russia often ignore each other, especially when it comes to promoting their regional initiatives like the Belt and Road and the Eurasian Union.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, China-Russia media initiatives primarily center on official-level communication, involving major national-level state-owned or state-affiliated media that emphasize official sources and pronouncements. Little effort is made to create linkages across media outlets and platforms at the subregional level, as well as to facilitate communication ties in popular culture by bringing together popular social media influencers, writers, and other influential groups that are not directly associated with the government. As a result, the

efficacy of these media connections when it comes to building favorable public opinion environment remains uncertain. State-to-state media ties play the role of signaling mutual official policies and shared stances, but whether they manage to shape public perceptions and build deeper trust amongst Chinese and Russian publics requires further investigation.

## **Conclusion: Implications and Policy Recommendations**

This study underscores both the deepening of bilateral ties, especially in terms of developing shared public sentiments, as well as the limitations of this relationship in the information domain and beyond. The strengthening of China-Russia joint information management, uncovered in this analysis, underscores the strategic importance of this relationship for Chinese and Russian elites. A major orientation of joint collaboration in the information realm is that of shaping domestic public opinion on both sides in favor of this relationship, and as such to also, indirectly, sway the public away from the West and Western aspirations. Recent public opinion surveys in both countries suggest that mutual sentiments have moved in a more positive direction. In the case of Russia, a 2021 joint survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Levada Analytical Center, reveals that nearly 74 percent of surveyed Russian citizens had a favorable view of China, and the majority shared that “respect for China has grown compared to 10 years ago.”<sup>63</sup> In the case of China, a public opinion survey conducted by the U.S.-China Perception Monitor months after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, found that the majority of Chinese respondents thought that supporting Russia in this war is “in China’s national interest,” though this support was understood more as giving moral reassurance than as provision of arms to Russia.<sup>64</sup> The growing synergies in joint media narratives, powered by the establishment of networks between Chinese and Russian state media journalists, have likely played a role in shaping Chinese and Russian publics in favor of stronger China-Russia ties.

At the same time, the findings presented in this policy paper also underscore that we should be cautious about not overestimating the potency of China-Russia relations when it comes to their joint coordination and dissemination of disinformation and propaganda aimed at global audiences. As noted above and throughout the paper, the main target of China-Russia information

coordination efforts is the domestic front, with less effort thus far dedicated towards external messaging coordination. In the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, for instance, Russia and China don't appear to spread coordinated campaigns in strategic regions, such as the Global South, though some of their anti-Western narratives can overlap and complement each other.

The analysis in this paper also highlights the importance of power asymmetry as a defining feature of China-Russia relations. China-Russia information partnership, thus far, appears to bring bigger gains for China. Russian media produces and airs more political pro-China content than vice-versa, and China is able to reach a wider post-Soviet audience through media partnerships with Russia. This asymmetry in the symbolic domain echoes China's growing sway over Russia in other sectors, including in economic and geopolitical domains.

This paper offers several core recommendations to US policymakers. First, US government agencies, especially the State Department's Global Engagement Center, should invest in supporting Chinese and especially Russian journalists in exile to craft alternative narratives about China-Russia relations. Partnering with and sponsoring projects of NGOs, such as Global Voices, which have long-established ties with media professionals and journalist activists from both countries would be most effective.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has led to a large-scale exodus of Russian media professionals. These journalists and some of their outlets, like *Meduza*, now operate from Europe and still have a large following within Russia, which could be utilized to shape public opinion about China and China-Russia relations. On the Chinese side, newly formed exiled HK media and some individual mainland Chinese journalists currently operating outside of China could also be targeted for the production of alternative narratives about Russia, Russia-China relations, and Russia's war in Ukraine. Ideally, more critically minded Chinese and Russian journalists would be gathered together to brainstorm joint ways of shaping public narratives.

Second, the Global Engagement Center and other institutions involved in public diplomacy should deepen engagements with more independent-minded media professionals in post-Soviet space. Considering China's increasing penetration of local media networks with the help of Russian media platforms, it is critical to craft and disseminate alternative narratives about China in

Russian-speaking countries, especially in Central Asia, where Chinese soft power is becoming influential.

Third, whereas it's important to call out China-Russia joint disinformation when it happens, it is equally critical to publicly and privately communicate the rifts in China-Russia messaging. Highlighting the asymmetry in China-Russia ties, in particular, exposes the fragility of this partnership and helps break the illusion of coherent and expansive China-Russia geopolitical block.

Finally, the State Department (and especially the Global Engagement Center) should adopt the framework of this study (i.e. institutionalization, socialization, co-production, and narrative synergies) to map out China's information politics in other contexts. A global mapping would help illustrate where China has invested more heavily in building information collaborations that could further guide more targeted policy choices.

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## Notes

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