

The No Limits Sino-Russian Friendship:

The End of Australia's China 'Fence Sitting' & Global Challenges Ahead



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Australia's Inevitable 'China Crisis'

As the Albanese government attempts to [re-chart](#)¹ Australia's commercial and trade ties to China, a news story has hit the headlines recently that portends a big problem ahead for Canberra. While Australia has been a relative [bit player](#)² when it comes to [supporting the Ukrainian government](#)³ in its stoic resistance to Russia's invasion 12 months ago, if, as this news story claims, rumours of Xi's China supplying Russia with advanced weapons and



other military supplies become true, this will change the nature of the war in Ukraine from a carefully stage-managed eastern European war into something more global in scope. It will place the Albanese government's peace-laden overtures to China at risk since the Americans will put pressure on their allies to restrict or ban outright commerce and trade ties to the People's Republic. This then becomes an existential threat to Australia. From an economic perspective, it has been noted by many economic historians that the [vast market](#)⁴ that China represented to Australia, post-1978, allowed the country to [dodge](#)⁵ the worst effects of global economic crises over the past 25 years. Indeed, Australia's centrality to Chinese growth has meant that for a generation, we in Australia have been used to [seeing China](#)⁶ as the economic [milk cow](#)⁷, guaranteeing our economic stability and profit growth. Should China overtly start supplying Russia with advanced weapons, our strategic ties with the United States will force our hand to relinquish this relationship. And this will come at a significant cost. All hopes of straddling the middle line between our primary trading partner, China, and our primary strategic partner, the United States, may well end for good. Since few are publicly addressing this extremely risky scenario, let's delve a little deeper into the consequences of this hypothetical geostrategic shift.

China-Russia 'Forever Friends'

The relationship between China and Russia has been an important aspect of geopolitics for decades. Both countries are major players on the world stage, with significant military capabilities and strategic interests that often intersect. Recently, there has been speculation about the possibility of [China supplying Russia](#)⁸ with weapons, and the potential implications of such a move are significant.

First and foremost, it is important to note that China is a major [producer](#)⁹ of weapons and has been steadily increasing its exports in recent years. While China has traditionally been a major customer of Russian arms, the country has been developing its own indigenous capabilities and is now in a position to supply other countries with advanced weaponry. Russia, on the other hand, is a major producer of arms but has faced increasing economic and technological challenges in recent years, which has led to a [decline](#)¹⁰ in its global arms exports. A position exacerbated by Russia's Special Military Operation against Ukraine and a tightening of international sanctions on Moscow.

If China were to supply Russia with weapons, there are several potential consequences. Firstly, it would provide Russia with access to advanced technology that it may not have been able to acquire otherwise. China has made [significant investments](#)¹¹ in military technology in recent years and has developed a range of sophisticated weapons systems, such as the [Chengdu](#)



[J-20](#)¹² fighter jet and the [DF-21D](#)¹³ anti-ship missile. If Russia were to acquire



these weapons, it would significantly enhance its military capabilities and make it a more formidable adversary.

Another major issue will be the testing of modern Chinese weapons, tactics and operations in real-time contemporary war.

The last time China went to war was against [Vietnam in 1979](#).¹⁴ During this short, but bloody exchange, war-weary but battle-hardened Vietnam emerged victorious having fought both the French and the Americans since 1954. In 1979, China had only opened up its economy to Western investment the year before and the PLA was still very much a peasant army with few sophisticated weapons. Western analysts understand little about the quality of new advanced Chinese weaponry, never having seen them [deployed and operated](#)¹⁵ in the field apart from carefully orchestrated PLA exercises.

However, there are also potential risks associated with China supplying Russia with weapons and ammunition.

Firstly, should Chinese weapons be destroyed or captured in Ukraine, the West will have a cornucopia of Chinese military technology to study to develop operational and engineering countermeasures. If China is serious about possibly using force to capture Taiwan or to intimidate the states of Southeast Asia or Japan, the West not knowing the full extent of China's technical capabilities is an advantage for Beijing.

It could also heighten tensions between Russia and other countries in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly those who are wary of China's growing influence. For example, Japan and South Korea have both expressed concern about China's military expansion in the region, and the prospect of Russia acquiring advanced Chinese weapons would exacerbate these concerns.

Furthermore, there is the possibility that such a move could escalate the war in Ukraine. Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine has been a major point of tension in Europe throughout 2022, and if Russia were to acquire advanced Chinese weapons, it could embolden the Russian military to take more aggressive action, perhaps even to the point of opening [new European 'fronts'](#)¹⁶ such as against Finland, the Baltic States or Romania/Moldova. This would lead to an escalation of the war by drawing NATO countries into the fray through Article 5 of the NATO Charter. What has been described as a



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proxy NATO war against Russia, using Ukraine as the battleground, could become an actual war between NATO and Russian forces involving much of Eastern Europe.

China as Peacemaker?

But then again, there has been some interesting talk of the Chinese leading a [peace initiative](#)¹⁷ for the Russia-Ukraine War.

How this would work is anybody's guess. The Chinese are by nature cautious about military entanglements and the problems they bring. The only time rhetorically they overcome their military reticence is when speaking in the context of reunification with Taiwan, protecting their militarised South China Sea islands and islets and confronting Japan over the disputed Senkaku islands in the East China Sea. In each case we are talking about small territories geographically close to the Chinese mainland where the PLA is strongest, covered by China's extensive Anti-Access, Area Denial ([A2/AD](#))¹⁸ systems.

Regarding the Russia-Ukraine War, Ukraine is still successfully holding the line against the numerically stronger Russians. This is partly to do with the supply of Western weapons. But it is largely to do with the fighting spirit of the Ukrainian people. It is unclear what sort of negotiated settlement the Chinese will be able to bring to the table that could be seen as fair and reasonable to Ukraine. The Zelensky government has made it very clear that any peace agreement with Russia will necessitate [the complete withdrawal](#)¹⁹ of all Russian forces from Ukrainian territory, inclusive of Crimea. It is highly doubtful that the Russians [having staked so much](#)²⁰ in their war against Ukraine would settle for this. It is also doubtful that Russian negotiators would be willing to sacrifice captured Ukrainian territory under Russian occupation. It therefore seems likely that failing a proper peace deal hammered out by a neutral party or parties, China is in no position to offer either side enough to end the fighting. As both Ukraine and Russia fight each other to a stalemate through the '[Rasputitsa Season](#)²¹', when liquified mud renders all heavy vehicle movement impossible, Kyiv and Moscow will be on the move again by mid-northern Spring after the ground hardens, by which time the first of Ukraine's [Western main battle tanks](#)²² may start making their presence felt.

This potted analysis and prognostication suggests that it will be through force of arms that the war will be decided. Neither Putin nor Zelensky could seriously entertain peace while both sides believe they have enough fight left in them.



The Dragon Throne

The Russo-Ukraine war is not just a threat to European security but also an attack upon one of the fundamental principles that underpin the entire post-war global structure and which has broadly preserved the peace for almost 80 years: the Rule of Law.

China, despite expressing its support for those elements of the global order that have allowed China to flourish over the last four decades, have been [undermining](#)²³ those elements with which they disagree. These are the rules that [constrain](#)²⁴ their ability to take over parts of the South China Sea, obstruct their national ability to take over Taiwan or to manage their unruly populations such as the Uyghurs, Tibetans and Hong Kongers. China is determined to develop a world in which the world order defers to states and their rulers rather than a body of law developed by more liberal Western democracies; they seek to reinstate the Dragon Throne and demand the suzerainty they believe they deserve. They see Russia's victory, or at the very least, being undefeated in Ukraine as a firm ally in delivering this freedom of action.

Chinese strategic objectives have been laid down some years ago and Xi Jinping sees it as his destiny to free China from the perceived straight jacket of Western laws and norms. When the time comes, they will use everything in their armoury to achieve them.

Consequently, the Chinese are not a neutral party and it would be inappropriate for the West to treat them as serious peacemakers. Their 'peace' is about retaining sufficient Russian power to continue menacing the U.S.-led international order – it is not about the preservation of that order. For Russia to retain utility as a Chinese [client-state](#)²⁵, it cannot be allowed to be humiliated or weakened to the point where Putin's regime could collapse.

Clearly the CCP and Premier Xi will hope for a Russian victory in this war. Russia is by far China's largest and most significant international friend. If Russia is defeated and grievously weakened, broken up or internationally isolated for years, the country's usefulness as a bulwark against the Americans and the West generally will diminish. Without this bulwark, China's own international situation may weaken too, leaving it a much reduced global power and certainly one that might not be able to throw its weight around in the Indo-Pacific region as it has recently.



Conclusion

Finally, there is the question of how the United States and other Western countries would respond to China selling weapons and munitions to Russia. The United States has been a major supplier of weapons to its allies in the region including Ukraine, and the prospect of China supplying weapons to Russia would be viewed as a significant threat to American interests. This would lead to increased tensions between the U.S. and China, and potentially even to the imposition of sanctions or other punitive measures against senior CCP leadership figures and the Chinese state. Those in Australia who were banking on the Albanese government's successful '[re-normalisation](#)'²⁶ of China, post-COVID, would be in for a rude shock if the Biden administration issued Canberra a red notice on trading with Chinese entities.

Has the Albanese government got a plan around this?

Doubtful. When push comes to shove, Australia will always back and support America's lead in the international order because of the centrality placed on the [1951 ANZUS Treaty](#)²⁷ and the new [2021 AUKUS](#)²⁸ security arrangement, even if this comes at a great financial cost to itself.

In conclusion, the possibility of China supplying Russia with weapons is a complex issue with significant geopolitical implications. China supplying Russia with weapons and ammunition will change a European war into a global one. While such a move could enhance Russia's military capabilities and provide access to advanced technology, it could also escalate international tension throughout the Indo-Pacific, exacerbating conflicts, and potentially draw other countries into the fray. For now, it remains to be seen whether China will choose to pursue this course of action, and how the international community will respond if it does.



**Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of
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ENDNOTES

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