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By Daniel Balazs

SYNOPSIS

The US and EU have imposed various sanctions on Russia since 2022 to undermine Moscow's war effort in Ukraine. Despite this, Moscow continues to receive dual-use items, as well as develop its capacities in space technology and drone development through its collaboration with Beijing. Sino-Russian cooperation is likely to continue as China's strategic design is to counter US dominance across the globe.

COMMENTARY

Since the beginning of the Ukraine conflict, the EU, the US, and other international actors have undertaken various efforts to undermine Russia's war effort and ostracise Moscow. The EU has [adopted](#) 18 sanction [packages](#) against Russia since February 2022, targeting the banking, energy, media, and military sectors. Similarly, Washington has also announced multiple rounds of [restrictions](#) on Russian entities since 2022.

As a part of these measures, the EU and the US have gone to great lengths to curb Russia's access to dual-use technologies. A scrutiny of Russia-China cooperation, however, reveals that Moscow is far from being cut off from such technologies. Through its collaboration with China and Chinese entities, Russia continues to purchase dual-use goods and develop its dual-use capabilities despite the tough sanctions.

Trade in Dual-Use Items

To sustain its operations in Ukraine, Russia needs critical inputs for its military-industrial base. Some of these inputs are dual-use [items](#), such as electronic components, telecommunications hardware, and equipment for circuit boards.

China has been a critical supplier of these items. In 2023, nearly 90 per cent of Russia's import of goods on the G7's high-priority export control [list came](#) from China. In 2024, dual-use shipments from China to Russia [surpassed](#) US\$4 billion.

China claims to be a neutral party in the Ukraine conflict, but the burgeoning dual-use trade between Beijing and Moscow leaves Western leaders sceptical about its position. In September 2024, the US [claimed](#) that China was giving substantial support to Russia in exchange for high-technology military know-how. At the same time, EU [policymakers labelled](#) Beijing as a key [enabler](#) of Russia's war effort in Ukraine.

Satellite Technology

While trade in dual-use goods is a critical aspect of Sino-Russian cooperation, it is far from being the only channel through which Moscow maintains access to dual-use technology.

Sino-Russian space [cooperation](#) in satellite technology [focuses](#) on enhancing the interoperability between China's Beidou and Russia's GLONASS navigation systems. The collaboration encompasses station construction, monitoring, and joint applications, among other areas.

In February 2022, shortly before the eruption of the Ukraine conflict, China and Russia [reached](#) a deal to enhance the complementarity of Beidou and GLONASS in system timescales, allowing them to better coordinate their programming and streamline the use of their resources.

China-Russia cooperation persisted, regardless of the hostilities in Ukraine. In September 2022, China and Russia [signed](#) contracts to build ground monitoring stations for each other's satellite systems: three Russian stations in China and vice versa. These stations will [enhance](#) the performance of the two parties' satellite systems, [facilitating](#) communication, data exchange, and control between Earth and the satellites.

China-Russia cooperation in satellite networks is ostensibly for civilian purposes. However, this cooperation facilitates Moscow's access to the dual-use technology, which has implications on the battlefield.

In April 2024, the United States [warned](#) its partners that China had supported Russia's war effort in Ukraine via technological means, such as the provision of geospatial satellite imagery for military applications. Several months later, in September 2024, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky [accused](#) Russia of using Chinese satellite imagery to monitor nuclear power stations in Ukraine in preparation for potential attacks against them.

Drone Technology

Besides trade in dual-use satellite technology, China and Russia also collaborate on drone development. Drones have civilian uses in entertainment or logistics, but are also employed for military [purposes](#) such as reconnaissance, surveillance, and

delivering precision-guided weapons. In the Ukraine conflict, militarised civilian drones are frequently [used](#) by both sides.

China and Chinese entities have taken steps to limit the sale of drones with military applications since the outbreak of the Ukraine conflict. DJI, a major Chinese company in the drone industry, broke off [relations](#) with Russia in 2022. Furthermore, China officially [restricted](#) the export of drones with potential military applications in 2023.

Nevertheless, Sino-Russian cooperation in drone technology continues. In November 2024, Guangxi Xinhang Shengjie Emergency Industrial Park Management Company – a Chinese company specialising in emergency and security technologies – [signed](#) an agreement with Ufa State Aviation Technical University, a prominent Russian aviation engineering institution, to acquire low-altitude drone defence technology, demonstrating that the cooperation benefits China's drone technology as well.

In addition, European intelligence sources claim that Russian drone development is still supported by China, regardless of the Ukraine conflict. In September 2024, European sources [stated](#) that Russia launched a weapons programme aimed at developing and manufacturing long-range attack drones in China, for use in the war against Ukraine.

Less than a month after the report was published, the United States [sanctioned](#) two drone suppliers based in China, Xiamen Limbach Aircraft Engine and Redlepus Vector Industry Shenzhen, for allegedly supporting Russia's war machine in Ukraine.

More recent reports, published in June and July 2025, suggest once again that Chinese actors are supporting Russian drone production. Their purported assistance [includes](#) providing Russia with "hardware, electronics, navigation, optical and telemetry systems, engines, microcircuits, processor modules, antenna field systems, control boards [and] navigation." To avoid detection, Chinese companies ship engines that power Russian drones [labelled](#) as cooling units.

While China has [denied](#) involvement in drone shipments to Russia, European officials have concluded that "China is escalating its role, both quantitatively and qualitatively," in the Ukraine conflict. To crack down on this practice, the EU is reportedly lining up new sanctions against Chinese actors over Ukraine.

Reputational Liability, Strategic Asset

Despite its self-proclaimed neutrality in the Ukraine conflict, China's continued cooperation with Russia strained Beijing's ties with its important trade partners, the US and the EU. It led to accusations of China supporting an aggressor and landed Chinese entities on international blacklists.

Nevertheless, China-Russia cooperation brings numerous strategic advantages to Beijing.

First, it [prevents](#) Washington from concentrating all its geopolitical focus on containing China, as Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reportedly told EU foreign affairs chief Kaja Kallas in July.

Second, closer Sino-Russian cooperation enables Beijing and Moscow to counter the pressure exerted by the strategic coordination of the US and its allies in the Asia-Pacific. This manifested in the recent Sino-Russian joint maritime drills, when they [practised](#) hunting and destroying an enemy submarine, shortly after the US announced it had moved nuclear submarines closer to Russia.

Finally, close ties with Russia allow Beijing to access critical military technologies, such as [missile defence](#) and advanced submarine [development](#).

Conclusion

Against this backdrop, sanctions do little to undermine China's strategic ties with Russia. On the contrary, they only push these two actors closer together. As a result, sanctions risk exacerbating geopolitical polarisation rather than curbing the very behaviours they are meant to deter.

Considering that China-Russia strategic ties are unlikely to weaken, Western actors should seek to turn them to their advantage. Russia's isolation and growing dependence on China provide Beijing with significant leverage in shaping a diplomatic solution to the war in Ukraine.

The US and the EU have already [encouraged](#) Beijing to use this [influence](#) to press Moscow toward negotiations. To increase the chances of success, Brussels could consider limited compromises on contentious issues in EU-China economic relations, such as the current tariff [dispute](#) over electric vehicles. Securing Beijing's engagement could serve as a first step toward a joint East-West diplomatic initiative aimed at de-escalating the war and reducing global geopolitical polarisation.

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