



Chinese Assess the Prospects of Putin's Continued Leadership

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For China, Vladimir Putin is the guarantor of the current policies of the Russian Federation and of support in competing with the U.S. and remaking the international order. The Chinese share Putin's negative assessment of the collapse of the USSR, criticism of the West, and support for authoritarian practices in domestic politics. This helps explain China's concern about Yevgeny Prigozhin's attempted coup in June, which was seen as a signal of a possible destabilisation of power in Russia. For this reason, one important dimension of Putin's expected October visit to China will be to reiterate political support for him.

Since taking power in 2000, Putin has worked with several Chinese leaders—Jiang Zemin (general secretary of the Communist Party of China, or CPC, until 2002) and Hu Jintao (party chief from 2002 to 2012)—including when disputes over the course of the Sino-Russian border were settled. However, only the relationship with Xi Jinping has catalysed the current [Sino-Russian cooperation](#). The two first met at the APEC summit in Bali in 2013. They are both politicians of similar ages and life experiences and have acquired not only an appreciation of the other but also a commonality in state goals. The cooperation between the two leaders intensified as Sino-Russian relations deepened, but also as the Chinese leader became more and more politically experienced. Since 2012, Xi and Putin have met more than 40 times, and the intensity of these contacts has increased with the rise in China's rivalry with the U.S. and Russia's with the broader West.

China's Evolving Reception of Putin's Policies. Putin's persona and authoritarian methods of rule are admired by the Chinese elite. His ideas for rebuilding Russia's global standing, criticism of the collapse of the USSR, and rhetoric towards the U.S. are regarded with appreciation. Prior to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, China was aware of Putin and his business and political community's prioritisation of relations with Europe, as well as its fear of increasing dependence on China. However, it knew that even an

increasingly powerful Russia did not have the potential to become a real economic threat to China. Hence, the positive but cautious reception of Putin's policies and bilateral relations, in which the main priority was to negotiate favourably priced supplies of energy resources and military equipment for China. The development of regional cooperation within BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) also played a role.

Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008 and annexation of Ukraine's [Crimea](#) in 2014 was assessed in China as excessive (and detrimental to Chinese interests), but nevertheless an acceptable response to perceived U.S. threats to Russia's security. The belief in an anti-Russian conspiracy by the U.S., seen as using its influence in, among other places, Ukraine, gradually became an important part of the Chinese power apparatus' thinking on the situation in Eastern Europe in the context of relations with Russia. The caution in the approach to Putin's policy lay, among other things, in the original concept of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced by Xi in Kazakhstan in 2013. Russia rightly believed that a key element was to be Chinese control of transport projects in Central Asia that would compete with Russian economic initiatives (such as the Eurasian Economic Union, EAEU, then in the works) and the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Along with the growing Sino-U.S. rivalry and a sense of similarity of goals between China and Putin-led Russia, there was also a growing convergence of positions. Just prior to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, President Xi was Putin's guest at the Sochi Olympics, where he complimented him as a "good host". Russia became a key partner in the narrative of the implementation of the BRI, with China emphasising the complementarity of this initiative with the EAEU. The culmination of the rapprochement process was the February 2022 declaration and [China's support](#) of Russian demands for a new security architecture in Europe, and later the continuity of cooperation amid the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Currently, the Chinese power apparatus assumes that it is in China's long-term interest to maintain a stable rule for Putin. It sees no alternative to him among the Russian elite. This is why Xi, on his first official visit after being elected for a third term as China's president, he went to Moscow in 2023 and there publicly expressed his support for Putin's re-election in the upcoming election (although he had not yet announced his candidacy). Xi also stressed the importance of cooperation between the two countries, which, he said publicly, were facing challenges, "the first of their kind in 100 years". He clearly pointed to Putin as the guarantor of this cooperation. Strengthening the Russian leader in the power apparatus stems also from China's acquiescence to the involvement of the Putin-linked business community in collaborative projects with China. For example, in 2014, Putin, during the signing of a gas contract in Beijing, introduced the oligarch Gennady Timchenko to Xi as his "representative" in China, and just a year later his company, SIBUR, sold shares to the Chinese conglomerate SINOPEC.

A characteristic element of the Xi-Putin relationship is the correlation of Russian aggression against Ukraine with direct meetings between the two politicians. While difficult to demonstrate the degree of possible coordination (or at least information exchange) during these talks, they allow Xi to perpetuate the image of Russian dependence on China while enabling Putin to pursue some of Russia's objectives: a meeting at the Beijing Olympics in February 2022 was followed by war; a meeting on 15 September 2022, [during the SCO in Samarkand](#), was followed by Putin's announcement on 30 September of the [annexation](#) occupied Ukrainian territories; and last year's talks at the [G20 summit](#) in Indonesia were followed by the announcement (later implemented) of the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons to Belarus.

The Prigozhin Effect. The Chinese authorities' belief in Putin's importance for the stability of Russia's political system (and the political and financial capital invested in this relationship) was shaken by the [Wagner Group's attempted coup](#) (25 June). The official response from China was slow and muted. On 26 June, China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang met with the Russian vice-minister (details of the conversation were not disclosed). On the same day, the

Foreign Ministry spokesman indicated that Prigozhin's rebellion was an internal matter for Russia and that China supported the Russian government's efforts to stabilise the situation. On 26 August, China's Foreign Ministry confirmed [Prigozhin's death](#) with just one sentence. Such cautious communications indicate that China was surprised by the events in Russia and was waiting for the situation to be resolved, seeking to support Putin sparingly, but also to use the situation to reinforce its own narrative on the relationship between the state and the armed forces. Prigozhin's words about corruption in the Russian army were not censored in Chinese media, and the expert commentary pointed to Putin's overconfidence in Wagner's forces and the Russian military in general. There were also comments by the Chinese experts that the Russian leader should take a cue from the experience of the CCP and its control over the army, as well as the illegality of private military companies in China. The coup attempt itself (as an expression of the authorities' overconfidence in the military) may have further influenced Xi Jinping's disciplining of China's armed forces, through such actions as the forced resignation of missile commanders or education campaigns on CCP thought leadership.

Conclusions and Outlook. Until the Russian full-scale attack on Ukraine, Chinese politicians, academics, and analysts viewed Putin's actions as evidence of the Russian regime's efficiency and stability. The glue of Russian-Chinese relations was the good private contact between Xi and Putin, which contributed to the development of cooperation after 2012.

For the Chinese authorities, the most important thing is preserving the anti-Western nature of the current Russian power apparatus, and they do not see a more favourable alternative to Putin as leader of the Chinese-dependent regime. However, the coup attempt, its course, and the ease with which the Wagner Group operated reinforced the Chinese authorities' concerns that a possible change in Russia at the highest level is not entirely unrealistic. This would mean a destabilising of the internal situation that could be exploited by the West. Therefore, China will continue to support Putin in maintaining power in Russia, even as a last resort through direct support of the Russian military by the supply of arms or ammunition so that it does not fail in Ukraine and in maintaining (at least part of) its territorial gains.

For the EU, this means that the cooperation between the two regimes should be viewed as sustainable, at least as long as—according to the logic of authoritarian systems—Xi Jinping and Putin remain at the helm of power, treating the actions of the West not only as a threat to their respective state, but above all to their own power and political environment (party in China's case). The consequences will include China's continued support for Russia's actions in Ukraine, thus limiting the possibility of ending the conflict in a way that is beneficial to Ukraine and the West.