



Estimating the Potential of China's Military Assistance to Russia

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China's military assistance to Russia would fill the majority of the latter's needs and help it to regain the initiative in the war with Ukraine. Chinese support so far is based mainly on dual-use materials and items, but bilateral and multi-dimensional military cooperation between Russia and China will likely deepen. Ukraine's partners might still influence and limit these areas of cooperation, which directly contribute to the continuation of war by Russia.

Russia's continued war with Ukraine assumes attrition of the defenders and a weakening of Western determination. However, the Russian armed forces are struggling with growing gaps in artillery ammunition, armoured fighting vehicles, guided missiles, and drones of different kinds. Some of these gaps are mitigated by deliveries initiated in summer of 2022 from Belarus, [Iran](#), and [North Korea](#), and in 2023 from Myanmar. Media reports suggest the U.S. prevented some deliveries from Egypt and South Africa to Russia, too. There are also issues in providing individual personal protection and small arms for Russian soldiers. Until recently, and independently from Russia's Ministry of Defence, [the Wagner Group](#) was seeking potential sources of small arms and ammunition in Syria, Turkey, North Korea, and [Belarus](#).

Since February 2022, Russia and China have described their [bilateral relations](#) as a "no-limit partnership", however, it is not a formal alliance. Since then, the U.S. and EU have warned China repeatedly to avoid military assistance to Russia. This issue was publicly raised by, among others, the U.S. president and other leaders in the final [communiqué of the NATO summit in Vilnius](#). In recent months, Western media and research centres published a series of findings on covert Chinese assistance to Russia. Last July, an unclassified U.S. intelligence report to Congress confirmed the majority of the publicised cases. Besides these, there is increased and broader bilateral economic cooperation between Russia and China, which last reached a record level of \$190 billion (a 35% increase compared to 2021).

Closer Cooperation Between the Russian and Chinese Arms Industries. The previous three decades have seen ever closer military-technical cooperation between Russia and China. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia became the main contributor to

the modernisation of China's air and naval forces. During the period 1992-2022, China's import of arms from Russia reached \$38 billion in total, according to SIPRI. In the same period, Russia also granted to China license production rights for some military systems. Sporadic disputes in this area also emerged, especially in the context of reverse-engineered and unlicensed production of Chinese variants of the Su-33 airplane, Kh-55 cruise missile, and S-300PMU and Tor-1M air defence systems. These issues were mitigated by common orientation in the strategic rivalry with the U.S. and opportunities for new areas of cooperation. Introduced in 2014, embargoes on Russia's access to advanced technologies in Europe and Israel also contributed to the trend to working with China. In recent years, Russia finally agreed also to sell to China advanced Su-35 airplanes and S-400 systems, which were previously denied any transfer. Although the details are secret, Russia has declared new research and development efforts with China on new missile defence systems and military use of space domain projects.

There is also a growing interdependency between the defence industries of Russia and China. Despite its potential, China's industry is still struggling with indigenous production of advanced jet engines for its new-generation airplanes. At the same time, Russia is unable without China to produce some parts or electronics for its Mi-17 helicopters and S-400 radars. Recently confirmed covert transactions in 2014-2022 are proof of the tight bilateral cooperation in production of these systems for the armed forces of both China and Russia. There is also speculation that the deepening interdependency between the state conglomerates Rostec and China's Poly Group would continue even without the full-scale war with Ukraine.

China's Dual-Use Options. China's assistance to a Russia at war includes dual-use technologies, equipment, and services. These are mainly Chinese software, microchips, parts, and civilian drones. Without Western chips or Chinese substitutes, Russia would not be able to continue the production of advanced guided missiles like the Iskander, Kinzhal, Kalibr, or Kh-101, used in strikes against the main cities of Ukraine. China, and Hong Kong in particular, contributed 70-75% of the chips imported by Russia in 2022, with the value of those transactions estimated at \$740 million. Of no less importance for Russia are Chinese commercial drones, which are intensively used on the battlefield. Especially crucial are the off-the-shelf drones produced by the China-based DJI company, which officially closed its business in Russia and Ukraine in spring of 2022. Russia is also looking for bigger civilian drones like the Mugin-5, which can be easily adapted to military tasks. Many Chinese civilian drones can be ordered as assembly-kits without violating China's customs controls. Even the recently announced stricter drone export controls likely will not end these transfers but might for some time improve the image of Chinese drone companies in the American and European markets. Moreover, new shell companies are constantly created in Hong Kong to facilitate undisrupted transfers of microchips and drones to Russia. Rostec and Russia's intelligence services also widely use transit routes in Central Asian and Persian Gulf countries, and Turkey, to re-export these items.

There are also increased transfers of other dual-use items and services from China to Russia. China refused to deliver ammunition to the Wagner Group but it supported its operations in Bakhmut with satellite imagery. Chinese small arms and personal protection equipment (body armour), officially of a police type, are easily accessed by Russia. There are already confirmed transfers of at least 100,000 bullet-resistant vests, combat helmets, and uniforms to Russia in 2022. In the first year of the war, Russia received a thousand—likely a trial batch— of “hunter rifles”, specifically the CQ-A, a copy of the U.S. M-4 assault rifle, produced by Norinco, a state company. Similarly, under the cover of civilian materials, the Poly Group delivered at least one huge delivery of smokeless gunpowder to an ammunition factory in Zabaykalsk. In spring 2023, China transferred to Chechnya eight Tiger lightly armoured vehicles made by the Shaanxi Baoji company. It is not clear if this transfer was a commercial deal between Chechnya and the producer or direct assistance by the government of China, which in recent years donated vehicles of a similar class to Belarus and Kyrgyzstan.

China's Military Options. China is the leading producer of Soviet 122mm and 152mm standard artillery shells, as well as Grad and Smerch rockets, which are most acutely needed by the Russian army in Ukraine. The newest generation of Chinese armoured vehicles is different from Soviet and Russian standards, but it has a reserve of thousands of main battle tanks based on Soviet T-54/55 and infantry fighting vehicles based on the BMP-1. These reserves from China could offer Russia a huge pool of spare parts. China also produces 100mm and 125mm tank ammunition, which Russia badly needs, and munitions for automatic cannons that use 23mm and 30mm rounds. State corporations CAIC and CASC are also exporters of a few models of multi-purpose military

drones, which it sells to countries in the Middle East and Africa. However, there are no confirmed cases of China transferring loitering munitions, such as the CH-901 drone inspired by the U.S. Switchblade. Also unconfirmed are media reports about the delivery to Russia of 100 kamikaze drones from the Xian Biao company. During the Army 2023 exhibition in Moscow in August, the CoBTec company also offered to Russia its own model of loitering munition similar to Iranian Shahed drones. From open sources, it is hard to precisely determine the relationship between CoBTec and the government of China but it is already known as a producer of police equipment and systems in China and for other markets.

Even if direct military assistance options to Russia are deterred and prevented by the U.S. and the EU, it is hard to predict China's future calculations in this regard. The Chinese internal discussion might hinge on the informal alliance with Russia or concerns about further tensions with the U.S. and Europe. It is even equally hard to predict whether the possibility of a clear and full military defeat of Russia might result in broader and more overt Chinese military assistance. Nevertheless, it is likely that China's position will be a rather gradual and covert evolution. Each use of a military option in terms of Chinese assistance to Russia on a bigger scale would carry a huge risk of relatively quick detection and confirmation by Ukraine and its partners.

Conclusion. Russia's defence industry is struggling to produce the arms necessary to continue the war with Ukraine. The consequence of this are efforts by Russia to obtain new sources of ammunition, weapons, and dual-use technologies. For Russia, gaining direct military assistance from China would be the quickest solution to reversing the negative trends and regaining the initiative on the battlefield in Ukraine. China, though, seems to prefer the maximum possible transfer of dual-use technologies to Russia as it fills some of its capability gaps, but so far without causing additional and open tensions with the U.S. and Europe. It could be expected that these dual-use options will broaden in the next few months. At the same time, it is hard to believe that the government of China is unaware of the military purpose of its growing exports to Russia. Recent reports about some of the most significant cases of such use will likely lead to tighter censorship of bilateral trade and customs data. Dual-use assistance gives China not only plausible deniability but also the best option to avert risky steps like conventional arms and artillery ammunition transfers to Russia.

There is still no confirmed case of direct military assistance from China to Russia, but this scenario cannot be excluded in the next few months or years as long as the war with Ukraine continues. China's future calculations about military assistance and its ability to manoeuvre between Russia's military requests and economic pressure from Ukraine's partners not to do so make it difficult to determine what will come next. Every instance of ammunition and arms transfers from China to Russia would require a strong response by the U.S. and EU, so a package of potential sanctions should be prepared. There is also the necessity for further monitoring and preventing dual-use technology transfers from China, especially Hong Kong, and transit countries, as well as to sanction all confirmed arms and ammunition brokers working with Russia.