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Sino-Russian strategic partnership continues to enjoy good health[Visit the WEBSITE](#)[Receive the E-NEWSLETTER](#)*Sino-Russian strategic partnership continues to enjoy good health**Abstract:*

The Sino-Russian strategic partnership, born in 1996, has not stopped tightening because of the successive disagreements between the US and the revisionist powers.

Today, a confrontation of opposite blocs is being redefined in which the rival parties aspire to align the rest of the world according to their own strategic designs.

It is not foreseeable that Beijing and Moscow will give in to the pressures of Washington and its allies, but it is foreseeable that the strength of the autocratic entente will remain firm, generating increasing antagonism.

Consequently, the international system is breaking down, the economy is deteriorating and global peace is more threatened than ever.

It is urgent to find a great powers relationship that combines inevitable strategic rivalry with a concept and practice of coexistence.

Keywords:

USA, China, Russia, international system, Sino-Russian strategic partnership, confrontation, coexistence.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

La asociación estratégica chino-rusa sigue gozando de buena salud

Resumen:

La asociación estratégica chino-rusa, que nació en 1996, no ha dejado de estrecharse a raíz de los sucesivos desencuentros entre EE. UU. y las potencias revisionistas.

En la actualidad, se está redefiniendo un enfrentamiento de bloques en el que las partes rivales aspiran a alinear al resto del mundo según sus propios designios estratégicos.

No es previsible que Pekín y Moscú vayan a ceder frente a las presiones de Washington y sus aliados y sí lo es que la fortaleza de la entente autocrática se mantenga firme, generando cada vez mayor antagonismo.

Como consecuencia de ello, el sistema internacional se está resquebrajando, la economía se deteriora y la paz global está más amenazada que nunca.

Resulta urgente encontrar un sistema de relación entre las grandes potencias que combine la inevitable rivalidad estratégica con un concepto y una práctica de coexistencia.

Palabras clave:

EE. UU., China, Rusia, sistema internacional, asociación estratégica chino-rusa, confrontación, coexistencia.

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Introduction

There are good reasons and some dark clouds that lead us to believe that we are living in a new strategic era. Thus, in the foreword to the recently published US National Security Strategy (NSS) (October 2022) President Biden states that “our world is at an inflection point”, we are living in a “decisive decade” and “we are in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order”¹.

At no time in the last 100 years has the US faced a single great-power with a GDP equal to or greater than 40% of its own. Yet today, the Chinese economy amounts to at least 70% of US GDP, a figure likely to grow. Each is nuclear-armed state able to project political, economic and military power on a global scale. China and Russia are also working together. Although there are clearly limits to Russia and China’s “no limits” quasi alliance, each appears bent on revising what they consider a Western-dominated global order².

Moreover, the NSS acknowledges that the main strategic challenge comes from “powers that overlap authoritarian rule with revisionist foreign policy”, referring to Beijing and Moscow. Of the People’s Republic of China it says, in particular, that it is the only competitor with the intention and, “increasingly”, the capacity to reshape the international order. The latter gives an idea that time is on Beijing’s side and that China’s power tends to match—and may even surpass— “increasingly” that of the US. This induces a sense of urgency, calls for action and makes many in both Washington and Beijing think, as Kevin Rudd³ explains, that war is inevitable!

Thus, today it seems clear that the White House has chosen, perhaps by default, to compete with—and, if necessary, confront— both Russia and China simultaneously and indefinitely⁴.

This American strategic design, which finds its symmetry in the determination of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership to oppose a unipolar international system presided over by the US, is the main factor that characterises the international system today. This intense

¹ *National Security Strategy* (October 2022) The White House, Washington. Available at: [8-November-Combined-PDF-for-Upload.pdf \(whitehouse.gov\)](#).

² Fontaine, R. (18 November 2022). *Taking On China and Russia: To Compete, the United States Will Have to Pick Its Battles*. Foreign Affairs.

³ Rudd, K. (March 2022). *The Avoidable War: dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping’s China*. Public Affairs.

⁴ Fontaine, R. Op. Cit.

rivalry has only deepened in recent years and there is little prospect of any short-term change to this basic strategic equation⁵.

With Russia weakened by the war in Ukraine and the growing power asymmetry between Moscow and Beijing in favour of China, Washington's primary concern is directed against the Asian dragon. Russia, however, plays an essential role because of the synergies it generates, its powerful energy and diplomatic position, its size and presence in Asia and Europe, as well as the mutual support that both neighbours bring to each other.

“In many ways, competition between the United States and China is just that—a rivalry between two powerful countries. But it is also much more than that. This is a contest not only between two rival states but also between two rival hierarchies. As the United States and China square off against each other, they are also vying for the allegiance of countries across the globe increasing the number of potential points of friction and rising the odds that countries wishing to remain outside the contest will be dragged into it”⁶.

While Washington tries to create a grand coalition to put pressure on the revisionist powers and isolate them from the rest of the world, the latter focus their strategy on fracturing the international system, especially in the economic sphere, in order to reduce US influence and make themselves more resilient to US sanctions. Thus, the global South has become one of the main battlegrounds between the two blocs in what increasingly resembles a Cold War 2.0.

At the heart of this clash between the giants lies the fact, as Kissinger points out in his recent book, that China expects that its ancient civilisation and recent economic advance should command deference, while the US assumes that its own values are universal and should be adopted everywhere. Each is impinging “partly by momentum, importantly by design” on what the other considers its core interests. Given these collisions and incompatible world-views, Kissinger concludes that the two powers will have to learn to “combine inevitable strategic rivalry with a concept and practice of coexistence”⁷.

Unfortunately, the strategic game at the highest level is already up for grabs, the relationship between the major powers is continuing to deteriorate, the international

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Colgan, J. and Miller, N. (November/December 2022). *The Rewards of Rivalry: U.S.-Chinese Competition can Spur Climate Progress*. Foreign Affairs.

⁷ Mathews, J. (January/February). *Profiles in Power: The World According to Kissinger*. Foreign Affairs, Review Essay.

system is cracking, the economy is suffering, and global peace is more threatened than ever.

Thus, the health of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership, which was initially signed in 1996, is a key issue in understanding the geopolitical moment in which we find ourselves. To be sure, there were numerous sources of friction between the two states, but the demand for closer relations between Moscow and Beijing in opposition to Washington has made a virtue out of necessity and pushed both partners to resolve them or at least not to deepen them.

This paper seeks to highlight the strength and relevance of the strategic link between the revisionist powers and argues for the need to create mechanisms to contain tensions between the great powers and reduce the danger of a major conflict in which all would be defeated.

Background

Figure 1. Territories won by Russia at the expense of China in the Aigun and Peking treaties. Source: Prepared internally.



The intense historical rivalry between Beijing and Moscow stems from the neighbourhood of the two empires and, in particular, the territorial expansion of the Russian empire at the expense of the Chinese. In the treaties of Aigun (1858) and Beijing (1860), the Tsarist Empire, taking advantage of the weakness of the Qing dynasty during the Second Opium War, acquired 1.5 million square kilometres in the Amur River region (Figure 1), as well

as extensive territories in Central Asia. Later, when Mao tried to regain Mongolia—as he did Tibet and Xinjiang—the Kremlin was the guarantor of Mongolia’s independence.

After World War II, the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union joined in what appeared to be a solid ideological alliance. However, after Mao and Stalin’s rapprochement, the Sino-Soviet relationship deteriorated rapidly, leading in 1969 to a brief armed border confrontation.

In the early 1970s, this deep disagreement was seen by Nixon as an opportunity for rapprochement with Beijing. The thaw between the two communist powers did not begin until the early 1980s and relations were not normalised until May 1989.

In April 1996, with the Cold War over and the US hegemonic order at its height, Beijing and Moscow established a “strategic partnership”, which Chinese and Russian leaders now refer to as a “comprehensive strategic coordination partnership”.

Until the Primakov doctrine of the same year, Russia’s priority had been to embrace the liberal model and leave behind the leftovers of the Soviet period. From then on, Moscow regained its geopolitical ambition, even if the East-West relationship did not fundamentally suffer because Russia needed Europe and was confident that it could manage its main strategic interests. China was particularly influenced by the recent third Taiwan Strait crisis (July 1995-March 1996), which intensified the perception of the US as a serious rival to its medium- and long-term strategic design.

The objective of the strategic partnership was to oppose both the hegemonic international order presided over by Washington and interference in internal affairs. While the rejection of a unipolar order responded to traditional geopolitical logic, both states interpreted interference in internal affairs as a threat to their territorial integrity and the legitimacy of their respective political regimes.

At the time, mistrust between the two neighbours still prevailed because of bitter historical rivalry. Nevertheless, intense diplomatic activity led to the 2001 Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation and culminated in the signing in 2004 of the border agreement that eliminated the major source of friction between the two neighbours.

In 2008, reasons converged on both sides for a closer entente. After NATO’s Bucharest summit considered Ukraine and Georgia accession, Russia responded by intervening militarily in Georgia and turning to Asia. The Kremlin needed to cover its back

if the Alliance was to continue its policy of eastward expansion. For its part, China had weathered that year's financial crisis better than the West, which reaffirmed its confidence in the future and allowed it to think about the possibility of soon catching up with the US as the dominant power. For this path, which would intensify the rivalry between the two powers, it was in its interest to close ranks with Russia. Thus, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership strengthened with significant advances in the energy and arms fields. However, the rapid détente in Moscow's relations with Western capitals meant that the Sino-Russian strategic partnership had yet to make the final leap.

The Sino-Russian entente attains high geopolitical relevance

The Crimea and Donbas crisis of 2014 brought the Sino-Russian strategic understanding to the forefront. China, which in 2013 had launched its New Belt and Road Initiative, no longer concealed its ambition and needed Russia to prevent an encirclement of states that would oppose its rise to world primacy. The Kremlin, in open opposition to Washington and its allies, needed a strong partner to resist Western pressures and diversify its strategic, economic and diplomatic ties. From then on, both powers felt sufficiently supported to openly challenge the existing international order.

Thus, they decided to cooperate closely in several fields, reaching previously unforeseeable levels of collaboration. In 2016, Russia became China's main oil supplier. Their armed forces partnered in military exercises in the Mediterranean and the South China Sea, as well as in some joint technology development projects, reviving their arms trade. In 2015, Beijing agreed to buy Su-35 fighter jets and the S-400 surface-to-air missile system from Moscow. The two countries also embarked on a series of symbolic people-to-people projects, such as the start of the long-delayed construction of a bridge over the Amur River, and in June 2016, Presidents Xi and Putin agreed to work together to increase their control over cyberspace and communication technologies⁸.

Bilateral ties between the two countries have, moreover, acquired a highly personalised character thanks to the good understanding of their presidents, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, who are directly involved in resolving financial and commercial problems of broad significance and mutual interest⁹. Both leaders share a historical interpretation of the

⁸ Stokes, J. (22 February 2017). *Russia and China's Enduring Alliance: A Reverse "Nixon Strategy" Won't Work for Trump*. Foreign Affairs.

⁹ STRONSKI, Paul, HG, Nicole. *Cooperation and Competition. Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East and the Arctic*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2018, p. 3.

destiny of their nations, a realistic vision of international relations and a short- and medium-term strategy of shared interests for their respective countries.

With China's rise seemingly unstoppable, the geopolitical importance of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership began to be recognised in Washington, all the more so as it became increasingly clear that Beijing was moving towards more authoritarian positions, away from the supposedly inevitable liberalisation and democratisation of the Asian giant as it became more prosperous.

President Trump came to power seeking rapprochement with Moscow to separate Russia from the Chinese embrace¹⁰, which then opened a great debate in the US, as reflected in this Stokes article:

Several commentators, among them Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute and Edward Luttwak of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, have suggested that U.S. President Donald Trump should take any efforts to warm relations with Russia one step further and try to enlist Moscow's help in balancing a rising China. Trump views China and Islamist extremism as the two principal challenges to U.S. security, and he sees Russia as a potential partner in combating both. The thinking goes, then, that Trump should run a version of the diplomatic play that former U.S. President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger followed in the early 1970s when they thawed relations with Beijing to counter the Soviet Union. This time, however, Trump would partner with Russia to balance China¹¹.

However, the president encountered enormous resistance from the establishment, became embroiled in a series of Russia-related scandals and eventually caved in. Thus, in its December 2017 NSS it presented great power rivalry as Washington's top strategic priority —displacing jihadist terrorism— stating that “China and Russia challenge American power, influence and interests, and seek to erode US security and prosperity [...] and are revisionist powers that want to shape a world antithetical to US values and interests.”

The tariff war against China, launched in 2018, led to an even further strengthening of Sino-Russian ties, causing many in Washington, Paris and other European capitals to wonder whether Moscow and Beijing were already in a de facto military alliance against

¹⁰ Carlson, Brian G. *Room for Maneuver: China and Russia Strengthen Their Relations*, Strategic Trends 2018, Center for Security Studies, March 2018, p. 30.

¹¹ Stokes, J., Op. Cit.

the US, or might soon be, which would undoubtedly have a significant impact on the changing global order¹². Thus, it was argued:

“China-Russia ties have grown in virtually every dimension of their relationship, from diplomatic to defence and from economic to informational [...] Perhaps the most troubling and least understood aspect of the Sino-Russian partnership is the synergy generated by their actions. [...] Little thought has been given to how their actions will be combined, amplifying the impact of both actors. The effect of Russia’s alignment with China is likely to be far greater than the sum of its parts, putting US interests globally at risk.”¹³

Beijing worked with Moscow to fill gaps in its military capabilities and accelerate its technological innovation. Russia provided China with advanced weapons systems that enhanced its air, anti-ship and submarine defence capabilities. In addition, they undertook broader technological cooperation, including in fifth-generation telecommunications, artificial intelligence (AI), biotechnology and the digital economy, recognising that the potential synergies of joining forces in developing these dual-use technologies have clear military and commercial significance¹⁴.

Both powers were equally aligned in their efforts to weaken cohesion among Washington’s allies and partners and dilute its influence with countries and international institutions, striving especially to reduce the centrality of the US in the global economic system.

One important aspect was the de-dollarisation of their economies. This had emerged as a priority for Russia in 2014 in response to the imposition of Western sanctions following the annexation of Crimea. Moscow had then found Beijing’s support for this purpose. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang had signed 38 agreements on a 2014 visit to Moscow deepening energy cooperation and establishing a three-year currency swap agreement worth 150 billion yuan (about \$24.5 billion), which was renewed for another three years in 2017¹⁵.

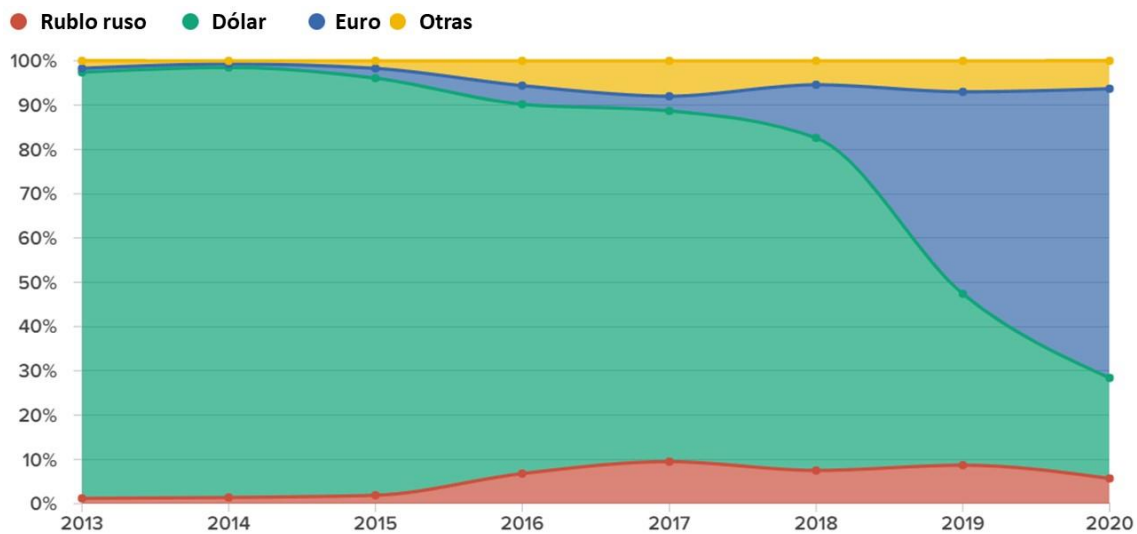
¹² Saradzhyan, S. (September 2020). *Why Russia’s alliance with China is improbable, but not impossible*. Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, Recherches & Documents N°13/2020.

¹³ Kendall-Taylor, A. and Shullman, D. (January 2021). *Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership*. CNAS. Available at: [Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership.pdf](#).

¹⁴ Bendett, S. and Kania, E. (29 October 2019). *A new Sino-Russian high-tech partnership*. ASPI. Available at: <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/new-sino-russian-high-tech-partnership>.

¹⁵ Bhusari, M. and Nikoladze, M. (18 February 2022). *Russia and China: Partners in Dedollarization*. Atlantic Council. Available at: [Russia and China: Partners in Dedollarization - Atlantic Council](#).

Figure 2. Evolution of the currency composition of Russia's exports to China. Source: Atlantic Council.



De-dollarisation also started to gain value for China in 2018 after the start of the US-China trade war. In 2019, Russia and China signed an agreement to replace the dollar with national currencies in international settlements between them. Such financial coordination helped Russia reduce its dependence on the dollar in trade from 80% of Russia's total exports in 2013 to just over half before the start of the war. Most of this decline was absorbed by its trade with China (Figure 2).

The war in Ukraine has made everything worse

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 together with China's military build-up and threats against Taiwan presage the emergence of a new tripolar world order and a paradigm shift from competition between great powers to confrontation between them. It is a dangerous time and concern has grown, not only about the possibility of escalating military conflict, but also about energy security and high prices for energy supplies¹⁶.

While Russia's relationship with the West has been irreparably damaged, in Asia the Taiwan issue is at the centre of the strategic debate. In both Washington and Beijing, the options for response are narrowing and both sides seem determined to impose their will on the other.

“For 70 years, China and the US have managed to avoid disaster in Taiwan. But a consensus is forming in US policy circles that this peace may not last much longer. Many analysts and policymakers now argue that the US must use all its military power to prepare

¹⁶ Ichord, R. (12 October 2022). *Nuclear energy and global energy security in the new tripolar world order*. Atlantic Council. Available at: [Nuclear energy and global energy security in the new tripolar world order - Atlantic Council](#).

for war with China in the Taiwan Strait. In October 2022, Mike Gilday, the head of the US Navy, warned that China might be preparing to invade Taiwan before 2024. Members of Congress, including Democratic Representative Seth Moulton and Republican Representative Mike Gallagher, echoed Gilday's sentiment¹⁷.

This is a systemic confrontation that, as a recent RAND Corporation report states, Washington intends to address together with its allies in an equally systemic way:

“The US predominant should seek to maintain predominant influence over the international system—its institutions, rules, norms, processes, networks and values. The US and China compete to establish the foundational global paradigm—the essential ideas, habits and expectations that govern international politics— and the broader system that produces that paradigm. That system includes actors or nodes ranging from states to industries, institutions and nongovernmental organisations, as well as the relationships among them, such as agreements, rules and forms of mutual exchange. Each of the main rivals is seeking to shape these components of the international system to produce an order oriented to its interests, goals and values”¹⁸.

The key question is how the rest of the world will respond and how it will or will not align itself with the opposing blocs. For the moment, India is reluctant to be drawn into this dynamic and maintains its good relationship with Moscow while partnering with Washington vis-à-vis Beijing. We are seeing the same in Africa and the Middle East, most notably in the case of Saudi Arabia, which is deafening to US pressure and is in cahoots with Russia to cut oil production. However, the main game will be played in Asia, around the South China Sea, where it will be more difficult to escape the pressure to take one side or the other.

The growing hostility between the world's two largest economies, China and the US, as they seek to reduce their dependence on each other for goods and services, has added to a de-globalising trend that began with the 2008 financial crisis —according to the World Bank, foreign direct investment peaked in 2007 at 5.3% of global GDP and fell to 1.3% by 2020¹⁹. Export controls and friend shoring will further intensify this trend, seriously affecting the world economy. Thus, the IMF has announced that with the simultaneous

¹⁷ Blanchette, J. and Hass, R. (January/February 2023). *The Taiwan Long Game: Why the Best Solution Is No Solution*. Foreign Affairs.

¹⁸ Mazarr M. and Mcdonald, T. (November 2022). *Competing for the System: The Essence of Emerging Strategic Rivalries*. RAND Corporation. Available at: [Competing for the System: The Essence of Emerging Strategic Rivalries | RAND](#).

¹⁹ Demarais, A. (27 December 2022). *The End of the Age of Sanctions? How America's Adversaries Shielded Themselves*. Foreign Affairs.

slowdown of the three big economies, the US, the EU and China, 2023 —with one third of the world economy in recession— will be tougher for the world economy than the one we have left behind and projects global growth of 2.7% this year, down from 3.2% in 2022²⁰.

In addition, the US policy of sanctions, which have multiplied in the wake of the war in Ukraine, is creating the phenomenon of sanctions resistance. As Washington has become increasingly dependent on them, many “rogue” states have begun to harden their economies in the face of such measures²¹.

Individually, currency-swap arrangements, alternative payment systems and digital currencies would not have much an impact on the efficacy of US sanctions. But together, these innovations are increasingly giving countries the ability to conduct transactions through sanctions-proof channels. This trend appears irreversible. [...] All this means that within a decade, US unilateral sanctions may have little bite²².

An added concern is that in this context of intense rivalry between great powers it is much more difficult to address major common challenges, be they climate change, the reconfiguration of the energy system, cyber security, pandemics, migration... and we all have a lot at stake.

Despite the apparent concerns raised by President Xi in his meeting with President Putin in Uzbekistan over the war in Ukraine during the 22nd Shanghai Cooperation Organisation leaders’ summit in September 2022, the meeting confirmed the continuity of the entente of these authoritarian states against Washington and NATO²³.

There is no doubt that, for economic reasons as well as by temperament and tradition, the Chinese leadership is averse to instability and surprises and would prefer the war to end as soon as possible, while fearing contamination, it seeks to disassociate itself as much as possible from the Russian military adventure. However, Beijing benefits from the fact that the White House has to devote so much attention and strategic resources to Russia. Unless Moscow makes a major change to its political system —something that

²⁰ *The IMF warns of a “simultaneous slowdown” in the US, the European Union and China.* (01 January 2023). REUTERS.

²¹ Demarais, A. Op. Cit.

²² Ibid.

²³ Fontaine, R. Op. Cit.

seems unlikely today— dealing with Russia, even if it is in decline, will require considerable US attention and resources in the years to come²⁴.

As long as Washington maintains intense rivalry or even open confrontation, Beijing and Moscow will work closely together to resist pressures of all kinds and to prevent the global South from aligning with the US and its allies. For Russia it is an existential question, for China a firm decision that Western powers will never again condition its future and that, whatever the cost, the Asian giant will return to its traditional place in history.

It seems hard to imagine that both revisionist powers will give in to the grand coalition that Washington might put together. This dynamic, as Hugh White fears, could drag the world sleepwalking into war²⁵ and, without going so far, seriously damage our way of life. The priority, as Graham Allison has been arguing for some years now, should not be to win this war but, fundamentally, to prevent it²⁶. This requires a major process, similar to the Helsinki process, to create mechanisms and reach agreements that seek some kind of détente or at least contain rivalries and avert the dangers and calamities that could result from an acrimonious confrontation.

Conclusions

The US's growing estrangement with China and Russia has brought the two revisionist powers closer together, overcoming an intense historical rivalry and realising Kissinger's worst predictions.

In 1996, Beijing and Moscow signed a strategic partnership aimed at opposing the unipolar international order and interference in domestic affairs. Since then, they have steadily strengthened their ties, reaching unpredictable levels of collaboration.

The war in Ukraine has brought the relationship between these powers and Washington to a very worrying degree of hostility, with a dialectic of wills that tends towards ever greater confrontation.

In a major systemic confrontation, each side strives to align the rest of the world according to its own strategic designs.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ White, H. (June 2022). *Sleepwalk to War: Australia's Unthinking Alliance with America*. Quarterly Essay #86.

²⁶ Allison, G. (24 September 2015). *The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?* The Atlantic. Available at: [Allison, 2015.09.24 The Atlantic - Thucydides Trap.pdf \(harvard.edu\)](#). Graham T. Allison coined the term in an article entitled *Year in a Word: Thucydides's trap* which he wrote in the *Financial Times* in 2012.

It seems unreasonable to think that a grand coalition led by Washington to intensify pressure on the autocratic powers would cause them to moderate their attitude – quite the opposite, in fact.

The world economy is paying a heavy price, major global challenges can hardly be addressed in such a state of affairs, and world peace is under serious threat.

It is becoming increasingly urgent to reach agreements between the major powers that will halt the deterioration of the international system, ensure peace and seek some form of coexistence, although the margins for trying to do so are narrowing.

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