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Russians See Greater Reward than Risk in Closer Relations with China

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With China and Russia on the outs with the United States, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping have broadened bilateral economic and military cooperation over the last few years. Recent cooperation has included [energy](#) and infrastructure projects, and even a little bit of [panda diplomacy](#). While some observers warn about the potential risk that Russia may grow too dependent on Beijing, a joint Chicago Council on Global Affairs-Levada Analytical Center survey finds that the Russian public sees little downside to the growing bilateral relationship.

Key Findings

- Three out of four Russians express a favorable view of China (74%).
- Nearly six in ten Russians (57%) believe that in 10 years, Russia and China will grow closer.
- A majority say respect for China has grown compared to 10 years ago (56%), while fewer say respect for Russia (42%) and the United States (46%) has grown.
- More than half say Russia's ties to China strengthen Russia's position in the world (55%).
- A slight plurality believes Russia's relationship with China weakens Moscow's ability to improve relations with the United States (34%).

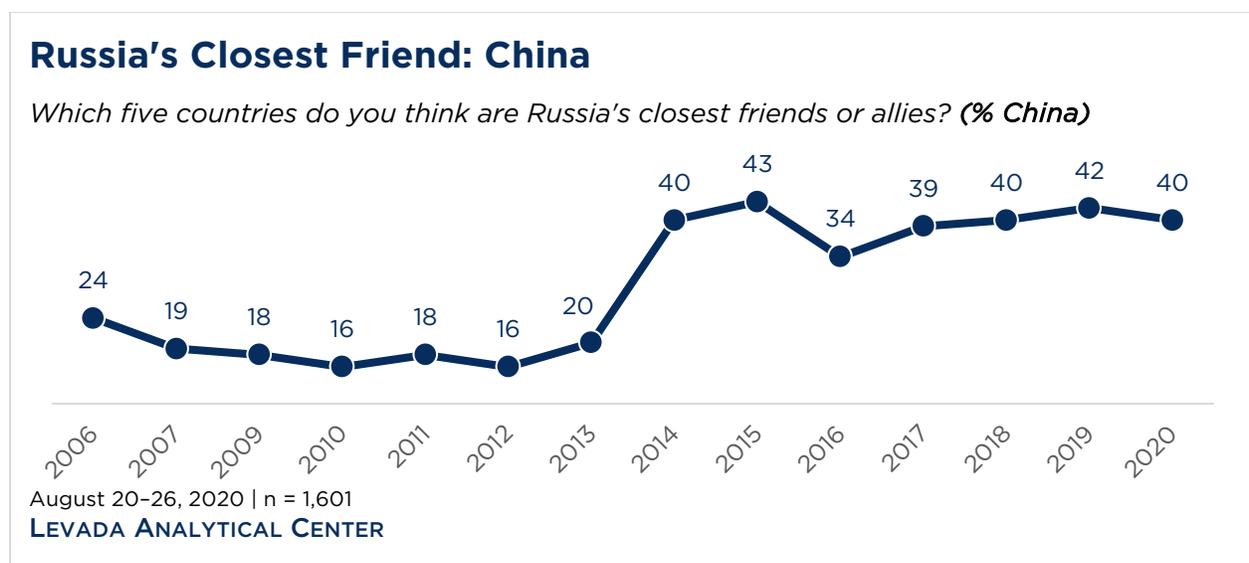
Russia and China: Friends with Benefits

Russia and China deepened economic ties in 2014 after the United States and European countries slapped sanctions on Moscow following the annexation of Crimea. Xi Jinping attended Russia's 2015 Victory Day celebration, where he and Vladimir Putin signed agreements to [increase economic and strategic ties](#). This

included a [formal link](#) between the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) with China's Belt and Road Initiative (specifically [the Silk Road Economic Belt](#)).

Since then, cooperation has expanded into [a variety of domains](#). Russia has leaned on China economically during the COVID-19 pandemic. China has also found a welcome partner in Moscow as it faces tensions with the United States over trade, human rights, and security issues. During a three-day visit to Moscow in 2019, [Xi Jinping stated](#) in a press conference that "Russia is the country that I have visited the most times, and President Putin is my best friend and colleague."

The Russian public seems to reciprocate this warmth to both China and Xi. In the January 29–February 2, 2021, Chicago Council-Levada survey, 74 percent of Russians have a favorable view toward China, far more than toward the European Union (45% favorable) and the United States (39% favorable). A slight majority of Russians say they have a positive view of Xi (54%). And [Levada Center surveys](#) have found that since 2014, roughly four in ten Russians (40% in 2020) say China is Russia's closest friend, a higher percentage than for any other country. According to [recent polling in China](#), the Chinese public likewise believes that Russia is their country's most important bilateral partner, edging out the United States in 2020.



Russians Say China Gets More Respect than United States and Russia

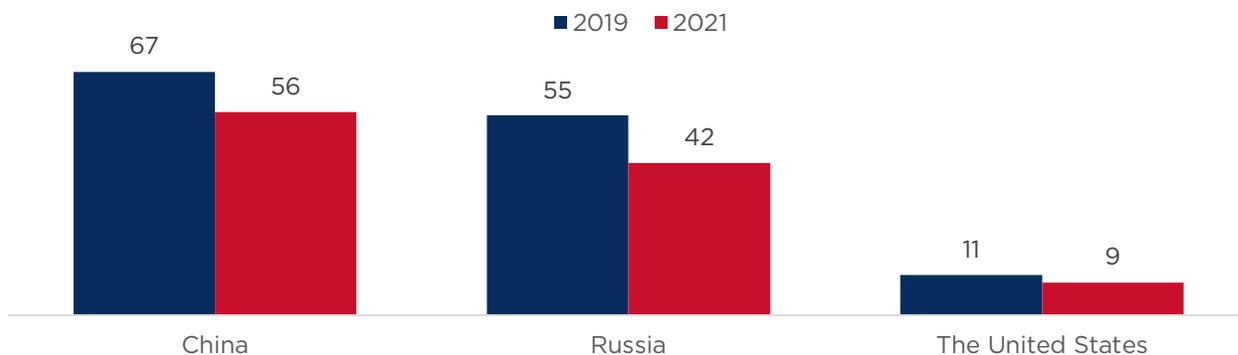
A solid majority of Russians still believe China is respected more today than 10 years ago, though this percentage is down from when this question was last asked two years ago (56% today; 67% in 2019).¹ In fact, only 8 percent of Russians think China is respected less; the rest say it is respected about the same as it was 10 years ago (29%).

¹ The percentage saying each country is respected more has decreased for all three countries asked about, perhaps reflecting the difficulties each faced from the challenges associated with the coronavirus outbreak.

By comparison, more Russians believe China elicits greater respect relative to 10 years ago than their own country, though a plurality also says Russia is respected more than it was a decade ago (42%, down from 55% in 2019). In contrast, a plurality (46%) say the United States has lost respect over the last 10 years (down from 2019).

Russians Say China and Russia Respected More than US

Do you think that [country] is respected more in the world today than it was 10 years ago, respected less, or respected about as much now as 10 years ago? (%)



January 29-February 2, 2021 | n = 1,616

LEVADA ANALYTICAL CENTER

Russians Expect Closer Russia-China Ties in 10 Years

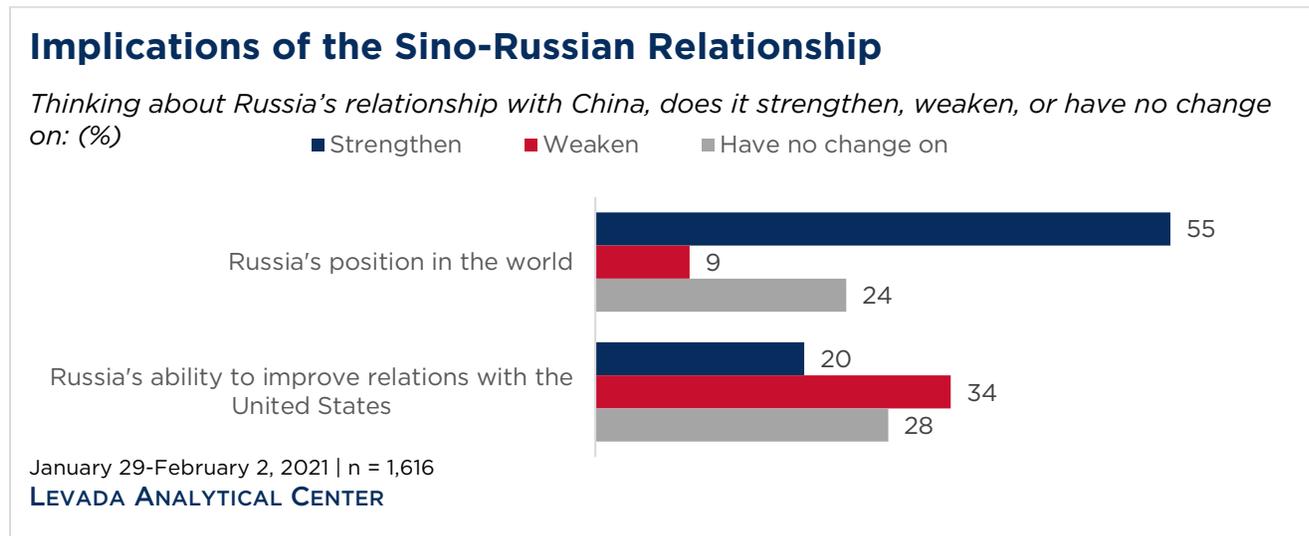
According to analysts at the [Carnegie Moscow Center](#), Russia is becoming asymmetrically dependent on China in terms of its increased reliance on China as a trade partner, increased usage of yuan held in Russia’s Central Bank, and increased dependence on Chinese industrial equipment and technology.

But the Russian public does not appear worried about the risks of growing dependence on Beijing. Fewer than three in ten Russians (28%) say increased cooperation between Russia and China means Russia is becoming more dependent on China.² Instead, a majority of Russians (56%) say Moscow’s active cooperation with Beijing is not increasing Russia’s dependence on China. And, a majority of Russians think their country’s ties to China strengthen Russia’s international status (55%; 9% say those ties weaken it).

Moreover, Russians expect their country’s ties with China will only grow stronger over the coming decade. Nearly six in ten Russians (57%) believe that in 10 years, Russia and China will grow closer. A third believe relations between Russia and China

² Among those Russians who say the increased cooperation between the two countries makes Russia more dependent on China (28% overall), 38 percent are somewhat concerned and 25 percent are very concerned.

will continue as they are now (32%), and just 5 percent think they will grow further apart.



One reason some analysts worry about Russia growing too dependent on China is that it could put the Russian government [in a tenuous position](#) if US-China tensions are defused. In other words, China's relations with the United States could improve while Russia's ties to the United States and Europe remained strained, and it would be unclear how supportive China would be toward Russia in a less competitive US-China scenario.

The survey results show that a slight plurality of Russians believe Russia's relationship with China weakens Moscow's ability to improve relations with the United States (34%), though a larger plurality thinks there will not be any change in US-Russian relations 10 years from now (42%). Of the rest, more say the two countries will grow further apart (29%) than think they will grow closer (19%).

Conclusion

Russian President Putin's reorientation away from the West and toward Beijing in the aftermath of the 2014 Crimea annexation seems to have been accepted, if not embraced, by the Russian public. Ironically, although the Obama administration planned for a [pivot to Asia](#) in 2009, it may be the Russians, not the Americans, who have successfully pivoted eastward. Russia may not be a fully equal partner to China, but the country is less isolated because of its ties to China. And the Russian public senses that Moscow and Beijing's combined ability to [counter US influence](#) internationally provides more benefits than costs.

Methodology

This analysis is based on data from multiple surveys conducted by the Levada Analytical Center in Russia. The first survey was conducted August 20–26, 2020, among a representative sample of all Russian urban and rural residents. The sample comprised 1,601 people 18 or older in 137 municipalities of 50 regions of the Russian Federation. The surveys were conducted as telephone interviews (CATI) on a random sample (RDD) of personal phone numbers and landlines.”

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